



CLOG DANCING **in** **NORTHUMBERLAND** **and** **DURHAM**

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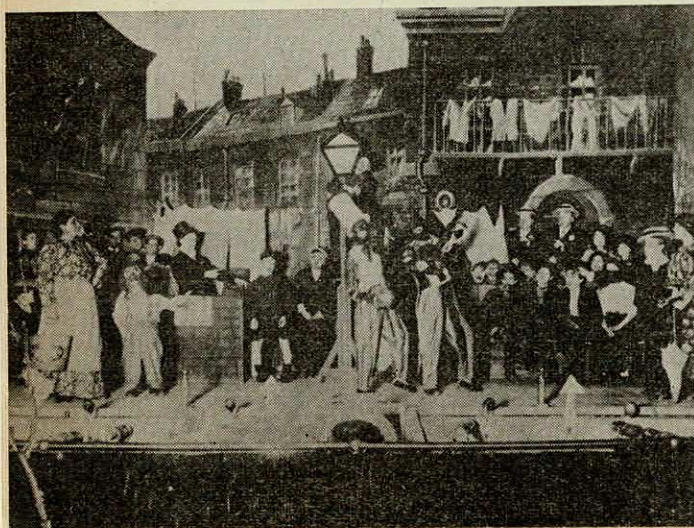
Industrial clogs are now seldom worn in Northumberland and Durham. The supply of more flexible and supposedly more comfortable footwear together with the unpleasant social stigma often associated with the wearing of clogs has led to their disappearance and the virtual extinction of the clog maker and clog factories in Northern England.

The art form of clog dancing, however, still survives and has a well-deserved place in the rich heritage of Northumbrian Folklore. The origins of clog dancing are not clear but it is probable that it is an industrial development of the more rural step dancing. In Northumberland and Durham clog dancing until recently has centred almost entirely around the mining communities. Like the other interests of pitmen such as the leek shows, brass bands and whippet racing, the miners' love of competition is also apparent in clog dancing. Before the Second World War clog dancing competitions

were fairly common and held in local theatres and halls throughout the North of England. Standards were high and a competition often attracted a large number of entries. Prizes included championship belts, silver and money awards and competitors were asked to dance 10 and 20 steps to hornpipe tempo finishing with a double shuffle. Even to compete in the dance extreme fitness was demanded. Adjudicators who were usually former champions awarded marks on originality, beats, execution, carriage and timing. Occasionally pedestal competitions took place where the competitors had to dance on the confined area of a slate-topped pedestal usually of about 2 or 3 square feet.

The clothes worn by the dancers usually included velvet kneebreeches which were very similar to miners' working hoggies, a shirt and a velvet waistcoat and a brightly coloured sash.

Sunderland Empire, 1913, Charlie Chaplin marked with an arrow.



The three generations, Johnson Ellwood, daughter and granddaughter, 1963.



The clogs themselves were often hand made and quite ornate. The lace-up low miner's flat-type clog was used, the irons having always been removed. The clogs most preferred for dancing were made from ash as good clear beats could more easily be obtained than with the more common beech or sycamore working clogs.

In the late nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century clog dancers appeared on music halls and on the stage of many theatres. A number of the well-known names in entertainment of the period started their careers as clog dancers. It was as a clog dancer for example that Dan Leno made his first real mark by winning the world clog dancing championship belt in Oldham in 1883 when he was 22 years old. Charlie Chaplin too was a clog dancer and danced with a group known as the Lancashire Lads which toured the music halls and theatres. The photograph shows Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel as they appeared at the Sunderland Empire in 1913. This photograph was shown to Charlie when he was awarded an honorary degree at the Newcastle Division of the University of Durham about 50 years later when a clog dancer, Johnson Ellwood, helped to entertain him. The popularity of clog dancing on the stage after the 1920s declined. Music hall itself was not as popular as it had been before the First World War and the relatively new tap dancing had been introduced, and clogs were too cumbersome for some of the steps. But even tap dancing had its origin in clog dancing, for Fred Astaire was taught by a clog dancer, Anne Liscomb, who had emigrated from the North East to the U.S.A.

One family that has made an enormous contribution to clog dancing in the North East are the Ellwoods. Their efforts in both teaching and clog dancing for charity have been outstanding. Generations of young clog dancers have been

taught by them and they have kept an open house at Chester-le-Street to anyone interested in dancing, and especially to students from Newcastle Durham and Leeds Universities. Johnson Ellwood is now 74 and still dances, although he has been threatening "to hang up his clogs" for the past ten years. With his daughter Mary and granddaughter Margaret, the three generations have delighted many audiences by performances at folk festivals and on the tours they have made abroad. Much has been done by them to promote the knowledge of clog dancing.

The pitmans' competitions are no more. Champions like Dicky Farrell of Newbiggin, Joe Daley of Blaydon, Warren Doyle of Low Fell, Bob Oliver from Anfield Plain are almost forgotten, and another tradition associated with the mining community has virtually gone. But there is still hope for clog dancing. Some ardent enthusiasts still survive. Johnson Ellwood's great-granddaughter at the age of two has just been given her first pair of dancing clogs. Hylton Pomeroy probably Johnson Ellwood's most talented pupil still delights all those who visit Seaton Delaval Hall mediaeval banquets by his brilliant performances. Peter Brown, of Monkseaton Morrismen and Michael Smailham are two young enthusiastic and able dancers who we hope have many dancing years before them. Clog dancing is still alive and will remain so as long as there are a few people to whom the Georgie phrase "a clivvor pair of feet" has other connotations than Saturday afternoon on the terraces of St. James' Park watching Newcastle United.

Article and photographs

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Warren Doyle, Pitmans Champion, c. 1935.

