

Memories of a Lancashire Clog Dancer

by Eddie Flaherty

It was the Nelson clog dancer, Henry Whittaker, who introduced me to Eddie Flaherty. As he has been fond of writing since his injuries curtailed more physical activities, I suggested that he write his 'clog dancing' story for E.D. & S. I hope that readers will find this valuable account as interesting as I have done on my visits to him at his home in Astley. The concertina that Paddy Daly played, was, from Eddie's description, an Anglo.—Julian Pilling.

I was born on August 12th, 1922, the youngest of a family of thirteen children and the seventh son. My father was born somewhere in County Galway, but I do not know the town or village. He died at the age of 73 years, in 1946. My mother, whose maiden name was Grady, was born at Ilkiston, Derbyshire; she was of Irish descent, and died at the age of 53, in 1937, when I was 15 years old. About five years before I had begun clicking my Clogs and finding it gave me lots of fun, also, I discovered that I had no trouble using both my feet. In the school playground—St. James R.C. Secondary School, Hindsford, Lancs.—my chums were always asking me to dance for them. They seemed to enjoy watching me dance as much as I enjoyed doing it.

One lovely summer day I was dancing at the front of my home, in Tyldesley, Lancs. I was feeling great, and then something happened that eventually turned me into a true Lancashire Clog dancer!

As I was dancing, the gentleman who lived next door to me was keenly studying my feet. He said to me: "Eddie, how would you like to be taught Clog dancing by a real teacher?" I replied: "There's nothing in the world I would love better, but I don't think my parents could afford to pay for my tuition." "Leave that to me," he said, "I have a great friend; Mr. Jack Grimes, and if you can dance for him in the same way I'm sure he won't charge your parents tuition fees."

"Will you come and say that to my mother and father?" I asked. He came in and said to my parents: "I have been watching your Eddie dancing for quite a long time. He has perfect footwork and rhythm, and with the right tuition he could become

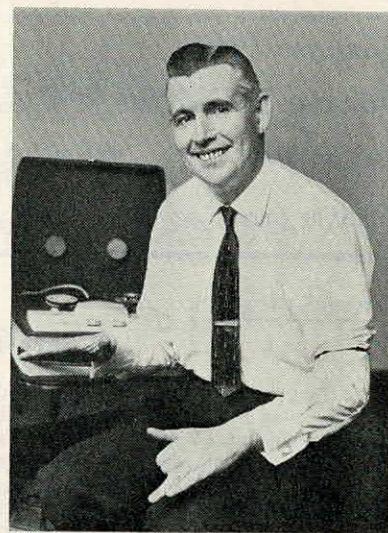


Photo: Lancashire Evening Post

a first class Clog Dancer." He paused for a moment; then he said: "Have you any objection to me bringing a teacher to watch his footwork?" My father replied: "I don't mind him being taught anything worthwhile." The man in question—Mr. Peter Kelly, was a professional footballer and wrestler. He wrestled under the name 'Ginger Burke,' and I believe he did a lot of his wrestling bouts at Burnley, Lancs., and also played football for Notts County.

The following Sunday, Mr. Kelly brought Mr. Grimes to my home.

Mr. Kelly said: "Show Mr. Grimes how you dance, Eddie," and my mother put on a favourite record of 'Me and the Old Folks at Home'."

We had one of the gramophones with a big horn, and a little handle at the side; and when the record started to play I began to dance. All the time Mr. Grimes was watching my feet. I knew because I was watching him, at the same time. After I had finished dancing, Mr. Grimes said: "You really do like dancing, son, and you have rhythm, so I will teach you to Clog dance."

"All the basic steps are performed on the balls of your feet. There are three important things you must remember. First: keep your feet and ankles relaxed. Secondly: your knee joints must be relaxed, completely. The third and most important of all is to have the heels of your Clogs off the floor. I am now going to show you the single 'Shuffle', on both of your feet."

He then stood up to show me how to perform it, and I watched with great attention.

