## The History and Current use of Vocal Music for Step-dancing in the Southern Counties of England

## Project Overview:

This project, supported by a bursary from Instep Research Team aims to record the historic and current practices of step-dancing to vocal music as seen in the southern counties of England.

Known as mouth music, diddling, lilting, or tuning up, there is very little recorded information of any kind about the use of vocal music for stepping, where dancers step either to others' singing, or to their own singing. It is a tradition that appears to have been more widely accepted in the past and which is seen very much less often now.
Traveller communities are about the only communities left now who use vocal music for stepping and are a rich source of information but it is less clear how common it is, or was, in other communities.

This project considers historic and contemporary regional variations and influences affecting the types of vocal music chosen or steps danced. The tradition of using vocal music for stepping might be seen by some as a 'poor-man's alternative' to using a musician, the project investigates this, and by creating a historical record it is hoped that it will allow it to develop a unique identity that others can recognise and relate to.

**Introduction to the dancing**

I am a free-stepper who having come to this style late in life has found myself increasingly drawn into the history and traditions of step-dancing, in particular in the southern counties of England where there used to be an active tradition of step-dancing from Devon and Cornwall right across to Norfolk. It is only in relatively recent years that there has been a significant decline in this dance form.

In recent years several collectors have gathered dances, particularly simple social dances that include some stepping, such as Bonnets so Blue; and competition stepping as is found in the Dartmoor Stepping competition. As I have found, their greatest source of information has come from the Gypsy/Traveller communities, many from the New Forest area and these can regularly be seen performed in Hampshire by Simon and Jo Harmer from InStep Research, and in Somerset by Les Bennett who runs the stepping and clogging group SomerStep.

Having very occasionally seen step-dancing done to vocal music where an instrument would normally be used, I became intrigued to find out more and knowing that step-dancing, like many old folk traditions, was suffering a decline, to record what I could before the information was lost entirely.



Although this project is about the use of vocal music and not about step-dancing itself, it will be useful for anyone unfamiliar with this style to have a brief understanding of what percussive step-dancing is and how this project defines that.

Step-dancing is a percussive dance, intended to add to the music as though the dancer was an additional instrument. The focus is intended to be entirely on the sounds made by the dancer's feet and traditionally does not include a 'showy' or performance element although inevitably some dancers are naturally more showy than others!

It is traditionally performed in hard-soled leather shoes without taps or other metalwork added for the purpose of making more sound, for example tap shoes are not allowed in Dartmoor Step competition

although, perhaps controversially, hobnail boots are permitted. No metalwork at all is allowed in the Steve Monk Memorial competition for traditional step-dancing held in East Anglia.

Nevertheless, many dancers, old and new, dance outside of competition using some form of metalwork on the soles of their shoes, often this is to enable the stepping to be heard over the sound of many instruments in a pub session or at a formal performance of any kind.

(Above is well-known Suffolk stepper Doreen West)

**Introduction to the singing**

Singing or the use of vocalisations, which aren't necessarily actual words, is well-established in other contexts, for example the waulking songs in Scotland used by the women working on the cloth (https://blog.historicenvironment.scot/2017/05/scottish-work-songs/ 2024), or the sea shanties sung by sailors as they hauled ropes in rhythm,( https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/sea-shanty-facts-history-meaning 2024) but this project looks at where these vocalisations were used in social settings and accompanied by the percussive beats of the step-dancer. These are not work-related settings and are most often simple social or family moments after work for example.

The very origin of step-dancing in being an instrument, rather than an opportunity for a display or performance, makes the use of vocalisations for step-dancing become more understandable. The dancer and singer have to work together and have a connection that allows the percussive element to run through the music and, as occurs with a musician on an instrument, the singer may sometimes stop singing the music to allow the stepping rhythm to briefly continue unaccompanied. Any vocal music can include actual worded song, and a whole range of vocalisations including many variations of 'diddles' and 'dums' that have no meaning whatsoever.

Confusingly the singing used for step-dancing goes by many names some more regional, such as 'lilting' which is often more associated with Celtic music and some more associated with Gypsy singers who often refer to 'tuning up', but 'diddling' is also used with some dispute over whether it is correct, and 'mouth music' can also be used. To some extent the perceived 'correct term' is dependent on the particular community or singer's background, or the region they come from and nicely demonstrates that this style of song and dance is not easily to be pinned down for research purposes!

**Historical findings**

Having very occasionally seen old recordings of the use of the mouth as the instrument for dancers and having seen many instances of the use of vocalisation in working songs, I became interested in researching how this might or might not be used in English step-dancing across the southern counties. As stated above, unlike the well-documented use of vocalisations in work contexts such as the woollen industry or at sea, this project looks at the use of vocalisations simply for stepping along to where an instrument might otherwise have been used. Therefore, in the past this would predominantly be in social settings, family groups, and in occasional performance.

