

# DARTMOOR STEPDANCING

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YESTERDAY, TODAY & TOMORROW





## Thanks to so many people who helped in the Taking Steps project!

**The project interviewers:** Bill Murray, Trevor Paul, Barbara Paul, Jon Shapley, Debbie Jessop, Beth Frangleton, Thomas White, Derek Moore, Chris Millington, Jerry Bix.

**The interviewees so far:** Rosemary Nockolds, Valerie Harvey, Roni Goff, Cllr Bill Cann, Bill Murray, Mark Bazeley, Shirley Bazeley, Jane White, John Cooper, Marlene Lethbridge, Gordon Rice, Cyril May, Jean Orchard, Tom Orchard, Jason Rice, Lisa Sture, Simon Ritchie, Jon Mills, Nigel Sture, Sam Richards, Chris Clapp, Bob Lethbridge, Thomas White, Ann-Marie Hulme.

**Others who helped:** Philip Freeman, Claire Weston, Pete Damsell, Alan Quick, Jenny Read, Ed Rennie, Roger Kitchen, John Hextall, Christabel White, Bob and Jacqueline Patten, Gary Hitching (Drewe Arms, Drewsteignton), Carolyn George and Steve Woodman (Kings Arms, South Zeal), Matt Norman, Jo and Simon Harmer, John and Katie Howson, Doc Rowe, Janet Keet-Black, Chris Brady, Chris Metherell, and many others who have helped and contributed their goodwill.

**Schools and Groups who took part:** Blackpool C of E Primary School (nr Newton Abbot), Chagford C of E Primary School, Dunsford Community Primary School, South Tawton Primary School, 1st Crownhill Guides, North Dartmoor Explorer Scouts, Crediton Parish Church Junior Choir, Active in Later Life (Age UK Devon), Tuesdays@Belmont (Exeter).

Front cover picture Matt Norman stepping on the wagon at the 2015 Dartmoor Folk Festival © Alan Quick.

Researched and written by Lisa Sture ©TASC 2017

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West Devon Mayor, Cllr William Cann demonstrating in 2007



Simon Ritchie in 2012

Photos by Alan Quick

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## ABOUT DARTMOOR STEPDANCING

Stepdancing is a traditional form of dancing where the rhythms are beaten out by the feet on a hard surface and is one of the origins of modern day tap dancing. Places where people stepdanced were; at home, particularly at celebrations and gatherings, in the public houses and as a display dance at entertainments, as well as at regular competitions. In 1911, Cecil Sharp the folk dance collector, wrote that stepdance was, "the most popular folk dance at the present time." It was popular over the whole of the UK and Ireland, each area having its own variation. However, in much of the country by the mid-20th Century, where it had once been popular, it had died out.

The tradition remained strong on Dartmoor for longer than most other areas, due in part to the regular competitions that were held. But by the 1970s there were only a handful of dancers left. As the tradition was not a taught tradition, it was learnt through observation and experimentation, the possibilities to learn became limited. So in the 1970s and 80s, to keep the tradition alive, Les Rice and Bob Cann started teaching - and a new generation of dancers was born. It is from the teaching of these two dancers that most of the steps danced today have been handed down.

In 2017, to reclaim and share as much knowledge of stepdancing on Dartmoor as possible, a project called 'Taking Steps: Discovering and Enjoying Dartmoor's Stepdance Heritage' researched existing materials and added to them by making new recordings of people's memories. Alongside this there was an intensive programme of workshops and events in schools and community groups to increase awareness and encourage participation in the tradition.

This booklet is a snippet of the information gathered and we hope it gives you a taste for finding out more about this fun and once-popular tradition.

[www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk)

We are sure that Bob Cann would say, **"PROPER JOB!"**

## ARCHIVES SPEAKING



This picture, from a collection at the British Library, is of Albert Crocker winning the stepdance competition at Whiddon Down's Annual Sports Day on the 30th July 1932. We know this through matching up what is known about the photograph with newspaper reports from the time. The newspaper also tells us that V. Bolt came second, F. Webber third, and the musician is Bob Cann's Uncle, George Cann, who played for most of the competitions in the area at this time. Albert Crocker and later his nephew Les Rice, are the most celebrated stepdancers we know of.