"The single 'Shuffle'," he said, "is to swing the left foot forward, making a tap with it, then

swing it back, making another tap as you do so. This forward and backward movement has to be done very rapidly so the taps you perform are practically together. You must learn to do this, perfectly, and don't forget the important points I have mentioned previously. Learn this to perfection, for one week, and I will come again next week and teach you the 'Three Lancashire Prize Steps'." After Mr. Grimes left, I was very keen to master this step with both of my feet, and bearing in mind the three points mentioned, I was determined to master this step. I practised in my home, in the street, and in the school yard.

The following week Mr. Grimes came to my home as he had promised. He asked me to do the single 'Shuffle', on both of my feet. When I had finished he said: "Very neat, son." Then he performed the 'Three Lancashire Prize Steps'. "Do you think you could do this step?" "I think I can, given time," I said. Although the steps seemed difficult I had a feeling I could master them. I will try to explain how Mr. Grimes taught me the 'Three Lancashire Prize Steps'.

They are as follows: A single tap with your left foot, a 'Shuffle' and single tap with your right foot and a forward and backward tap with your left foot, so that you finish with both of your feet in line with one another. When you have done this correctly, your feet should say—rap-a-tap-a-tap-tap, or, as Mr. Grimes told me to they would say: Johnny had a fat cat, coinciding with the rap-a-tap-a-tap-tap, above. This has to be repeated as the break—meaning the finishing of the steps, going thus: A tap with the left, a shuffle and a backward tap with the right, a tap with the left foot, another shuffle and backward tap with the right foot, a forward and backward tap with the left foot, and a single tap with your right foot; making both your feet finishing in a straight line and as close together as possible. When you have finished this your feet should have said: rap-a-tap-a-tap-a-tap-tap-tap. In other words: Johnny had a very very big fat cat.

Mr. Grimes did, eventually, teach me all the required steps, which included the single 'Shuffle,' the 'Three Lancashire Prize Steps,' 'The Stage Step,' 'The Skutch,' and most difficult of all, 'Dan Leno's Double Shuffle.' I would much rather perform this than explain it. It is similar to a continuous roll on a kettledrum. Mr. Grimes told me that not very many Clog dancers could perform this step. If you can perform this to perfection no-one in the world can say you're a left footed dancer!

By the time I was twelve years of age I had all the Clog dancing steps perfected, and when the boys at school knew I could Clog dance correctly I had no peace in the schoolyard! I thoroughly enjoyed

performing for them, especially on the cold winter days! I kept myself and them warm, and did my best to teach them the steps.

One of my chums, who was partly Irish, the same as myself, was a lad full of Irish humour, named Joseph Daly (nicknamed Paddy). He was rather good on the concertina, and on occasions he invited me to his home, at Atherton, Lancs.

Paddy's parents used to really enjoy watching me dance. Paddy played a few Irish and Scottish reels on the concertina and I was in my glory dancing to them.

One day I invited Paddy to my home. I told my parents he was bringing his concertina to entertain them, and they were delighted, as any form of entertainment was eagerly accepted in those days. (You were classed as "posh" if you had a radio set at that period).

Paddy and I came out of school that afternoon and we were making our way to my home when Paddy said: "Let's have a practice before we arrive at your house, Eddie."

He began to play his concertina, on the main street, and I began to dance. I was so absorbed with my feet that I didn't notice Paddy place his cap on the pavement! Then, suddenly, a dear old lady stopped and stood watching with great interest. She looked me straight in the eye and said: "Very good, Son, keep on with that dancing." Then she opened her purse, dropped a penny in Paddy's cap and went on her way!

"That's your first wages for Clog dancing, Eddie," he said. I bought a pennyworth of sweets and shared them with Paddy, but I felt he had earned them more than I!

During the winter nights when my friends and I had finished playing games in the streets we used to sit under the old gas-lamps. A man came round at that time with a long pole, when he had lit the lamp we used to shout—at the top of our voices—'HURRAH'. One of my street chums called Stanley Hall—he lives in America now—was pretty good on the harmonica. When we were sitting under the gas-lamps he used to say: "Come on, Eddie, give us a 'twitter', I will accompany you on the harmonica." On several occasions many of the neighbours came outside to watch and hear our gas-lamp concerts. I knew they enjoyed them by the look on their faces, and I always put on a good show for them.