In the course of searching the memories of those who can recall family members, dancing either during their childhood or earlier in their adult lives, I spoke to a great variety of people who were almost entirely from the Traveller communities.

Perhaps because they were on the move more and were short of storage space and perhaps because they had less money to spend on instruments the Traveller communities seem to have dominated in stepping to vocal music in social settings. Arguably the need to improvise music using vocalisations where there was no alternative necessarily created this style of dance since it is both affordable and accessible. I have as yet not found any real evidence that stepping to vocal music was common in other settings.
That is not to say it was not done, but that hasn't been the findings during the research for this project, although it is very likely that it may have been done in agricultural settings for example, when farm labour was predominantly still manual and therefore required the involvement of more manual workers, since the format of stepping to vocal music is clearly predominantly used in social settings where entertainment was necessarily minimalistic and very informal.



This view is supported by the consistent descriptions I was given, the frequency with which those able to share memories and knowledge were from Travelling families, and the consistent lack of any evidence coming to me from outside the Traveller communities.
Even those people not coming from Traveller communities consistently referred to learning steps from people within those communities.

*(Peter Ingram using traditional tuning for Deborah Sanger)*

After having spent many hours with many different people from Cornwall to Norfolk I began to see several common themes emerging.

Firstly, everyone viewed stepping to tuning up as the poor man's version of musical enjoyment. People didn't originally choose to use vocal music, they had no alternatives when money wasn't available to buy or make an instrument. Although over time it gradually became something done during a group social get-together when instruments were also on hand it always retained that element of informality associated with its origins. It remains in Traveller families as somehow less 'proper' than stepping to an instrument, however that doesn't mean at all that it is less valued by them. A good singer or a good step-dancer would be highly regarded as being skilled and talented, and everyone would be keen to see them step or sing even if for only a minute or two.

Secondly, people almost always used popular songs of the time, although some traditional folk tunes were used; a favourite thing to do was to take a popular song and change the lyrics to something much bawdier. Vic Legg (seen right) very kindly shared the version of 'I Left My Girl Behind Me' that was sung by his mother when singing for stepping:



Oh I stuck my nose up a nanny goats' arse
And the stink was enough to blind me
I used my nick* for a walking stick
And I left my gal behind me

One for the pint and two for the glass
Three for the tags and laces
Of all the money that I earned
I spent it at the races.

*other words may be used here by some singers. This was considered to be the 'clean' version.

Peter Ingram also sang me an amusingly inappropriate song about a 'snake'!

Partly I believe words were changed because there was a sense of division between travellers and settled people and partly because it was simply more humorous and worked well with the very informal settings they were performed in.

Thirdly, step-dancing was predominantly done by the men, although having said that there were some very good women step-dancers. Men in some families had different steps to the women who were only expected to perform the 'ladies' steps' but either of them might step to tuning up. Several people told me that inside the home women might sometimes sing a tune and step for one another, or do a step or two to pass the time whilst at their daily work, although this had virtually no value placed on it at all as a recognised dance activity so is even less well recorded than the social dancing.

Fourthly a significant difference between old and modern performances was the length of time the dancer would step for. The dancer would dance for just a verse or two, demonstrating their skills before sitting down again. Another dancer might then come up and take their turn but in each case the length of their dance was short, just a minute or so, sometimes even less.
The structure of the music also differs. In the past only one verse would be sung with words, and thereafter the singer would use only tuning for the dancer to step to. There appears to have been no rules whatsoever about what form the vocal music needed to take, any sound or combination of sounds was acceptable. This lack of structure is different from the performances one might see today.

Most usually during any performance people were either the singer or the stepper and did not do both things simultaneously. Although they may have been both a good singer and stepper they would generally only do one activity or the other at any one time. This isn't always the case though as Peter Ingram told me that he often did both the tuning-up and the stepping for example.

Another common theme, which is in many ways a good example of the many differences is that as much as each family may have used the same popular songs, the same short demonstration of stepping, or a similar combination of sounds in the singing, every family had their own idea of whose version was the correct one, which was invariably theirs of course! This was an interesting learning point because I began my research with the expectation that I might find some definitive answers. Who danced, when and how, what did they dance to and who sang?

So, one of the first things I learned is that for every opinion and memory one comes across there will soon be another that opposes that view. That is to say, one will find that there is as yet no definitive answer to any question asked during the course of gathering information. Every individual and every family group differs, and every one of them is right in asserting that their answer is the correct one, because the very informality and unstructured nature of step-dancing to vocal music means that in a family group setting any step is acceptable, and any tune and any performance style from either dancer or singer.