### ANCIENT AND MODERN HORSE AND MOTOR EVENTS

A novel item was the stepdancing contest, in which stalwart countrymen showed remarkable lightness of foot to the tune of an old English jig played on a concertina." [July 1937]

### STEP DANCES ON A FARM WAGON

#### 84-Year-Old Shows Youth The Way

### WHIDDON DOWN TITLE GOES TO SOUTH ZEAL

With a farm wagon as their arena and with Mr. George Cann jiggling away merrily on his concertina for their orchestra, local stepdancing celebrities "gave all they knew" to a large crowd at Whiddon Down annual sports on Saturday.

None enjoyed himself more than 84-year-old J. Butt of Hittisleigh, whose footwork and poise shamed more than one of his younger exponents, and who, although not a winner, crowned his "feat" with glory. [July 1938]

"Ancient and Modern" excerpt: Exeter and Plymouth Gazette - Friday 23 July 1937 - Image ©Trinity Mirror.

"Stepdances on a Farm Wagon" Western Times - Friday 29 July 1938 - Image ©Local World Limited/Trinity Mirror. Images created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD. (Newspaper images) reproduced with kind permission of The British Newspaper Archive [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk). © British Library Board, MS Mus. 1771/1/PR0345

## NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF STEPDANCE COMPETITIONS IN DEVON 1881 - 1939



We know from newspaper archives that the places on this map held at least one stepdance competition between 1881 and 1939. It is clear that they are not all of the competitions that were held during this period, just the ones that were reported on.

The competition was always part of a bigger event, such as a Carnival or Village Fair. At Whiddon Down it was part of the Annual Sports Day. There were always a range of competitions, and stepdancing came in the category of a 'sports event'. In the newspaper records we found, all of the competitors mentioned were men, so we can only speculate whether there were women entering the competitions at that time. However, just a little later on, we have reports of women both entering and winning.

### STEPDANCE COMPETITIONS 1881 TO 1939

Years competitions reported in newspapers for each place in brackets

1 - Belstone	[1912-1920-1926-1929]	10 - Manaton	[1926]
2 - Braunton	[1884-1889-1903-1904]	11 - South Tawton	[1898-1910]
3 - Bow	[1913-1914]	12 - South Zeal	[1891-1905-1906-1907-1913-1936-1938]
4 - Chagford	[1902-1929]	13 - Spreyton	[1922-1923]
5 - Cheriton Bishop	[1933]	14 - Teignmouth	[1902]
6 - Chudleigh	[1912]	15 - Whiddon Down	[1932-1935-1937-1938-1939]
7 - Crockernwell	[1922]	16 - Winkleigh	[1914-1935]
8 - Drewsteignton	[1906-1923]		
9 - Topsham	[1881]		

## NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF DISPLAY STEP DANCING IN DEVON 1886 - 1941



The places on this map are where between 1886 and 1941 the newspapers reported stepdancing as part of an evening's entertainment, or danced in a display. Unlike the competitions, we read of women dancing in these events, in fact, 20% of the reports are of women dancers, and in a further 20% the dancers' gender was not indicated.

Not included here are the many references to stepdancing in the Exeter theatres where, in the majority of shows, stepdancing was a feature. These shows would have originated elsewhere and not featured the local style of stepdancing. However, it is interesting to note that many other styles of stepdancing were known about.

### REPORTS OF DISPLAY STEP DANCING 1886-1941

<b>Alphington</b>	<b>[1932]</b>	Lynmouth	[1887, 1927]
Black Torrington	[1938]	Newton Abbot	[1889]
Braunton	[1891]	<b>Ottery Saint Mary</b>	<b>[1935, 1941]</b>
Bridestowe	[1920]	<b>Rackenford</b>	<b>[1933]</b>
Chagford	[1929]	Seaton	[1938]
<b>Chulmleigh</b>	<b>[1932]</b>	Sidbury	[1928]
Crediton	[1894]	South Zeal	[1937]
Exeter	[1886, 1894, 1939]	Sticklepath	[1935, 1937]
Exmouth	[1892]	Teignmouth	[1892]
Heanton Satchville	[1892]	Winkleigh	[1913]

\* Performance by women is denoted in **bold**

# STEPPDANCING COMPETITIONS

## THE SHOES

Until the 1980s people wore their everyday shoes to dance in and didn't have special 'dancing shoes'. Today, however, many shoes have soft, non-slip soles, which make poor stepdancing shoes.

