



On Clogs

For many people the highlight of the 1975 Durham City Folk Festival was the clog dancing workshop in the Town Hall on the Saturday afternoon, run by Johnson Ellwood of Chester-le-Street, Co. Durham, the veteran champion clog dancer. Johnson captivated his audience with his demonstrations of steps, his reminiscences of the old Music Halls, his humour and his sheer personality. Johnson was 76 in August but his rapport with the crowd and the interest he generated would be the envy of any present day performer.

Johnson was born in 1899 in a little old public house in Twizell, Co. Durham named the "Jingling Gates". His earliest memories are of sitting under the table watching his father's feet dancing the clog steps. At five years old Johnson had his first pair of clogs bought for him and at six he first appeared on the public stage when holding his father's hand and dressed in velvet he danced at a charity concert in the Co-operative Store Hall, West Pelton. The concert was to raise money to buy a peg leg for a miner injured in the pit.

At that time Johnson's father, Jim Ellwood was one of the most renowned clog dancers in the North and Johnson's own story is really a continuation of his fathers. Jim Ellwood was born in 1868 and between working at sixty five collieries before he retired also found time to become the Pitmans' Clog Dancing Champion of Durham and Northumberland - a championship he first won in 1896 and retained until 1908. In 1924 at the age of 56 he competed again but lost the Championship to Warren Doyle a great friend of his. Jim Ellwood was taught by Jack Liscombe of South Shields whose daughter Ann emigrated to the U.S.A. where she taught both clog and tap dancing to the movie stars. "Watch Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly (two of her pupils)" Johnson will say "it's only clog steps with taps on", and if you doubt it, Johnson will demonstrate the Kelly-Astaire routines for you!

Johnson of course was taught by his father but did have some lessons from George Mackintosh the last world champion after Dan Leno's death in 1904. G. H. Elliott the famous "chocolate coloured coon" was another music hall artiste well known to Jim and Johnson and one of Johnson's favourite stories is of how he taught the Indian Doctor, who fixed his broken ankle with a steel pin, to tap dance to the tune of "By the Light of the Silvery Moon".

Johnson's first solo appearance (unknown to his Dad) was at the age of eight at a travelling theatre called "Blooms" where he won a silver watch for the best clog dance. The watch unfortunately went the

way of other valuables during the depression years when the collieries were closed and money was short. Another gold watch he won in 1912 in the Junior Championship also went the same way.

In 1912 Johnson joined a young lad called Steve Craggs from Craghead and together they left home to go professional on the stage for 4s. 6d. a week. Before the police would grant a licence to perform under fourteen, a juvenile had to appear before the Court and wherever they appeared had still to attend the local school. Johnson therefore attended many schools but claims all he ever learnt was "pinching pencils". After appearing at scores of places which ranged from Music Halls, Pubs, Picture Palaces, Village Halls and the like, Johnson's contract came to an end and his father got him a job at the

Colliery as a pony driver for 1s. 1½d a day. All in all Johnson was to work in thirteen different pits before he finally left the collieries in 1925. Starting as a pony driver he worked his way through pony putting, hand putting to the top underground job of Coal Hewer for 5s. a shift.

His days underground were interrupted by the Great War and Johnson and a mate joined the Royal Navy in 1915. His first uniform he believes, was taken from a sailor killed in the Battle of Jutland. His war service took him through three Naval actions including the Battle of Heligoland in 1917 whilst serving on the ill fated HMS Repulse, to Russia during the Revolution, Ireland during the original "troubles" and finally to Scapa Flow where one night on watch he witnessed the scuttling of the German Grand Fleet and rescued a drowning German Sailor.

3 generations of Clog Dancers. Johnson centre, daughter Mary on left, granddaughter Margaret on right.



Johnson at 1975 Durham Festival holding his fathers clogs, his daughter Mary's 4 Northern Counties Championship belt and Warren Doyle's Championship belt.



Johnson (right) & Stevie Craggs (left) at the Pavilion, Grange Villa 1912.



During his naval career Johnson's dancing ability was to come in useful on a number of occasions especially with regard to his boxing activities, for a quick "double shuffle" would draw his opponents eyes and Johnson would then promptly uppercut him! The Ali Shuffle therefore is at least 60 years old! On another occasion at a Barn Dance in Ireland guns were trained on Johnson and his fellow sailors but all ended peacefully after a display of clog dancing.

