

More about Clog Dancing

THE EAST LANCASHIRE TRADITION

By Patricia Tracey

CLOG DANCING, as it survived in the East Lancashire cotton towns up to the first decade of the present century, before the 1914-1918 war brought about the virtual disappearance of spontaneous dancing, owes its form largely to the inventiveness of the mill workers who almost without exception were clog-wearers. The sound of iron-shod clogs on cobblestones suggests a dance in itself and almost all the youths could perform a few steps. But clog dancing is complex, lending itself to individual elaboration, and is essentially designed for an audience. At least until the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war, certain youths would practise various steps and stunts and work them up into a dance. In order to obtain an audience they would join the ranks of those performers—the singers, musicians and novelty artists—who went round the streets in those days in order to make a little extra money. This also produced a spirit of competition among them which had the effect of raising the general level of the dancing.

For the act there might be one or two dancers, accompanied by a third person singing through an instrument called a tommy-talker. The performers would select their pitch at the head of a back street and on the rough uneven cobblestones begin their dance. The sound of the steps as the clog-irons struck the pavement would resound along the streets.

For their performance the dancers usually wore their normal working clothes—brown fustian trousers, striped shirt with red muffler knotted round the neck, navy blue jacket and soft cap. They danced in their everyday clogs though these were usually somewhat lighter in weight than those worn by the majority of weavers. The reason for this was that the street dancers normally belonged to a set of rather dandified working youths and the lighter clog was part of their accepted dress. A mark of the dandy was the use of brass nails to attach the uppers to the soles of their clogs instead of the customary steel nails. For their act they would polish the brass nails until they gleamed.

Although occasional dancers used a style of their own, the main East Lancashire tradition was in the flat-footed style of dancing, the heel being used as much as the toe to make the sounds so that the shuffles and double shuffles, danced off the toe, and used to great effect in other traditions, occur hardly at all in Lancashire clog-dancing. The nature of the steps reflects to some extent the conditions in which they were evolved and were performed. From time to time in the dance the sound-patterns catch the rhythms of the cotton-mills and certain steps, common to all dancers, were given names associated with weaving. Thus, for instance are the "pick," the "shuttle" and the "two up and two

down." The "pick" is performed by propelling oneself by the toe of the right foot and sliding rapidly on the left. It is derived from the action of the picking-sticks which send the shuttle backwards and forwards across the loom. The "shuttle" is a backwards and forwards sliding step, while the "two up and two down" consists of two side kicks, R foot then L foot, followed by a drop onto the R and a drop onto the L. In weaving, the plainest type of work is called "two up and two down" from the action of the heald shafts which rise and fall in alternate pairs. Because the dances were performed on cobblestones in iron-shod clogs, steps containing a slide—such as the "pick"—were fairly popular since the clogs glided easily over the ground.

Normally two dances were performed, each often covering four verses and four choruses of reel music. Each step ended in a break, the most familiar being stamp R, stamp across L, stamp R, so that reels which ended in *||||* were good dancing tunes, though some performers used the latest song hits. Although the simpler steps might be repeated, the more complicated ones would be done once only. The first dance would begin with simple stepping on the spot, followed by a more arresting step containing movement. This would be followed by more complicated stepping, the dance culminating in various leaps or kicks (such as the "two up and two down"). The second dance, which would be slightly different in style from the first, might end amid a spectacular shower of sparks, raised by hitting the edge of the clog-iron sharply against the cobblestones. In all but street dancing this exciting step must inevitably be missing.

Apart from coming round the streets, the dancers might be found near the approaches to the annual fair, at market places, or be asked to entertain in clubs and public-houses, or at other indoor functions such as weddings.

Away from the streets, the dancers had to find substitutes for the cobblestones on which to make the sounds, and the most popular were squares of slate and later wooden dancing mats. Irons had to be dispensed with and though some dancers had metal plates fitted to the clogs, many of those who used mats preferred the sound of wood to wood. Among these semi-professional dancers, the tooled and specially shaped clogs were worn. The scooping out of the heels and the fitting inside of coins was a device used to make a pleasant jingling accompaniment to the steps. It was not, as some people have thought, a method of increasing the apparent number of steps, and the dance could be equally well performed without them.

From such beginnings, several dancers took their act onto the stage where further refinements and modifications were made to suit the requirements of the theatre. That the clog proved an effective dancing shoe is shown by the fact that it was adopted for stage purposes by people from all parts of the country. As far back as the 1880's clog dancing championships were held, the most

famous winner of the Championship Belt being Dan Leno, the Music-Hall comedian, and he was actually born in London.

Though clog dancing came so often to be performed by individuals who reached professional status, it never lost its links with its origins in the spontaneous dancing of the clog-wearing communities, and many steps that were to be seen in the theatre had first been tapped out on the mill floor. This folk tradition flourished vigorously until the second decade of the present century, but declined rapidly with the growth of more organized entertainment. Because the tradition survived so recently, there are still one or two of these former clog dancers living in Lancashire, and it is through their recollections that I have found it possible to recreate the dances for performance.

CONGRATULATIONS TO MRS. HEFFER!

The Gold Badge

At its meeting held on Saturday, February 28th, the National Executive Committee awarded the Gold Badge of the Society to Marjorie Heffer for her outstanding work on behalf of folk dancing notably at Oxford, Cambridge, New York, Rochester (New York State) and in the Union of South Africa.

But, alas, no one gets

"Five Years Membership Free"

Second and Third Prizes Awarded

The result of the competition announced on page 11 of the January issue was disappointing. None of the entries succeeded in making the Society sound really attractive to the man-in-the-street, and only two were considered by the judges to merit a prize. Of these neither was quite good enough for the First Prize, so the Second Prize (Two years Membership of the E.F.D.S.S.) goes to Miss M. J. Lucraft, 40 Tite Street, London, S.W.3, and the Third Prize (one Premium Bond) to Philip J. Whitehouse, 11 Conway Avenue, Quinton, Birmingham.

FESTIVALS AND COURSES

WHITSUNTIDE

Isle of Wight (in conjunction with the West Wight Hoteliers Assoc.). Fri.-Mon., May 15th-18th (Whit-Monday). Folk Dance Festival in West Wight. Paul and Daphne Green, Nan and Brian Fleming-Williams, Denis Smith, Pat Shaw.

Festival dancing out-of-doors (weather permitting) on Sat. and Whit-Monday at Freshwater, Totland Bay, Alum Bay and Colwell Common. Barn Dance Sat. evening; Island coach tour Sun. afternoon; concert Sun. evening. Fees: Double (man and partner) £2; Single £1 10s. Details of accommodation, etc., from Cecil Sharp House.