

A DANCE THROUGH HISTORY

The Story of English Country Dance
and its place in history

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Ann Wise | Pat Simpson

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Declaration

My involvement, and subsequent immersion, in English Country Dancing came about when I was still in my teens. I was so lucky that not only did my local club have lots of dancers around the same sort of age but also that there were other dance clubs in the area and regular well attended Saturday night dances with well known bands and callers. The standards were high and we danced the energetic rants and American squares as well as Playford and dances from across the Country Dance repertoire. This is what got me started and I now realise that without that background things could have been very different. Other people with different backgrounds can come up with an entirely different narrative and I am convinced that there no definitive version of this story. Over the years I have had so many discussions about Country Dancing and I look forward to many more. If by my efforts I can help people to have even a fraction of the enjoyment I have had throughout my adult life then this will have all been worthwhile.

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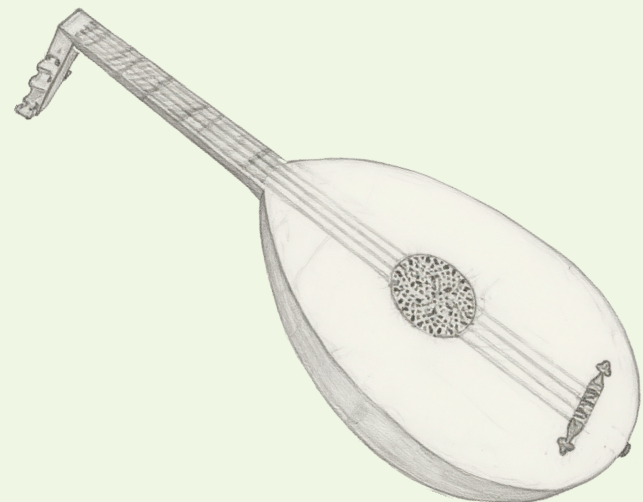
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Introduction

What is English Country Dancing?

Country dancing is a group activity that revolves around the figures or patterns created by the interaction between couples and individuals in columns, circles, squares, and other formations. These patterns are usually repeated within the dance to allow other couples to “lead the set”. The steps of the individual dancer are less important. Although certain fashionable steps became accepted practice at different times, they were never compulsory. The English Country Dance, known as such from the second half of the 16th century, was enjoyed by all sections and classes of society.

The term Country Dancing was never used to refer to dances from the rural countryside, nor was it any sort of attempt by publishers and dancing masters to imitate that sort of artificial Eden. Instead, it was more an expression of England’s own dancing style, a particular creation for which we became known and which has been exported to other countries in the creation of their individual styles.

Therefore, Country Dancing may be thought of as being of This Country and not of The Country or Countryside. It is now thought that the dances mentioned during the time of Elizabeth I, “the old and the new country dances”, and those listed by the characters in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (see Chapter 2) derived from the column dances and measures of the earlier Tudor courts. As with anything that becomes traditional, somebody must have created them at some point, whether or not they actually wrote them down; after all, they do not appear spontaneously from the ether.

Both Elizabeth I and James I used these dances in entertainments for foreign ambassadors, as evidenced by M André Lorin writing to the Court of Louis XIV in France. The dance style was exported to France, where it was called Contredanse, to Scotland, and to America where it became both Contra Dance and the Square Dance. Certainly it is a unique part of our heritage and owes as much to the Dancing Masters as to any rustic equivalent. Cecil Sharp himself, while avidly collecting songs and Morris dances, believed that most, if not all, of the Country Dances he included in his books derived from the Playford collections (Ch.3).

It is clear from the writings of Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen, among many others, that dancing has been enjoyed by all sorts of people throughout much of the last 500 years. This is particularly true of what might be called the heyday of English Country Dancing, from the latter part of the 17th century to the early 19th century, when thousands of dances were published and it was a major part of fashionable balls.

What we do find when country dances were observed, collected, and then performed in the early 20th century – having fallen out of fashion (at least in the most fashionable of circles) some 50 years earlier – it was found that many of the dances, such as Circassian Circle (Maud Karpeles), Stoke Golding Country Dance (Miss Lambert), and others, can generally be shown to be versions of earlier popular published dances, albeit with local variations.

Another point to mention is that these days we tend to view history as reflecting the activities of either the rich or the poor. However, for much of the period discussed in this book, there was a considerably more nuanced approach to class, and what was originally called the middling sort was not only increasingly numerous but also provided much of the market for all the dance books that were published.