Until soft soles became popular, shoes were robust and had hard soles, which were traditionally made of leather. Leather soles wear out quickly, so to extend their wear 'segs' and 'blakeys' (little pieces of protective metal) were hammered into them. Later on, hard-wearing plastic soles were introduced, which were also good to dance in.

Going back a generation 'hobnail boots' were popular in the countryside, they were practical for working in the fields. 'Nail boots', as they were called, have a 'horse-shoe' shaped metal plate around the edge of the heel and rows of large-headed nails on the sole, reducing wear and giving grip, particularly in the mud. When danced in, they give a satisfying, loud and clear sound. Both hard-soled shoes and hobnail boots are used to dance in today.



Photo by Lisa Sture

## THE BOARD

In a competition, the dancer is required to dance on a small raised board to show their skill. It is said that the best dancers were able to dance on a plate!

## THE WAGON

The board is placed on a farm wagon, which acts as a stage, lifting the dancer up so everyone can see and hear the dancer's feet. If the dancer falls off the board they are disqualified.



Jenny Read dancing on the Wagon 2016  
Photo by Alan Quick



2012 Judges: Bill Murray, Matt Norman and Cyril May

## THE JUDGES

There were two or three judges for the competition, three ensured a majority to decide the outcome. It was said that some judges liked to place themselves under the wagon to hear the beats more clearly. At the Dartmoor Folk Festival, where the competition was revived in 1984, there are two permanent judges and the previous year's winner judges with them.

## THE PRIZE

One of the things that made competitions popular was that there were prizes. In the old fairs, which we can read about in the newspaper archive, there was always a first, second and third place awarded, and each received a cash prize. These prizes varied between events, but as an example, just over a hundred years ago the top prize was between five and ten shillings (converted into 'new' money this would be 25p and 50p respectively). The second prize was always half of the first prize and third prize half of the second prize. A few decades later the top prize had increased to £2.



Jason Rice and Matt Stoner, Adult and Junior champions 2010

Currently, at the Dartmoor Folk Festival there is a Junior competition for under-16s and an Adult competition. Today the winner receives a specially commissioned quarter-size stepdance board. Their name is also inscribed on the adults' shield or the juniors' cup.

Photos by Alan Quick

## STEPPING COMPETITIONS

### THE MUSIC

During the competition the musician sits on the end of the wagon with their back to the dancer so they don't know who is dancing, and can't play in a way that might favour one over another. The most commonly played instrument for competitions is the anglo-concertina.

The Dartmoor way of playing has evolved for dancing - it is a style that makes your feet want to move! The notes are slightly clipped, rather than slurring into each other, giving a lift and energy to the music.

The competition has three rounds of dancing, and in each round the musician plays a different tune and the competitor dances a different step. Today, a competition might have up to 20 competitors.

In an interview with Les Rice in 1983 he said that in times gone by there were up to 40 competitors. Playing three different tunes twenty times each, at the same speed and with the same enthusiasm, takes a lot of concentration and stamina - even more so for forty!