This creates something of a challenge for research purposes of course and this project must be read as a collection of pieces of direct evidence each valid in its own right but understanding that they fit only into a loose but recognisable structure.

**Current findings**

Most dances to vocal music nowadays are 'performance pieces' that is to say they are pre-prepared in some way or intended for an audience. They may be seen in a music or dance session but only as a formal 'performance spot'. There are some very good current performers of stepping to vocal music, for example at Sidmouth Folk Festival both Sandra and Nancy Kerr have been variously seen singing a traditional folk song whilst well-known steppers Janet Keet-Black or Simon Harmer have taken turns to improvise some stepping.

In the past dancing to vocalisations were very much only seen in informal settings, occurring spontaneously, but can very occasionally still be seen, for example well known Traveller Tom Orchard can sometimes be found stepping to the singing by a family member of You're Sixteen (You're Beautiful and You're Mine) by Ringo Starr.



Peter Ingram (right) demonstrated tuning up for stepping using one of his jig dolls and tunes often end with 'good old girl/boy if he keeps good time'.

These are always sung as complete songs nowadays, which can make for a long dance for the stepper and will almost always contain only sung worded verses and not other non-worded vocalisations, although a good singer will sometimes stop singing to allow the percussive stepping to be heard on its own. Songs will most often be traditional folk songs, since stepping to vocal music is very often associated with folk sessions, whereas in the past they were often popular songs of the time. The vocal element used to be very much more unstructured, and has become much more formalised with consideration for how the different sounds work with the stepper to emphasise starts, finishes, loud/soft elements sh, b p etc.

Performers nowadays tend to be professional or semi-professional dancers or singers who have studied music in some way and have a good understanding of how the different sounds can emphasise the beat and rhythm, the start to a verse, or the emotions of the words they are singing. Although dancers can share stepping to different parts of the song, they normally dance for longer than those in the past where a short step to a verse or two might be all they did.

I recently wrote a song called Bones on the Floor, with nine very short verses and three intermittent choruses, for well-known Gypsy stepper and singer Jean Orchard. I have performed this doing both the singing and the stepping but quickly discovered in practice sessions that this challenge requires a very considerable lung capacity!

I better understood why so few people do both parts and also why when they have done so in the past, it was probably only for a verse and chorus or two.

**The importance of the singer/stepper relationship**

I have spoken to both singers and dancers (Ethan Beal, Lindsay Want-Beal, Katy Coope) and there is a sense that it is very much a two-way experience, although they both have to respect the limitations of the other. For example, a singer might sing too slowly for a dancer to easily find a good rhythm, and equally a dancer could easily step at a rate no singer could sing to! They also perform best when they understand the other's style and preferences. Some dancers like to step to tunes which allow them to use the off-beat or accommodate changes in rhythm, whilst others are happiest dancing to a tune with a regular and predictable rhythm.

Katy Coope (seen here with Simon Harmer) described the importance of breath control for the singer so that they can maintain the pulse and rhythm of the music, noting that not all tunes are written so that they can easily be sung, and often are not suitable for women's voices.



There is no set tradition in England of which sounds are used when vocalising a tune, and whereas people described this process in the past as being very free and down to each singer to decide on the spot, in recent times much more thought is gone into making it a performance piece.

Therefore consideration is given to using suitable end or stop sounds, such as 'dum' or softer mid-vocal sounds such as 'dor'. This allows the singer to communicate the song structure to the dancer and to mirror their stepping.

As a dancer I collaborated with Lindsay Want-Beal from the East Anglian Traditional Music Trust to try for myself the experience of stepping to vocal music. She sang Oh Joe the Boat is Going Over whilst I stepped. There was naturally some trial and error in finding the best arrangement, and it was interesting to see the problems that might occur between singers and steppers.

We had not worked together before so initially we agreed on a comfortable dancing pace. However immediately the needs of the singer for a short singing break before each verse in order to draw breath was identified, so the pace was slowed to make it easier to sing, and this also had the added benefit of making it better for any audience so they could follow the narrative of the song more easily.



*(Deborah Sanger and Lindsay Want-Beal)*

As the dancer I stepped an introductory four bars before each verse, and Lindsay sang the last chorus much more quietly to give the stepping a chance to dominate and be heard more clearly. It is quite a long song so we also added some variation and interest to the song, and reduced the length of the dancing, by starting the first verse with just the singing and having the stepping come in after the short section of spoken words before the second verse.

Our experience showed that it is possible to dance or sing with someone new, but that on both sides there are needs to consider. The singer needs time to breath, and the song needs time for listeners to hear and appreciate it. Both the singer and the stepper can unintentionally speed the song up, but in some ways the speed is more easily influenced by the stepper so it is important to maintain eye contact and adjust the performance as necessary.