How this book came about

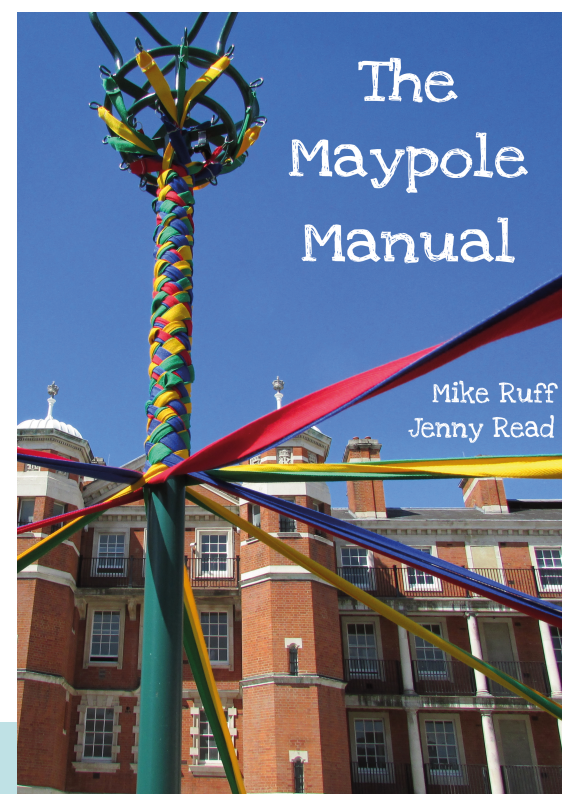
Dancing is usually left out of history books, and yet it has always been part of people's lives. In fact, dancing was generally considered a desirable social skill and was enjoyed by all. The dances which were in fashion – galliards, minuets and quadrilles, waltzes, polkas and charlestons – changed through the centuries, but running through the last 500 years has been the common thread of the Country Dance. These dances reflect the social history, fashions and architecture of their time. In literature, there are plenty of references to dance, from Chaucer to Hardy and beyond, and knowing a bit about the dances can add a new dimension to enjoying these works. Depictions of dancing can be seen in the work of artists and illustrators such as William Hogarth, James Gillray and John Tenniel.

In this book, I attempt to address this omission of dance elsewhere in history books. Its origins can be traced back to a trip to Australia in 1996, where I joined a band for their festival season. While I was there and looking to develop some work for schools, I realised how much all the dances, songs and tunes that I knew had a context. I also realised that understanding where they originated, not just geographically but when and in what social circumstances, profoundly influences what they are and how they could be interpreted. Once back in England, I took this further by exploring historical dance and music, which led to my joining Nonsuch History and Dance and to spending a summer season as a minstrel at Warwick Castle.

Since then, I have continued to explore this alternative view of history based on this “intangible cultural heritage” and I often include bits of background information in my various dance events. Numerous workshops and series explored this idea for festivals, dance groups, visitors from overseas and schools. In 2010, my long-time friend Pat Simpson and I discussed using this concept to teach history and, from 2011 to 2013, we ran a six-week, half-term set of “History through Dance” workshops for Year 9 children at an Academy in Hertfordshire where Pat was then Head of History. Each class had one lesson with dances from a particular period of history, and in the other lesson that week, they learnt more about that time. It seemed such a good idea that Pat has added some of that extra history to each chapter.

In 2012, with the involvement and encouragement of Ann Wise, who was then at the British Schools Museum, we created an illustrated lecture on the same theme of History through Dance but with the title “Court Entertainment to Ceilidh”. This talk, with numerous variations, has proved extremely popular with museums, festivals, University of the Third Age (U3A), local history and Open Age groups. I am constantly finding different angles for the talk depending on my audience, the circumstances, or to fit in with the particular interests of a group. As Ann had spent years working on costumes and their history for the Worthing Museum and later the Warner Textile Archive in Braintree, and as what people wear affects how they dance, it seemed sensible to ask Ann to contribute a section on this subject.

At the same time as all of this, I had been running successful teacher-training sessions in Maypole Dancing, and the notes I prepared for these sessions seemed to point the way to writing a book on the subject. The Maypole Manual came about during 2013 and 2014, in collaboration with Jenny Read and my band Quicksilver. Another resource pack on Morris Dancing



involving a DVD as well as a book had been rumbling along for some time, and Morris! Hey! finally saw the light of day in 2015. These resources met the changing environment where schools can no longer book in outside teachers with the same freedom that they once had; when they are able to, they need resources to work with afterwards. Having started writing books, it seemed natural to carry on and to address other areas of dance.

