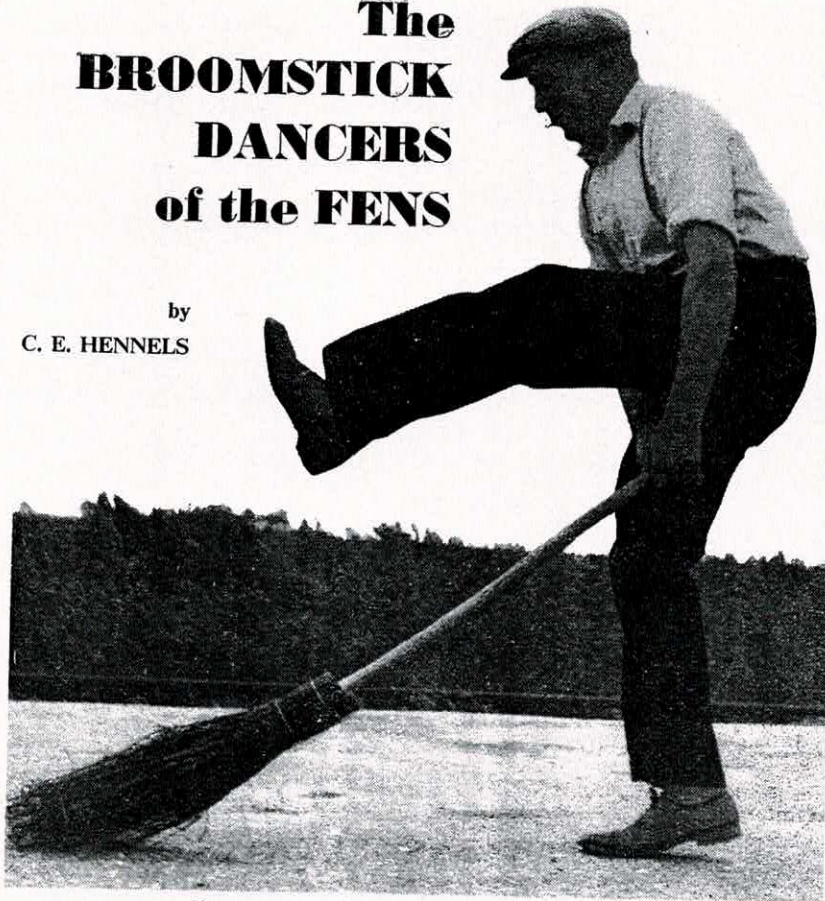


# The BROOMSTICK DANCERS of the FENS

by  
C. E. HENNELS



*Demonstrating the steps of a broomstick dance.*

ONE day while chatting to an old countryman, we talked, as most old countrymen will, of the long passed days. Soon we embarked upon the everlasting topic of how much happier people were in the old days. He condemned the everlasting blare of canned music and told me of the rare treat of music and dancing in his young days. Then the sound of an old fiddle and accordion

had the power to make folks forget all the cares of the world as the villagers danced and sang.

The old man spoke of his ability to dance for many hours in the hey-day of his youth. With a twinkling eye he recalled all of the old dance routines that he had known. The jig, the step dance, when a hollow sounding board was used to tap out the time, the barn

dances, the broomstick dances . . . but wait . . . the broomstick dance, what was that?

Surely I had heard of it before? Why, dancing fenmen had performed the dance for as long as he could remember. Even the tiny tots had hummed a tune and passed an imaginary broom to each other as they had skipped along the country lanes upon their way to school.

Later, when I had left the old man, I made some inquiries about the old broomstick dance and found that very few people of the new generation had ever heard of it. But by mentioning the dance to several of the older villagers, one would observe a new twinkle in their eyes as they recalled the old dance that had been tucked away in their memories for many years. Some would even seize an old brush and force stiffened limbs to perform the gyrations that had been part of their youth.

A little short of breath, they would explain how the broom must be passed over and under the legs of the dancer and handed from partner to partner. Some of them recalled the old musicians who had played the fiddles and accordions to the hopping dancers of the pubs and halls of the village.

Nobody could tell me of the origin of the old dance but it appeared to have been handed down for many long years. Could it be that a traveller to a medieval fair had been fascinated by the antics of a jester as he danced and swung his legs about the headed stick of the hobby horse? Returning home, did the traveller tell his wide eyed family of the wonders that he had seen? From a chimney corner he may have seized an old birch broom and, using it as a hobby horse, imitated the piped music of the fair as he danced and whirled.

Children, wide eyed and laughing, passed the broom from hand to hand as they made their own steps and joined the dance. With the passing years, the brooms were brought to the village feasts and skillful steps were introduced to match the merry piping music. Thus may have begun an old Fenland dance.

In any case it seems more in keeping with the dance to accept this theory than to accept the one advanced that it is part of an old fertility dance. The dance is a happy simple thing and as much a part of the children as of the adults. It was, I am sure, born out of the joy of dancing and living.

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