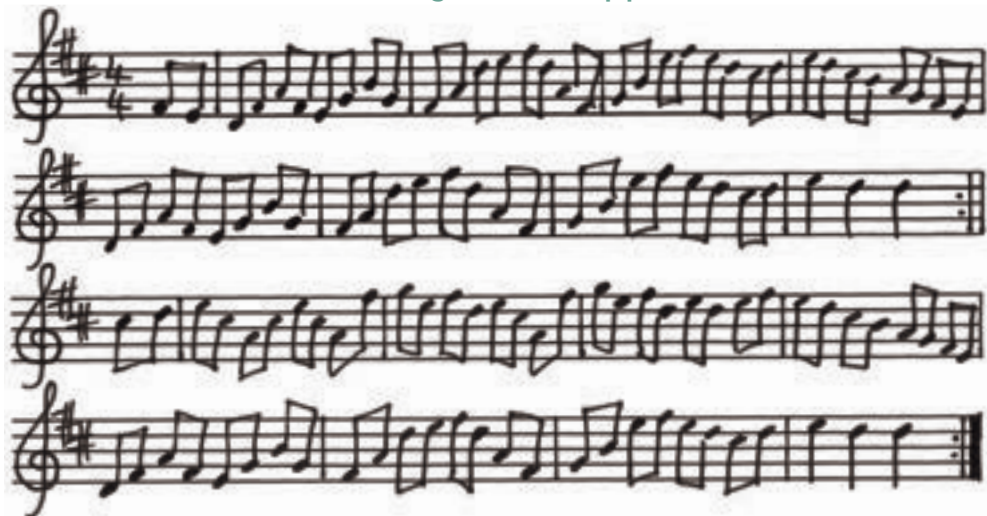


*"Music for the stepdancing was provided by a "solo orchestra" provided by Mr. George Cann, who, perched at one end of the waggon and wearing a seraphic smile, jigged away merrily on a concertina and nearly went to sleep while doing it, for the day was very hot and the contestants so evenly matched that the encounter took nearly three-quarters of an hour to decide. The rhythm they maintained was amazing and the final choice was a popular one."*  
Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 2 August 1935

*"If I have a good player, I can dance well."* Les Rice

The tune used in competitions is always a 4/4 hornpipe, 32-bars in length. The 32-bars are divided into 8-bar sections. The first two sections are called the 'first A' and the 'second A', the second A being a repeat of the first A. The next two sections are called the 'first B' and the 'second B', and the second B is a repeat of the first B. There are tunes that have been favoured for this tradition of dancing for generations. The hornpipe here is written 'straight', however it is played with a bit of a swing.

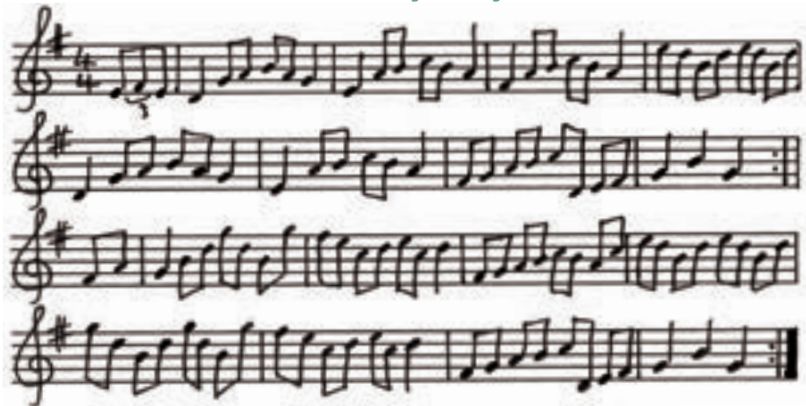
### UNCLE GEORGE'S HORNPIPE (George Cann's Hornpipe)



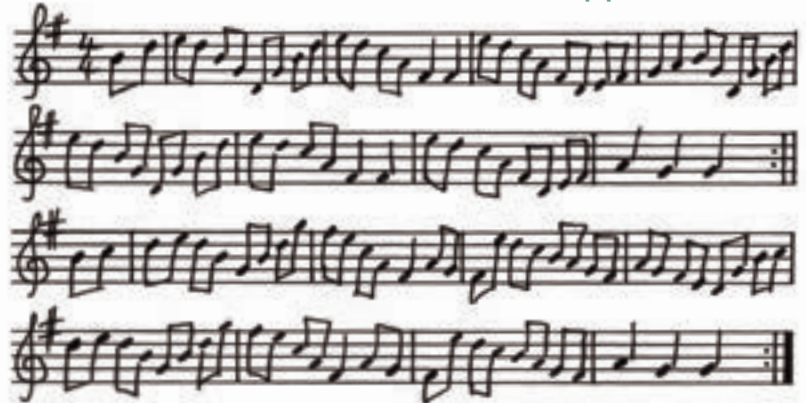
The first part of the dance is called 'the setting' and is marking time to the music. Whatever steps the dancer uses to set in the first A music they must repeat in the second A music. The dance to the B music is called 'the dance'. Again, the dance to the first B music must be repeated in the second B music. The dancer is disqualified if they fall or step off the board.

## STEPPDANCING COMPETITIONS

### THE COKEY HORNPIPE (The Cokey/Cokey's)



### THE SCHOTTISCHE HORNPIPE (aka Ricketts Hornpipe)



## INFLUENCES ON STEPPDANCING

During the 20th Century, although there are mentions of stepdancing across a wide area of Devon, the North-East area of Dartmoor is where there were the most competitions. Bob Cann suggested that this might have been due to "the most important group of people on the Moor" - the pony breeders.

