

'Shuffle, Darby, Shuffle'

By Joan Flett

It is always interesting to pick up snippets of information which give clues to the dances, steps and style of dancing used in the past.

A John Stobbs, of North Shields, wrote a note to the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle in 1876 (later reproduced in the Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend by its editor in November 1891) which indicated that dancing was regarded as a part of the education of most young people. In addition, the mention of Shuffle and Cross the Buckle (sometimes called Cut the Buckle) in the note shows that stepping was taught and used in social dancing in the North Shields area, for these are the names of steps widely taught in the North of England and in Scotland from at least 1800. John Brockett in *A Glossary of North Country Words*, Newcastle, 1829, gives 'Shuffle and Cut, a superior step in vulgar dancing'.

In his note John Stobbs tells how he remembered an aunt and uncle singing a song with the chorus:—

Shuffle, Darby, Shuffle, Darby,
One, two, three;
Shuffle, Darby, Shuffle, Darby,
One, two, three.

He states that the tune used was 'the once famous "Jim Crow"'. From their ages he felt sure that his relatives had learnt the song either in their youth in the neighbourhood of Bamborough or, later, when they moved to Glanton, long before the song 'Jim Crow', using the same tune, was introduced from America. He thought it probable, from their ages that they had never heard 'Jim Crow'.*

John only remembered fragments of the song but he remembered the story of it which his aunt and uncle had told him. A well-to-do farmer's daughter had married her father's manservant but his education had been neglected — he had not learnt to dance. The farmer's daughter took it upon herself to teach him to dance whilst, at the same time, looking after their baby, cleaning the house and doing the mending. He was so fascinated by the story that he used the fragments he remembered to make up his own song. Although it is *not* the original the date of the composition is still early enough to make the song of interest for the light it throws on local dancing and John states that he had had the song 'by me for a long time'.

"Set aside the chairs, Darby,
Shut the cupboard door;
Get yoursel a' ready on
The middle o' the floor.
Dance away, Darby, hinny,
Dance, dance, away;
Never mind what ony body
Hes a mind to say.

Chorus

Round by the table, Darby,
Past the easy chair;
Stop before the looking glass,
Cut and shuffle there.
Hush abi my bonny babby,
Never mind your dad;
He's only in a merry fit,
He isn't gannin' mad.

What would you like o' Sunday, Darby,
For your Sunday's dinner?
My eyes, but your a good'n
To be only a beginner.
Run the reel, Darby, hinny,
Darby, run the reel,
Lor-a marcy, what a hole
There's in your stocking heel!

Dance to the clock, Darby,
Dance to the clock;
Mind as ye turn about
Ye dinnot get a knock.
Dance to the clock, Darby,
Turn about agyen,
Mind ye dinnot kick your toes
Again the trough styen.

Cross the buckle, cross the buckle,
That's the way to dance;
Cross the buckle, Darby; wey,
Ye mun ha been at France.
Hush abi my bonny babby,
Hush upon my knee;
Your dad'll be a first-rate
Dancer I can see."



* The song 'Jim Crow' was made famous by an American comedian, Thomas Dartmouth Rice. He was born in New York in 1808 and died there in 1860. In 1832 he became well-known as a Nigger Minstrel and made his London debut in 1836, after which he became well-known all over the country. He introduced many popular farces and burlesques and his well-known songs included 'Jim Crow'.

A further gleam of light is thrown on the dancing scene in the Glanton area by an itinerant farm worker who wrote to the Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend in June 1888. He recalled that 'indays gone past' he joined a gang of other farm workers to tramp from East Linton, Haddingtonshire, to Whittingham Fair. As they passed through Glanton they were stopped by a local farmer who engaged them all at £1 a week plus food.

He recalls that they slept in a barn and many nights had singing and story telling. Two of the men played the flute and fife and when the local workers' wives and daughters joined them at night the large barn doors were laid on the floor 'and there commenced such capering and dancing as would have delighted Neil Gow or Paganini'.

Five volumes of the Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend were consulted in the Russell Wortley Collection in the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield and I am indebted to Professor John Widdowson for allowing me access.