My first stage appearance was shortly before I left school when I was thirteen years of age. Every 17th March (St. Patrick's Day) we had a school concert. Mr. Egan the Headmaster said to the class: "Can anyone sing, mime, or play an instrument? Some of the boys and girls raised their arms, but I didn't! A boy named Joseph Holt had

his arm raised and Mr. Egan said: "What can you do, Joseph?" Joseph answered: "I can't do anything, sir, but Eddie Flaherty can Clog dance." I went a little queer inside. I didn't mind dancing for the lads in the school yard or on the street, but I couldn't imagine myself on a stage.

After Joseph Holt had mentioned me, Mr. Egan said: "Come here to my desk a moment, Edward. Is it true that you can Clog dance?" "Yes, sir," I replied. "When I was enquiring, why didn't you hold your arm out?" he said. "I'm not certain that I can put my dancing over on a stage; I've never been on one before, sir," I replied. Mr. Egan said: "Stay behind after school lessons, four



Dan Leno. World famous music hall artist and clog dancer.

o'clock, and I will tell you if you are capable of appearing on a stage."

I stayed after school hours as instructed and Mr. Egan asked me if I could dance to tunes. I told Helen Joyce, the pianist, the tune wanted and she began to play. I found dancing to a piano was no difficulty. All teachers were there, including Mr. Egan and I

could tell by the looks on their faces that they were impressed.

Next morning Mr. Egan called me to his desk and said "Edward, you really shocked me last night, you are a gifted dancer, and fit to go on any stage. You are very light on your feet and your balance and timing is perfect. God has given you a wonderful talent and you should use this talent on a stage or anywhere. Your feet will never let you down!"

I made my debut on the night in question. I must admit I had the 'butterflies,' but when I ran onto the stage I didn't look at the audience, I imagined I was dancing for my friends in our street.

Mr. Grimes also taught me to dance with my hands and I will try to give you an idea of this and maybe you can learn it. You have to have a little knowledge of dancing and a little rhythm inside you, but it is quite simple once you get the hang of it. I believe Mr. Grimes invented this himself, but later in my story I will explain how I improved on it.

First of all you have to sing or whistle a tune you

are familiar with, and then follow the tune by slapping your left fingers against your right palm and visa-versa, with your fingers closed.

Eighteen years ago I lost the first two digits of my forefinger and second finger of my left hand in an industrial accident, but it didn't stop me from hand dancing! I couldn't do the hand dancing the same way so I developed my own technique.

I sit upon a chair or stool, with my knees about eight or nine inches apart and follow the rhythm of the tune by clapping my hands and hitting my legs—just above my knees—alternatively. I have tape-recorded this and it definitely does give the impression of someone dancing.

Newspaper reporters have watched me perform, and 'The Lancashire Evening Chronicle and Post' photographer took a picture of me demonstrating my hand dancing.

In my time I have danced for a great many people on and off the stage. During the 1939-1945 war I was in our local Home Guard concert party and we put on many performances. I have danced many times for the old age pensioners, and have done my utmost to please them.

Eleven years ago we held a 'Top-Town' competition at Tyldesley, Lancs, when we challenged Atherton, our neighbouring town. Three judges declared us the winners. We had a request show a week or two later and the proceeds were given to charity.

Clog dancing was slowly fading out by the time I was taught to do it. Mr. Grimes, I believe, was nearly sixty years of age when he taught me. Ten years ago I had to have an operation on my spine, and I attended Salford Royal Hospital for about two and a half years.

I honestly believe that Clog dancing all these years helped me to overcome this operation and put me back on my feet. I think that Clog dancing strengthened my ankles and the muscles of my legs.

Two and a half years ago I gave tuition to a Canadian Playwright, Mr. Grainger, in Tyldesley Labour Club. He was born at Leigh, Lancs, and had written a play concerning Lancashire in the 1920s. His central character was a Lancashire Clog dancer and he wished to see how a Lancashire Clog dancer performed.