*"One of the very strong areas for pony breeding is around the South Zeal, Whiddon Down, Sticklepath area – and around there, there has been a very strong tradition of stepdancing. It may be that Gypsies, bringing horses and trading in horses came to this area, as it was a common land area." Bob Cann*

As well as plentiful, free grazing, the area was accessible. It was on an old coaching route from Exeter to Penzance, passing through Cheriton Bishop, Crockernwell, Whiddon Down and South Zeal, all of which held competitions. It has now been upgraded to the A30, a motorway-style road diverted away from the villages.

Many gypsy families settled in the area and brought their own stepdance tradition, which although differing from the Dartmoor tradition, has existed alongside and influenced it for a very long time.



Lisa Sture and Tom Orchard sharing a step. Photo Ayla Bedri 2008

*"The Gypsies used to gather, and the horse dealers, and they'd get in the pub of a night an' they'd start to broomdance and stepdance. No other entertainment, they used to entertain themselves by doing this." Bob Cann*



## ROMANY GYPSY STEPDANCING

Tom Orchard is regarded as the best Gypsy step dancer in Devon today. He tells how, until he met Bob Cann at 6 years old and danced to his playing, he had only danced to mouth tuning. Gypsies dance to a range of musical rhythms and are not constrained by small boards or dance areas.

An old Gypsy stepdancing custom, not often seen today, is to stand in a circle facing each other whilst one by one people go in and dance. It doesn't matter how well you dance, just that you join in. When the dancer has had enough they kick a leg up and return to place and the next person who wants to dance goes in. This can go on for some time! Gypsies are welcoming of anyone who is willing to get up and have a go. Willingness to be part of it is more important than skill, although there is great pride in being skilful.

### NELSON'S TUNE (Jig)



Tom, Jean and Ashley Orchard performing at Cecil Sharp House  
Photo by Sam Lee

## LADIES' STEPDANCING



Dancing together on a board

In the past Gypsies, both men and women, used to enter the local stepdancing competitions. They were good dancers and often won. Some of the Gypsy women who are remembered to have won are Bessy Small, Dehlia Crocker, and Rebecca Roberts. Dehlia was the grandmother of Tom Orchard's wife Jean. Les Rice tells how Mary Small drew equal first with him in a competition, but he eventually won by them competing again and dancing a fourth step.

The best place to dance is in a pub on Fair day, and Fair days are always days to dress up. It is part of Gypsy culture to look good when you go out, so most of the women will wear shoes with high heels, which affects the kind of steps they can dance. This has led to there being a step called The Ladies' Step. Here is the tune that calls the ladies onto the floor.

### THE LADIES' STEP



## STEPPANCERS OF THE PAST – THE MEN



Photo by Nigel Sture

### LES RICE (1912-1996)

His Uncles Johnny and Ernie encouraged him to stepdance and play concertina from the age of 3. Another Uncle was Albert Crocker. He won at least 28 competitions. Bob Cann said he was "one of the best stepdancers I can remember."



Photo by Nigel Sture

### JACK RICE (1915-1994)

Jack was a fine stepdancer, and cousin to Les Rice. In the 1980s he judged competitions at the Dartmoor Folk Festival. He was also a talented accordion and mouthorgan player.



Photo by Alan Quick

### BOB CANN, BEM (1916-1990)

Bob was himself a good stepdancer, and Les Rice recounts how on one occasion at Whiddon Down Bob beat him in a competition. In 1989 Bob was awarded the BEM for "services to local and national folk music".



Photo by Nigel Sture

### BILL CANN (1913-2002)

Bill was Bob Cann's brother. He was a stepdancer and in the 1980s he judged the competitions at the Dartmoor Folk Festival. The brothers had uncles who were great musicians and stepdancers, and had contact with Gypsy stepdancers throughout their lives.

Among the dancers we know were about at this time are Dickie Cooper, Perce Tucker, Frank Webber, Les Bolt, Jimmy Cooper.

## STEPPANCERS OF THE PAST – THE LADIES

Today there are at least as many women who stepdance and enter competitions as men. However it wasn't always this way. From the records we have, we know that women frequently gave stepdance performances at events, however mentions of women entering competitions are not common.

Apart from the women Gypsy stepdancers mentioned, we know of three other champion women stepdancers from the past: Annie Baker of Whiddon Down, affectionately known as 'Grannie Baker', and remembered by sisters Rosemary Nockolds and Valerie Harvey (nee Goff) who grew up there; Bob Cann's sister who won a competition at Spreyton Revels; and Les Rice's eldest daughter, Marlene, who beat him in a competition also at Spreyton when she was 7 years old.



