

Tips and Clates

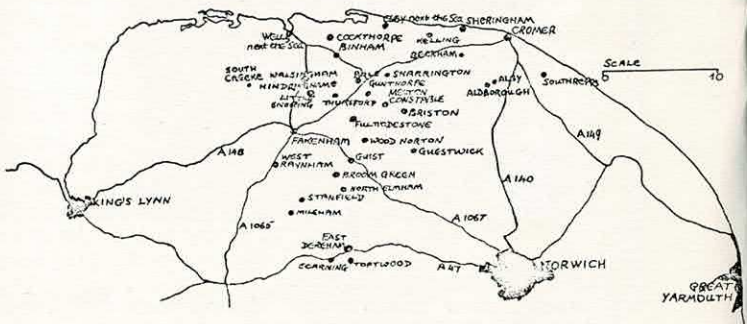
A report on the beginnings of an investigation into step dancing in Norfolk by Jennifer Millett, in collaboration with Alan Pittwood and Christine Crofts.

We have as yet made only two short visits to a small area of Norfolk, but we have found there a tradition of step dancing which is very much alive in people's memories, and was common in the pubs in the younger days of those to whom we talked, though it is seen less nowadays, partly due to the extensive closure of pubs in this area, including those where it particularly thrived.

We came across step dancers who live or lived in all the places shown on our map, ranging from those who died seven or eight years ago in their late seventies and eighties, their fathers from whom they learned, and their sons and daughters, now in their fifties and sixties, who learned from them, to those who had picked it up or taught themselves, now in their sixties and seventies.

Most of the older dancers danced in their working boots—often their only boots—which had tips and clates (illustrated) but irons on working boots went out when tractors came, because of safety. Some, however, danced in light walking-out shoes without tips. Clog boots were worn up to forty years ago on the railways and in the breweries, but were too heavy for dancing, though some dancers had tried them. Nowadays they dance in ordinary shoes, some dancers using tips and clates on them and others not. They normally dance on the brick floors of the pubs and do not use boards (though some had done so when dancing in other places), and dancing mats seemed unknown.

The older dancers and their descendants used their heels as well as their toes, and two dancers who learned from their fathers demonstrated steps having consecutive toe, "middle" (ball of foot), and heel beats, though other dancers use only toe beats—"You can't dance on your heels!" They did not use a formal sequence of steps each of a certain number of bars, but a series of figures, each of which might be repeated several times, fitting them together to suit the music, so they did not do the same thing every time, nor would someone who learned a certain dancer's figures fit them together in the same



way: Some dancers were able to demonstrate the figures separately and teach them to us.

The style of dance varied considerably. The older dancers lifted their legs well up, though other "toe and heel" dancers told us it was "more of a shuffle, and you don't bend your knees." Two had a foot-turning action, which others hadn't, and whereas one dancer's toe and heel beats were barely distinguishable visually, others had a pronounced toe and heel movement. Generally "toe and heel" dancers danced on the spot, but some "toe" dancers moved about. Several dancers shook match boxes while dancing, one danced playing the bones, and some "larked about," dancing from tabletop to tabletop. A dancer from Guist used to do a broom dance with his daughter which consisted of "cocking your leg over the broom" several times, each holding one end of the broom, and then stepping. None of those we spoke to knew of any contests other than one between a musician and a dancer as to who could keep going longest, and a landlord's challenge to a dancer who boasted how long he could dance.

The usual instrument for step dancing was the "old accordion" (melodeon) but the mouth organ and hammer dulcimer were also used. Three melodeon players gave us the tune shown, each saying it was an old step dance tune of his father's, and another identified it as the Yarmouth Hornpipe. (It is similar to a tune of Bob Cann's from Devon which I believe he also had from his father, and to the Manchester Hornpipe in the Fiddler's Tune Book). Other tunes for stepping included the Norwich and Sheringham Breakdowns, the Bluebell polka, Scotland the Brave and one similar to the "A" music of the second tune published with the Dorset fourhand reel. ("The Kitchen Kettle" and "Poor old Joe the boat is going over" were among other tunes played for us). Although hornpipes were generally used for step dancing, some danced to a march or a waltz, and others to quicksteps and "tunes going at the time"—"Whispering," "Paper Doll," "Cuddle up," "Swanee," "Swanee River," and more recently, "Yellow Ribbon" on the juke box.

Dancers became widely known even before people had cars. One dancer and his family of ten would hire a bus for themselves and others in the row to go on outings to the seaside, and they would play, sing and step dance in pubs on the way back. Dancers would bicycle such distances as Bale to Wells or Hindringham to Cley for evenings out, stopping and dancing at pubs along the road, and darts tournaments took people further afield to pubs where there were stepdancers.

Step dancers got together in the pubs on such occasions as Briston and Aldborough fairs, and work brought some together. Teamen, who looked after horses on the farms, and didicoys, who were horse dealers, used to gather and dance in the pub at Thursford when they brought the horses to the railway station (no longer existing) for Fakenham market; the blacksmith at Bale would spend afternoons in the pub dancing with people who brought their horses for shoeing; and the old fishermen danced in their thigh boots in the pub on East Quay in Wells when the weather was too bad to go out.

Some step dancers never went anywhere but the pub, but there was also dancing at large family Christmas parties, harvest frolics, and shooting dinners. In Binham, until the reading room was built folk would gather in the cobbler's shop to play "throw ha'penny" and pitch-and-toss and sing, play, and step dance. In Bale, before the village hall was built they danced in the barn,—the heel and toe polka, schottishe, waltz, and four handed reel (which from the description was probably the Norfolk Long Dance). At dances in village halls, to which at one time they wore evening dress, and for which music was provided by fiddle, piano, drums and mandolin, or piano accordion, saxophone or clarinet, and cornet, they did the polka, veleta, St. Bernard waltz, barn dance, schottishe, and the Norfolk Long dance which all the old people got up for. At "dances where they had big bands from London," they danced La Rega, La Rosa, St. Bernard waltz, old fashioned waltz, Boston two-step, Military two step and Lancers, which were taught at local classes, and also the four-handed reel.

There are still dances or music and singing on Saturday nights in the pubs at Little Snoring and Fulmodestone and on Sundays at the Hindringham Sports and Social Club, with accordion band or electric organ and drums, and a microphone passed round for folks to sing. Not quite your Folk Scene, but very much the "scene" of folk who have grown up with a tradition of gathering to drink, sing, dance, and make music, a tradition which has changed with the times but is happily still alive.

We should like to thank all those who have helped us in our investigations, and made us so welcome in Norfolk. We should be glad to hear from anyone who can give us more information of step dancers in this, or any other area, or who is interested to know more about our findings.

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The cat has got a kitten and the dog has got a pup Pray old woman is your rhu-barb up.

When your fat-her kills a pig you shall have his thing-a-mee jig.