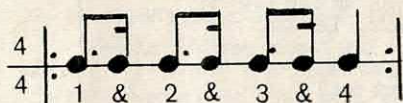
He advertised in the Leigh, Atherton and Tyldesley Journal, for a Clog dancer. At that time Mr. Grainger was in Leigh to visit his mother and I believe I was the only person who accepted his plea. At Tyldesley Labour Club I began to do the steps, slowly, as his wife wrote down the notes for him. Afterwards, I performed the steps faster to show him how the rhythm changed. He asked me: "Was there a way a dancer could walk onto the stage dancing?" I answered: "Yes, but I would have

Clog Dance Steps

I am pleased to append a notation of Mr. Flaherty's clog dance steps. This follows the pattern I have used in my article in the 'Folk Music Journal,' 1967, on Clog Dancing. In Mr. Flaherty's steps the dance starts with the left foot and the step occupies six bars and is finished with a two bar break beginning on the left foot. This is then followed by the same step and break beginning on the right foot. The dance is all done on the ball of the foot and the heels never touch the ground. When translating these steps for hand dancing Mr. Flaherty uses his knees as the floor for his beats and does the shuffles between his hands. Mr. Grimes used his hands only, doing the shuffles fingers to fingers, and using the heel of each hand for the beats in position, i.e. using each hand, as appropriate as the floor. JULIAN PILLING.

The Three Lancashire Prize Steps

(N.B. This is the name of the step that follows here-under, not of three separate steps).



1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 2. Brush in Right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
 3. Beat Left foot about six inches in front.
 4. Beat Left foot in position.
- } 1 Bar

Repeat the above but beginning

1. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight, &c.
- and on alternative feet for six bars.

The Break for the Three Lancashire Prize Steps



1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 2. Brush in right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Beat right foot in position, taking weight.
 3. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 4. Brush in Right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
 5. Beat Left foot about six inches in front.
 6. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 7. Beat Right foot in position.
- } Bar I
- } Bar II

For right break, reverse footing.

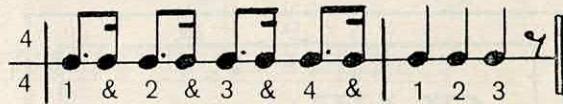
The Stage Step



1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 2. Brush in Right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
 3. Brush out Left foot } shuffle.
 - &. Brush in Left foot } shuffle.
 4. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Beat Right foot in position.
- } 1 Bar

N.B. This step is repeated exactly as above for six bars. As it ends with Right foot beating the next step is beating the left foot.

Break for the Stage Step



1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 - &. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 2. Brush in Right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
 3. Beat Left foot about six inches in front.
 - &. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 4. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
 - &. Brush in Right foot } shuffle.
 - a. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
 1. Beat Left foot six inches in front.
 2. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
 3. Beat Right foot in position.
- } Bar I
- Triplet
- } Bar II

For Right break, reverse footing.

to bring my heels into it, and it would have to be all performed while walking, naturally." I showed him, very slowly at first, a shuffle on the left foot and a tap with the left heel and then the other foot.

You keep repeating this as you are walking.

He went back to Canada, with the notes his wife had taken, to coach his dancer who was the principal character.

His comment to the reporters when asked was he satisfied: "I was more than satisfied with the excellent tuition I received."

The Skutch



- Triplet { 1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
&. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
a. Brush in Right foot }
2. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
&. Brush out Left foot } shuffle.
3. Brush in Left foot }
&. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
4. Beat Right foot in position. } 1 Bar

As with the Stage step this step is repeated exactly as above for six bars.
The same break is used as that for the Stage step.

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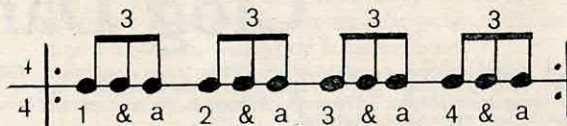
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Dan Leno's Double Shuffle



- Triplet { 1. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight.
&. Brush out Right foot } shuffle.
a. Brush in Right foot }
2. Beat Right foot in position, taking weight.
&. Brush out Left foot } shuffle.
a. Brush in Left foot }
3. Beat Left foot in position, taking weight. } 1 Bar
&. Brush out Right foot } shuffle }
a. Brush in Right foot } Double
4. Brush out Right foot } shuffle } shuffle.
&. Brush in Right foot }
a. Beat Right foot in position. }

As with the Stage Step this step is repeated exactly as above for six bars.

The same break is used as that for the Stage Step. J.P.

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