Photo © Throwleigh Archive

### JANE ARSCOTT

An older account of a female stepdancer is of Jane Arscott. Jane lived in and around the north-Dartmoor village of Throwleigh, all her life. She was born in 1827 and died in 1921 at the age of 94. She was fit and well until the last, walking two miles to visit friends the day before she died. In the book, "Throwleigh – The Story of a Dartmoor Village", published in 1938, it reads,

*"She had great accomplishments and when well over 80 would do her step-dances and broomdance very gracefully in the Barn on gala occasions, holding herself very upright and keeping that set expression of face meanwhile which is peculiar I think to all stepdancers."*

So there is no doubt that female stepdancers were both abundant, and just as keen as the men!

## OTHER DANCE TRADITIONS ON DARTMOOR



Valerie Harvey describing The Monkey Hornpipe with Roni Goff. Photo © TASC

### THE MONKEY'S HORNPIPE

The Monkey's Hornpipe is a simple but energetic dance that was danced with between one to four dancers. The dance is similar to what is known as 'Cossack Dancing' as the dancers squatted on their heels and kicked alternating legs out to the front, and then to the sides. The dance is recorded across Britain and in Ireland, and appears to have been very popular on Dartmoor. The Monkey's Hornpipe dancer Tom 'Ginger' Wonnacott was part of a group of four local dancers invited to London in 1953 to perform in the EFDSS's Annual Folk Dance Festival at The Albert Hall.



Edward Selwood 2017  
Photo by Alan Quick

### BROOMDANCING

Many versions of the broomdance have been recorded across Britain and Ireland. Bob Cann said it was, "danced more or less all over Dartmoor" and also called it "The Devon Broomstick Dance." It is recalled as being taught in schools as a form of physical exercise.

It wasn't danced as a competition dance at the Dartmoor Folk Festival until 1991, the first year of the festival after Bob Cann died. The competition is a children's competition.



Mark Bazeley and Sailor Jan in 2015.  
Photo by Alan Quick

### JIG DOLL STEP DANCING

Jig dolls have been around in Britain for about 150 years, although other designs of dancing doll for longer. Jig dolls have loose limbs, and are made to stepdance by tapping on its dancing board. They are usually home-made, some being roughly made, whilst others created with great care and attention to detail.

Dartmoor's most famous jig doll, Sailor Jan, is over a hundred years old. He was made by Harry Price from Fingle Bridge and was given to Bob Cann by Harry's family. Bob's grandson, Mark Bazeley, now takes Sailor Jan out to dance. He has gained a reputation for being the oldest dancer in the show!



Country dancing 2015 Photo by Alan Quick

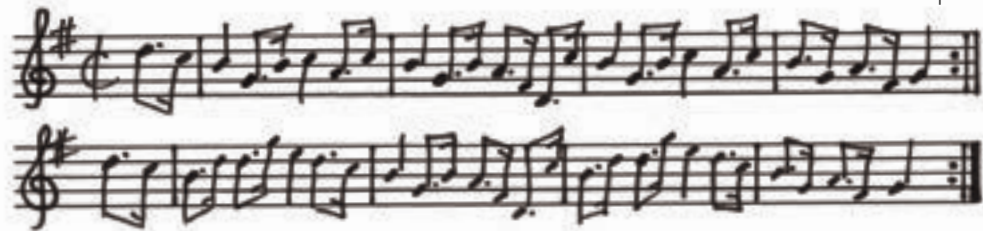
### COUNTRY AND SQUARE DANCING

Country dancing has been popular on the moor for as long as people can remember. In the 1950s, square dancing became popular and, Bob, heavily influenced by the American caller Otto Wood, started to call them. He had formed The Dartmoor Pixie Band to play for the dances, and they gained such reputation that they were invited all over the country. His grandson continues The Dartmoor Pixie Band and they play in venues far and wide to this day.

