



Durham 1976. First revival competition for the Ellwood Cup. Left to right, Johnson Ellwood, Lynette Eldon, Peter Brown, Mary Jameson (Johnson's daughter, ex-Champion and head judge), Sue Jenkinson.

Recollections of a clogging renaissance



Sue Jenkinson and Lynette Eldon, 2019.

Instep Research Team members Lynette Eldon and Sue Jenkinson share their memories of entering the Northern Counties Clog Championship from 1976 to 1983.

We began clog dancing in 1973 at our folk club, Folk Union One in Hull. Our teacher was Shelagh Roberts, who had been taught by second generation champion Johnson Ellwood of Chester-le-Street in county Durham. The percussive sound, rhythms and intricate step patterns of the dances fired our enthusiasm.

We were lucky to visit Johnson a couple of times a year from 1973 until 1976, to show him our progress and learn new steps. Johnson, a slight man, always wore a suit, a trilby hat and a wide smile. His eyes twinkled and his face conveyed his love of the dance and his joy at the interest we showed. His dearest wish was to revive the Four Northern Counties Championships, which he had started in the 1950s but which had lapsed in the 60s.

In August 1976, Durham Folk Festival hosted a novice competition for the Ellwood Cup, which, as it turned out, was the forerunner of the Championship, which began the following year. Johnson insisted we enter. So, five dancers – ourselves included – and two musicians made their way north. We had to dance six steps of our own choice off each foot and finish with a double shuffle. One hundred marks would be awarded in four categories of judging – for time, beat, carriage and execution.

We arrived at the magnificent Durham Town Hall. The dancing platform was on the stage and in front of it were the judges' tables. There was a real sense of occasion. Johnson was at the front, beaming. We were surprised to encounter so many fellow dancers, with 19 competitors drawing lots to determine dancing order.



Mary Jameson, head judge, presenting Sue with the second place plaque, with Johnson Ellwood looking on.

Stepping out onto that platform was daunting. There was a buzz of excitement in the packed hall as it had been over 15 years since the last competition. We had been told to acknowledge the judges before and after dancing. We were given a brief opportunity to set our time with our musician, and then we were off. There was silence for each competitor during their dance – and on completion, the audience erupted. Sue began with a step called ‘stamp’, hoping to make an impact. Lynette, dancing last, became aware that she had moved backwards and found no stage beneath her heel drop – but fortunately she kept her balance.

Peter Brown, one of Johnson’s pupils from the North East (and still a member of Monkseaton Morris) won the cup, scoring 95 marks. Sue was placed second with 94 marks and Lynette, with 87 marks, was third, having had points deducted for the aerial heel drop. We were amazed to be awarded such high places. Every competitor was given a medal, the first three places receiving gold, silver and bronze. We were thrilled to see Johnson take to the stage to perform a few steps. Having a metal plate in his ankle meant that he was supported by two chairs, over one of which was draped his championship belt.

The Northern Counties Clog Championship – the title given to the revived open competition – was introduced in 1977, with the winner receiving a new championship belt. Dancers had to perform 10 steps and a double shuffle. Johnson did not live to see this but he did know it was to take place.

We both competed in this revived championship. Our abiding memory is of seeing Doris Hawkes for the first time – a jaw-dropping moment. Her steps were so intricate, her dancing so light, that she seemed to float. Doris was older than us, a pupil of Johnson, and she had clog dancers in her family. When the results were announced, there was a tie for one of the places – we



Lynette performing her dance again in Durham Town Hall after winning the belt in 1982, with musician Pete Fletcher.

knew it wasn’t for first place – and we both had to dance again. Now here’s the thing; after dancing for the first time, we had visited the bar to calm our nerves. It transpired that Lynette could hold her vodka and lime better than Sue – she was awarded second place, beating Sue by one point. Doris, of course, won the belt, as she did for the next two years – three consecutive wins gave her a belt to keep, as had been the old custom.

In 1979, a pedestal competition was introduced and the following year a junior competition was started. Hull dancers continued to enter all categories with great success, Lynette winning the pedestal competition in 1983.

In 1982, Lynette entered the championship. In a field of nine dancers, she danced last. It was a long wait but once on stage the hours of practice and autopilot took over. As Lynette walked off to tremendous applause, her musician quietly said, “Let them pick holes in that”. They found just one. Lynette was awarded 99 marks, one lost for a missed beat in a backslide. She had won the belt at last and a gold medal.

We are so pleased to have been part of those revival competitions. We benefitted enormously, realising that every detail is important. Having come full circle, we now love teaching the steps and feel honoured to judge the Northern Counties Clog Championship and The Northumberland Championship.

The Northumberland Championship is held at The Morpeth Gathering on 26-28 April. For details, visit northumbria.org.uk/gathering.

For further details about the Northern Counties Clog Championship, please email brenda@brendawalker.co.uk

Photos courtesy of Lynette Eldon and Sue Jenkinson.



Lynette Eldon with belt and cup, August 1982.