

# 35 Years of Clog and Step Dance Research

The Instep Research Team was formed in 1980 to collect, film, teach and publish clog and step dances. **Chris Metherell** looks back at those early years and the continuing research.

Photo: E. A. Kirkby



The Ellwood Family

My then wife (now Alice Brunton) and I had learned to clog dance while at university, through the happy chance of being undergraduates in Reading, the base of the Reading Step and Traditional Dance Group (RSTDG). Members of the group were encouraged to rediscover the critical importance of meeting and learning from the traditional exponents themselves or, at the very least, from the original collector where the dancers themselves had died.

We eventually tipped up in Newcastle upon Tyne, where I had obtained a post working for the university, and found a new, but already flourishing, group of clog dancers, learning under the tutelage of Peter Brown, a pupil of Johnson Ellwood. We had heard of Johnson, and indeed learned a few of his steps which had been collected by Mike Cherry, a member of RSTDG and taught to the group, but it was clear that we had only scratched the surface. Just as importantly, however, we had learned a large amount of material, mainly from Lakeland and Lancashire, which was entirely novel to the Newcastle dancers. We quickly joined forces, the resulting team becoming the Newcastle Cloggies. But that is another story.

After a few months, we began to hear of other dancers in the area and, by attending the Northern Counties Clog Dance Competition, we were able to meet

at least one old dancer, John Surtees, whose steps we realised had never been collected. Building on our experiences with the RSTDG, Alice and I, together with four local dancers, Ed Wilson, Alice Smith, Julie Jarman and Cath Hays, formed the Instep Research Team (IRT) which, 35 years on and through many changes in membership, is still researching and recording clog and step dances.

We very quickly realised that we needed a secure methodology, not only for our research but also in order to be able to write down what steps we found. There were no easily portable video cameras in 1981! And so one of our first tasks was to develop a notation system. Many lengthy discussion meetings and dead ends later Newcastle Notation was born. Time has shown that the effort expended on developing the system was well spent. We still use it today, and it has become recognised as an important tool in the dance researcher's kit. It has even been used in PhD theses!

But I am perhaps getting a little ahead of myself, because when we first started collecting we had not worked out the notation system and had to do the best we could. I can well remember our first recording trip – to meet John Surtees (then in his late 70s) in Billingham on Teesside. Julie Jarman sat outside his house in a borrowed car working up the courage to

knock on the door and interview him. We did of course. He was charming and when we reported to the rest of the team that we had successfully collected about six previously unknown waltz steps, we knew that what we hoped would be possible was going to turn into reality. We could recover new material from the memories of older dancers and it was clear that there was a lot of unknown material out there.

Using the Newcastle Cloggies as guinea pigs we developed a collecting technique which produced most of our best early leads. The team would turn up at a working men's club (very popular then on Tyneside) and perform – usually in the interval between bingo sessions! After performing, the dancers would fan out around the room collecting funds for the team and asking about local dancers. As soon as a lead was discovered a hand would go up and one of the IRT would dash over and note the details. As a system it worked really well. It was the method by which we discovered Ivy Sands who was to be one of our main early contacts and from whom we recovered over 30 steps and a wealth of social background over a period of about two years. And Kit Haggerty, a pupil of the legendary Northumberland dancer Dickie Farrell.

After a while it had become clear that there were two main families from whom the majority of dancers from Northumberland and Durham could trace their steps. The Ellwood family (then living in Stanley, Co. Durham) and the Farrells (who we eventually traced to Ashington, Northumberland). Members of the Ellwood family were still teaching regularly and so it was relatively straightforward to obtain



Hyton Pomeroy

Photo courtesy VWM





*Tiny Allison*

choreographic details of their dancing (over the years we must have notated several hundred steps!) but at the outset the Farrells were unknown to us and so to strike gold so early in our work in the person of Kit Haggerty and Ivy Sands (who was a pupil of a pupil of Dickie Farrell) was astounding. We did eventually trace Dickie Farrell's son and daughter who were able to provide further information.

We set out from the start to record from oral tradition. We felt that the age of the surviving dancers demanded this. Literature research could wait. But we did a little newspaper searching in order to find new leads, particularly where competitive dancing was concerned, as our feeling was that competition winners would make good informants! We quickly came up with the name of Tiny Allison, who had competed in the revived Northumberland



*Ivy Sands*

and Durham Championship in 1949. We traced her to Stanley (obviously a hot bed of clog dancing) and by the simple expedient of asking in the local post office were able to arrange to call and see her. Unfortunately she was incapacitated and we were only able to interview her once before she died, but she was able to introduce us to a number of her pupils which enabled us to collect her outstanding repertoire of steps, learned from local dancer Harry Robinson and, yes you guessed, Dickie Farrell. But her star pupil was Jackie Toaduff. Unfortunately, as he was a professional entertainer working abroad (mostly on the QE2), we had to wait until his retirement before we could fully investigate his dancing.

We didn't only record our own discoveries however; we realised that by re-collecting material from known dancers we might shed some new light on their material. One such example was Sam Steele, whose steps had been published in the *Folk Music Journal* in 1971. We went back to re-interview him in November 1980 and were not only able to correct some discrepancies and ambiguities in the published version, but also to collect several further steps. More importantly, Sam ventured to suggest that his sister Elsie Brookes was 'a much better dancer than me'. She was of course unknown at that stage, but we were able to interview her four months later and obtain yet more material. An early lesson in the absolute imperative of checking sources!

One could fill an issue of *EDS* with stories of collecting new material from this or that dancer. For example visiting Robbie Harrison in the Lake District in 1982, we discovered that, like Sam, his sister too was the best dancer in the family. And where did she live now? About five miles from my home in Newcastle! Her name was Elsie Willis. Or there was the morning when a letter arrived from Sussex from someone we had never heard of – Alex Woodcock – asking if we could teach him some new steps as he had acquired no new material since learning before the Second World War. He turned out to be one of the most accomplished clog dancers we ever met and ended up performing at the folk festival in Sidmouth.

Most importantly we set out to make the results of our work as widely known as possible. The Newcastle Cloggies organised an annual weekend of clog dance for many years at which the material was taught. We used to joke at the end of each weekend that we didn't know what we would be teaching next year as we hadn't collected it yet. But it wasn't a joke. It was true.

We published our material under the imprint of the Newcastle Series. Little blue handbooks containing details of a traditional dancer's repertoire. There are over thirty of them to date with more still in

the pipeline. It has to be said that we didn't restrict ourselves to our own contacts. In 2008 we completed the herculean task of accurately notating all of Sam Sherry's complex routines. Joan Flett, the widow of the great dance researcher Tom Flett generously made all of her husband's papers available to us, and I well remember making the 800 mile round trip from Newcastle to Devon in 1987 to film (yes we had cameras by then) the late Leslie Rice dancing 'Uncle Albert's Double Backstep', the one step which researcher Ann-Marie Hulme had been unable to recover from him, so that we could publish his competition-style Devon steps.



*Jackie Toaduff*

It is a tribute to the perseverance of the team as a whole that I suspect that almost every clog dancer today has at least some steps in their repertoire which they would not be dancing save for the work of the IRT. And we are still researching and publishing. All our material, including our manuscript collection of original notes, is now being made freely available via our website.

*Chris Metherell is not just a clog dancer and researcher: at university, he was a member of the Whiteknights and Kennett morris sides, and later danced rapper with High Spen Blue Diamonds. From about 1990 to 2014, he was Archivist of the Morris Ring.*

### Further information

The website [www.InstepRT.co.uk](http://www.InstepRT.co.uk) includes dance notations, information on the dancers and film clips.