## BROOMDANCE TUNES

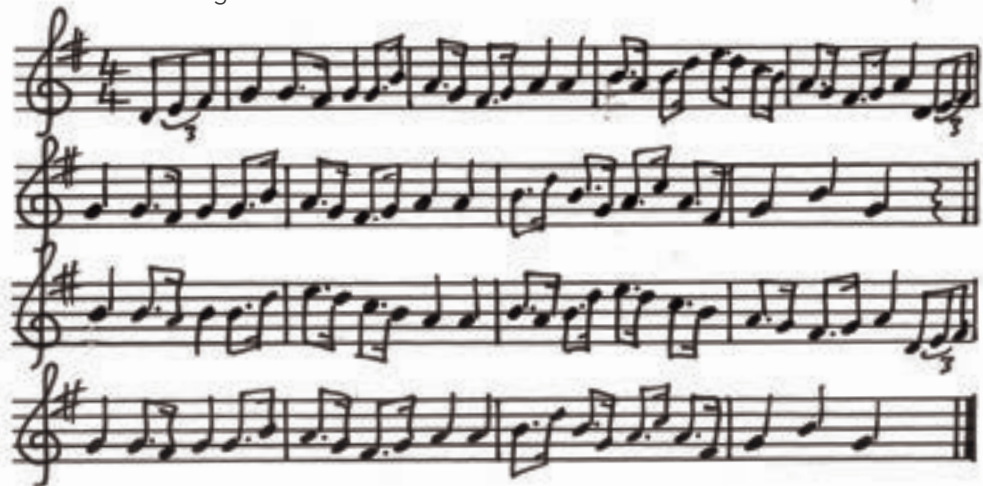
### THE KEEL ROW

The Keel Row is the tune used at the Dartmoor Folk Festival for the Broom Dance competition.



### THE DEVON BROOM DANCE TUNE

This tune was collected by Alan Boyce, the headteacher of Malborough Primary School in South Devon during the 1970s.



## RESOURCES & SOURCES

### RESOURCES

Dartmoor Stepdancing now has its own website where you can access: online stepdance lessons, music for stepdancing, information about the tradition, the Dartmoor Stepdance Archive, events and workshops. [www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk)



Keep in touch - sign up to our newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/cOnL4H>

If you would like a workshop or talk for your group, in the first instance email: [dartmoorstepdance@gmail.com](mailto:dartmoorstepdance@gmail.com)



Every year at the Dartmoor Folk Festival there are workshops and competitions for both adults and children. See [www.dartmoorfolkfestival.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorfolkfestival.org.uk) for dates and programme.



The schools and community workshop element of the project was carried out by Spinningpath Arts CIC, a not-for-profit company. [www.spinningpatharts.org.uk](http://www.spinningpatharts.org.uk)

Thanks to the Throwleigh Archive for the permission to print the information on Granny Arcscott and the photograph of her from the book: "Throwleigh – The Story of a Dartmoor Village" which they have republished. Copies are available from: [archive.throwleigh@virgin.net](mailto:archive.throwleigh@virgin.net)

Recordings of Bob Cann and the Rice Family can be obtained from [www.veterean.co.uk](http://www.veterean.co.uk)

### SOURCES

Page No. - Source

- 1 - Sharp C J, The Morris Book IV, Novello, London (1911), p 10
- 16 - "Throwleigh – The Story of a Dartmoor Village", p55, Emmie Varwell, 1938. Reprinted 2017. Available from the Throwleigh Archive [archive.throwleigh@virgin.net](mailto:archive.throwleigh@virgin.net)

# DARTMOOR STEPDANCING

There is a traditional form of dancing where rhythms are beaten out by the feet on a hard surface. This tradition is called stepdancing. Once it was popular over the whole of the UK and Ireland, however as more modern and organised entertainment became popular its practice waned, and by the mid-20th Century in many of the areas where it had once been popular, it died out.

However, on Dartmoor in Devon, stepdancing has survived. It went through a patch when there weren't many dancers, but now there is renewed interest and growing numbers of dancers and musicians, of all ages. Junior school children through to retired people are discovering the fun and benefits that can be enjoyed by stepdancing.

In 2017 the Taking Steps project searched out old pictures and references to stepdancing in years past, and recorded stories from those who still recalled it. The project has given us fertile ground from which to grow our understanding of the setting and practice of stepdancing, which we hope will inspire new stepdancers to pick up the tradition and dance with it.

This booklet is a brief introduction to Dartmoor Stepdancing and is intended to connect you to places where you can see, try, and find out more about this, and other, fun traditions practised on 'The Moor'.

Whichever aspect of the tradition you are interested in, a good place to start is the Dartmoor Stepdance website:

[www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk](http://www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk)

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