In the course of the project I have also learned many new steps and styles from the dancers I have spoken to or watched, this is another useful aspect of stepping to vocal music to consider because as the only 'instrument' the stepper's ability to create dynamics and interest is important.

Although there are many great steppers who very successfully use a relatively small range of steps to accompany a singer, I have found that the more steps I have been able to add to my stepping repertoire the easier it has become to create that variety, light and shade, and interest for the listener, and this also better supports the singer.

**Summary**

This project has proved more challenging than expected at the outset for several reasons. Firstly, it is historically a very informal style of dancing and therefore there is very little documented evidence of how and where it occurred, or who might be found performing in this style.

The greatest source of information comes from the people themselves, who either performed, or occasionally continue to perform, stepping to vocal music, and from the very many people who recall seeing other people using this style of dance. Sadly, a great number of the most highly-regarded step-dancers are no longer with us so their information has been lost.

From the information gathered it clearly shows some differences between the past and the present, the informality of the past, and the lack of recorded information available, is quite different to the structured or rehearsed performances currently seen, many of which are available to see on YouTube and other internet sources. The length of the stepping time is also quite different. In the past it was very short and only stepped to the vocalised part of the tune after a single verse, nowadays it is almost always seen as stepping throughout a complete and sung song usually consisting of several verses and choruses.

In the past it would almost exclusively be seen in social and family group settings, whereas now it is more often seen as a 'performance piece' to be watched by an audience and is sometimes contained within the set performances of a professional performer.

Even when done by those outside the Traveller communities the steps seen nowadays are based on those collected from these communities. Bob Cann who started the Dartmoor Step competition within the context of his Dartmoor Folk Festival learned many of his steps from the local travelling communities.

I have not yet found historical examples of stepping to vocal music outside of the traveller communities but it seems very likely that other groups who might similarly need to improvise their music due to a lack of instruments would have also step-danced to vocal music. For example, amongst itinerant farm workers who may well have seen stepping during their travels, and among other agricultural workers in the southern counties who socialised after work and improvised their own entertainment.

One very important point is that in the past although the style was considered the 'poor man's' option due to the lack of money for instruments, the style itself was nevertheless regarded as a valuable piece of entertainment.

Stepping in general was, and still is, thought of as quite an art and the skill of a good dancer was, and still is, highly prized. However, in the past the idea that stepping to vocal music as a dance form in its own right was somehow distinct from stepping to instrumental music is less obvious and partly because it was so short perhaps. It seems to have been considered simply as another form of stepping mainly distinguished by its inability to provide proper instruments.

**Conclusion**

Stepping to vocal music has a varied and rich history but researching this dance form has been intriguingly nebulous. It definitely exists but is very hard to pin down or quantify since it is a dance style of the people and therefore there is no right or wrong way of performing it, just a lot of varied personal views and experiences. These vary by region, lifestyle, family tradition and relative wealth. There are increasingly few opportunities to see this dance style, which is also true of any percussive stepping in the southern counties.

Like many folk traditions the modern researcher, however willing, cannot recreate the past in order to preserve it, and step-dancing is a key victim in that. Although clog dancing sides proliferate across all regions, and the more recent Appalachian step-dancing sides also thrive, the world in which step-dancing was a commonplace sight has altered such that it simply doesn't have the opportunities to flourish. Family groups are more dispersed, instruments may be more available, the very informal and affordable ways in which people share their leisure time, the settling of so many of the Travellers, even the carpeting of pubs have all led to a decline in the style of percussive dance previously seen in southern counties.

Percussive step-dancing continues to exist, and stepping to vocal music should be recognised as its own worthwhile style in that.

I proposed at the outset that I thought step-dancing to vocal music was in the past considered the 'poor man's' dance.

After my research I can say it was, but that doesn't detract at all from its historical importance, and when seen nowadays it is enjoyed as much as any other style, if not even more so.

Thanks go to all the following contributors of information or demonstrations of a step or dance, including those from whom I have simply learned by observation.

InStep Research Team; East Anglian Traditional Music Trust; Mo Allum; Ethan Beal; Les Bennett; Katy Coope; Gloria Buckley; Sue Coe; Pete Coe; Fiona Davies; Robert Dawson; Nick Dow; Kerry Fletcher; Jo Harmer; Simon Harmer; Kathleen Harris; Charlie Harris; Katie Howson; Bob Hunt; Peter Ingram; Janet Keet-Black; Neil Lanham; Sam Lee; Vic Legg; Marlene Lethbridge; Matt Norman; Jean Orchard; Tom Orchard; Simon Ritchie; Dom Smith; Nigel Sture; Doreen West; Julie Williams.