

Young dancers tap into their heritage to step their way

Step dancer Simon Harmer discusses a youth dance project he has co-led, which he heard about through the Folk Education Network.



Despite the frustrations of the autumn 2020 lockdown, enthusiastic young dancers from around Portsmouth completed an exciting film documenting a creative exploration of the links between 19th century hornpipe steps, part of Portsmouth's maritime heritage, and popular dance of the modern era.

Funded by Reverberate – an initiative by English Heritage's Shout Out Loud youth engagement programme – Step Your Way was led by Sasha Biloshisky of Portsmouth-based Funk Format – Soul Rawkus, and myself. It was selected to be one of only 14 projects from across the country to re-discover, re-imagine and re-create local heritage through creativity, and share the participants' vision with their community.

Step Your Way aimed to give young people a new opportunity during COVID-19 and a creative way to avoid risks to their mental health during the pandemic. The project's young participants, aged 11-25 years old, learnt about dance evolution from steps associated with sailors from the 1800s to the street dance styles of the modern era.

The chosen heritage dance focus was Miss Gayton's Hornpipe, a step dance collected by Tom and Joan Flett in 1958 from Miss Elizabeth Wallace of Kilmarnock, with its roots in the early

19th century. The project drew on archival material held by the Instep Research Team, plus Katie Howson's personal research into tunes on the barrel organ Admiral Parry took on his arctic expeditions in the 1820s. Parry's officers and crew exercised and danced to the tunes which included Miss Gayton's Hornpipe. Midshipmen dancing hornpipe steps are depicted in an illustration drawn during one of the voyages.

Live music for the project was provided by fiddle player Lewis Wood, whose playing was sampled and remixed by a local music producer to provide a unique and exciting soundtrack.

The dancers were provided with background information in the form of fact sheets, guided towards informative video footage and given tasks to complete between sessions. Due to the pandemic, four of the sessions had to take place on Zoom, which was a challenge for everyone.

The dancers who applied for Step Your Way came from a variety of dance backgrounds with a range of skills. Four of the dancers came from families that have been involved with folk dance, but they were not actively involved with it themselves. Most participants were experiencing dance from our country's heritage for the first time. The project was designed to allow each dancer to explore and develop at their own level and make an equal contribution by stepping in their own way.



Two of the young people – Georgia, 16, and Rhys, 15, who are studying dance, share their experience of the project:

Georgia:

I heard about Step Your Way from Facebook; one of my dance teachers had shared it. I signed up because it sounded interesting and different.

I started dancing at the age of four and have always loved street styles. At first, I wasn't sure about the hornpipe as it felt weird and different but as time went on and we learnt more moves, I started to feel more comfortable with it. Some of the steps in the hornpipe were very similar to those in nowadays street styles.

My favourite part of the history was seeing how the hornpipe evolved, and other styles evolved, to become modern day street dance. I would be interested in learning more of the UK's dance styles from the past because knowing these styles gives me a wider range of dance knowledge and enables me to stand out at auditions. It's very interesting to learn about. During the project I've made new friends and I now have a better understanding of the UK's dance history. I also gained more confidence as the weeks went on. I enjoyed talking to the people on the course with me; I also enjoyed learning new styles of dance that I didn't know before.

Rhys:

I found out about Step Your Way through #myboycan, an organisation which encourages boys to dance. I signed up so I could expand my knowledge of a wider variety of dance genres, hoping that this can help me with my college applications in the future.

My dance background is training weekly at a performance academy and at a dance school, learning a wide range of dance styles, which I thoroughly enjoy. Step Your Way has changed the way I explore new dance forms.

For me, the memorable heritage part of Step Your Way was learning that the hornpipe was performed around Portsmouth. The most memorable step was the hornpipe Pas de Bas. Learning the hornpipe was interesting as it gave me a taste of someone else's culture and how it links to other dance genres across the globe. I have learnt so many new things I did not even know existed.

I got so many opportunities doing this project, such as learning about all of these amazing dance styles and getting the chance to apply to be a teaching assistant with Funk Format, which is great. I would like to be an actor and I can use what I have learnt in the future in auditions.