

The controversial dance championships that caused a furore

Chris Metherell, of the Instep Research Team, explores the World Clog Dance Championships – and some infamous clog champions of the 19th century.



Dan Leno belt, now in the V&A

The appearance on the web a few years ago of a short silent film of the 1898 World Clog Dance Championships in Bow, London, prompted me to ask how much was known about these championships. I knew that Dan Leno had won a similar competition in 1883 but little more. It turned out that there was, indeed, a lot more to discover.

Clog dancing first appeared on the English stage in 1710 as a 'wooden shoe dance' – an entr'acte performance between dramatic pieces – although records of hornpipe dancing in similar circumstances go back almost to the Restoration.

Fast-forward to the rise of the music hall in the 1850s and clog dancing becomes a relatively common speciality act amongst the singers and comics of the era. Although we only have available records from larger theatres, it is very likely that similar, more amateur performances took place in the tents and rooms behind public houses, which were advertised by poster or word of mouth rather than in the press.

Were these lesser venues the breeding ground of competitive dancing? We shall probably never know. However, the first available notice of a clog dance competition comes from



Will Percival. Photo: Chris Metherell collection

Norfolk in 1858; not on the professional stage, but at a fete. At about the same time, dancers were beginning to style themselves as 'Champion Clog Dancer'. The first we know about is John Booth, who had adopted the title by 1848 and claimed to be the world champion by 1855. Whether this was earned in competition or simply adopted as a professional puff is unknown.

What we do know is that throughout the late 1850s and 1860s, a number of professional dancers styled themselves as world champions. The Travis Brothers and John Crabtree both did, although perhaps the best known and most important was Tom Ward of Newcastle who claimed to hold the title in 1878.

However, it seems that the first widely announced world championship was organised by theatre impresario J H Wood, taking place at the Princess's Palace Theatre, Leeds, commencing on 17 May 1880. This was a knockout competition with the winners of each heat dancing off against each other in a final competition at the end of the week. There were six entrants including Tom Ward, another famous dancer, Tom Robson, and a relatively unknown young man by the name of Dan Leno, who, at the end of the week, defeated Ward in the final, the latter having made a mistake in his seventeenth step. Leno was awarded the championship belt.

A re-match took place at Cooke's Circus, Manchester, commencing 6 June 1881. The championship was organised by George Mellon. Tom Ward beat 14 other entrants and gained the championship belt amidst protests of foul play by Leno.

In 1882 the competition was at People's Concert Hall, Manchester, commencing on the 11 June. There were 12 entrants, but Tom Ward and Dan Leno were not amongst them. Chaos ensued. Tom Ward refused to part with the belt he had previously won and Mellon had to take him to court to reclaim its value. The contest never took place but further rancour was certainly caused.

At any rate, by 1883 J H Wood had purchased a new belt, which was danced for at the People's Music Hall, Oldham, from 14-19 May, the competition being won again by Dan Leno. Wood advertised a further world championship contest at the Circus of Varieties, Greenock, in November 1885 but no further details are known.



A Scottish clog dancer, probably one of the competitors in the 1898 competition, wearing the typical costume worn by some of the competitors. Photo: VWML

Enough was apparently enough and there now seemed to have been a pause until Wood decided to revive the competitions in 1898 at Bow, London, the source of the film mentioned above. The contest, which followed the same format as the previous ones, was won by J H Burns of Glasgow. Further contests followed in Leeds in 1899, won by J H Harvey, and Hull in 1901, won by George MacIntosh of Motherwell.

However, the details given above are perhaps not the whole story. Several other dancers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries claimed to be the world champion. A typical example is Will Percival, who from 1887 onwards claimed to be the holder of the championship belt won by Dan Leno and Tom Ward – presumably the belt which Ward had refused to hand over in 1882. One wonders how he got it.

Most of the contestants in these events appear to have been professional music hall artistes, although not necessarily best known for their dancing. They often appear to have been comic singers or minstrels who used the dance as part of their act. However, by 1898 there were a number of amateur contestants, who included the eventual winner, J G Burns.

What is certain is that clog dancing in general – and competitions in particular – were very popular on the Victorian stage and their popularity is very likely to have been mirrored in vernacular tradition. And that tradition stretched far and wide. The contestants in 1898 came from London, Byker near Newcastle, Glasgow and Merthyr Tydfil to name just a few. Traditionally we associate clog dance with the north of England. Historically it seems that nothing could be further from the truth and during the 19th century, clog dancers could be seen performing in almost every town in the country with contests held from Aberdeen to Bridport and from Cardiff to Cromer. But that's another story.

This trophy shows the sorts of trophies won at local competitions. Photo: Chris Metherell collection



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