In 1925 Johnson left the collieries and entered the Volunteer Fire Brigade and soon after became one of the first professional fireman. He eventually left the Service in 1951 with the rank of a Chief Fire Officer at Easington.

In 1923 Johnson and his father joined up as a double act and started travelling around the theatres as well as training dancers throughout Durham and Northumberland. Traditional dancing was, however, still very much part of the Ellwoods' life and both Johnson and his father were members of the famous Royal Earsdon Sword Dancers, the only performers of the Tyneside Rapper Dance. Jim Ellwood was the soloist at Alnwick Castle in 1908 when he danced before the future King George V. In these respectable days of the E.F.D.S.S., it comes as a surprise to learn that in the old days of Clog Dancing Championships, rivalry was intense and both corruption and under-handed tricks were rife. Jim Ellwood during his championship days was drugged, and his clogs surreptitiously slashed between the soles and uppers so they would come loose. Once during a championship took off his clogs and hit the accompanying fiddle player with them since it was apparent that the latter had been bribed to play much too fast.

Johnson finished competitive dancing in the early 1950's after he had won first the Mens' Championship and then the All-Comers the following year for Northumberland and Durham. His daughter Mary, however, continued the family tradition and having won three years in succession, the Four Northern Counties Clog Dancing Championship Belt, became her own property. Since that time the Championships have lapsed and Johnson points out that anyone calling themselves Champion Clog Dancers today are to say the least not being entirely accurate!

Johnson's greatest wish today is to see the British Championships revived and working towards this purpose it is tentatively hoped to stage the Northern Counties Championship at the 1976 Durham City Folk Festival after a lapse of over twenty years.

His daughter Mary has retired from dancing now but Johnson continues to teach the clogs to anyone who comes along and to date has trained well over 2,000 clog dancers.

Both Johnson and his father were great admirers of Dan Leno and even today Johnson still sings the song his father composed one day in the pit. To hear him

sing this song and then to drop into a still masterly clog dance routine is an evocative reminder of the Champion days of clog dancing.

Don Watson.

*I will sing of Champions, of Champions
in their day,
Who used to be not long ago but now have
passed away,
Yet there are some and when they come
the Championship's the rage
But there was none like Dan Leno when
he was on the stage.*

Chorus:

*But where is Dan Leno now,
Where is good old Dan?*

THE OLD MINER

key: D

Come all you marrers that fettle, I hope I find you well, If you
gather all a-bout me now a story I will tell, For I
used to be, when I was young, a miner like your-self, But
now to-day when my hair's turned grey, they put me on the shelf,
For fifty years I've worked at the pits & man-y's the change I've seen, When
I was young and a man was done, they'd set him on the screens, But
now to-day when my hair's turned grey, like a squaddy with an old peg leg, They
say that I'm nae use an-y mair, "Get out on the road and beg."

Come all you marrers that fettle,
I hope I find you well,
If you gather all around me now
A story I will tell.
For I used to be when I was young,
A miner like yourself,
But now today when me hair's turned grey,
They put me on the shelf.

Chorus:

For fifty years I've worked at the pits,
And many's the change I've seen,
When I was young and a man was done,
They'd set him on the screens.
But now today when me hairs turned grey,
Like a squaddy with an old peg leg,
They say that I'm nae use any more,
Get out on the road and beg.

*He used to come to the Music Hall,
And sing before the band,
At Dance he was the champion
But his day has long gone bye
For men like Ward and Tom Robson
For the Championship did try.*

*Now Just to keep in memory of those
Champions passed away,
I'll show to you some of the steps they
danced when in their day,
So if you'll pay attention now and listen
to the beat,
I'll do my best to please you all with these
clogs upon my feet.*

Chorus:

Dance.

Written by Jim Ellwood

Arranged & adapted by Bob Davenport

Well me age it is just sixty four,
And for workin' I've got no chance,
And they barred me from the Championship,
For the belt with me clogs to dance,
They said that I was getting old,
And for dancin' I was nae use,
And for dancin' I was nae use,
They told me to hie me clogs away,
Get into the old grey house.

Chorus:

For fifty years etc....

So come all of you young fellers,
Take heed to what I say.
Get out the pit while you're young enough,
And make out your own way.
For if you div'nt and you stay below,
You'll wake to find one day,
You're all washed up and you've got the
push,
Because your hairs turned grey.

Chorus:

For fifty years etc...