The final impetus for this project came with the “Dancing Through History” workshop series in Cambridge in 2015. These were hosted by the Cambridge Museum of Technology and run jointly with the Farmland Museum. Since then, I have had the privilege of seven years teaching at the long-running English Country Dance Classes at Cecil Sharp House for the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), giving me more frequent reasons and opportunities to delve into these dances with the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library close at hand.

A first draft of the book came together in late 2019, but it was quickly clear that a lot more work was needed on my part to make it a valid work. At that point, I put it on the back burner for some time while other projects, and dealing with the Covid lockdown and its aftermath, took priority.

Since then there were some tentative discussions about a more coherent version during 2024 and a real start was made at the beginning of 2025 when I added, with the help of various friends, a whole lot more about how the dancing developed. This meant that the dances themselves became mere examples rather than the basis of the story, hopefully adding more clarity to the narrative. As this was going on we also tried to sort out what illustrations we wanted and as we looked for who held copyright and the locations of different images it became clear that there was a more exciting book in prospect. This resulted in some months of delays, a few of which were unavoidable, but this version is finally ready for you to enjoy. I am sure that there will be some who disagree with my interpretation of the events, but that is almost inevitable, and I do hope that this will be viewed as an honest endeavour to bring together many disparate threads. Perhaps we can use it as a vehicle for future debate.



Pat Simpson



Mike Ruff



Ann Wise

The Original Crew

Gender, dance notation and teaching

In all country dances, couples could be same-sex or mixed, and this remains the case. Teaching in the past would generally refer to Men and Women and would often be taught to the Men (because the Women were more intelligent!); most of the notation refers to Men and Women. While I have, for some years, been teaching gender-free and have, as far as possible, tried to make this clear in the text, I have retained the earlier convention in describing the dances for reasons of clarity.

To make sense of this in the modern world, it is usually assumed that whoever starts on the right of a couple dances whatever would be the female parts of the dance, and the left-hand dancer as male within the notation.

Another convention that I have observed within the dance sections of the text is to use “We” when I am referring to what is currently understood by the wider dance community and “I” when referring to my own opinion or personal experience.

Chapter headings

Chapter headings are a great way of breaking up the narrative of a text, particularly in a book of this type where there are three concurrent threads running through it. It is also helpful for the many groups who choose to have a talk or a workshop on one specific period. These are not intended as any more than a guide. Dance styles did not change overnight any more than any other fashions, ideas, or events, and new dances would appear gradually in different ways. This sometimes means that we might know about dances and how dance was changing, but the published evidence does not appear until later. As a result, certain dances may even appear in what seems to be the wrong chapter – sorry!

Is it Morris?

Finally, I am often asked if Morris Dance is the same as Country Dance. While there are many similarities in terms of the figures, this is definitely not the case. First of all, the idea of Morris Dancing is that it should be “performed”, whereas Country Dancing is a social and participatory activity to be enjoyed by all. Secondly, very many Morris Dances were genuinely passed on through the oral tradition and were rarely written down or published until the early 20th century, when the various revivals took place. There are numerous books on Morris Dancing, some of which can be found in the Bibliography at the end of this book.

This particular Morris dance resource was produced by Mike Ruff with the help of Fool's Gambit and many others and is now available as a free download from The English Folk Dance and Song Society.



Chapter 1

The Middle Ages

2001-2026

1901-2000

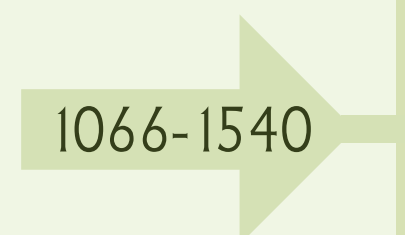
1800-1900

1714-1837

1603-1714

1485-1603

1066-1540



Dance

Medieval Beginnings

Our knowledge of dance in medieval times is scanty and is restricted to the appearance of dancers in paintings and art or passing references in books and writings. While there are literary references to dancing from *The Canterbury Tales* onwards, there are no English books on dancing until much later. Within those references that we have, there is very little detail given, so dances have to be recreated or imagined. It is not quite the same for the music, as that was often written down – so we might know the tunes but not the steps. What follows is merely an indication of what we do know about dancing and how it sets the scene for what comes later.

Let's start with a relatively recent discovery. In 1996, a manuscript was discovered in Matlock, Derbyshire, which has become known as the *Gresley Manuscript* and has been dated to around 1500. This is not primarily about dance but does include brief, and somewhat confusing, instructions for a few dozen tunes and dances. There is no context for the dances, so it is possible to interpret them in various ways, and several historical dance experts have had a go at them. Since that discovery, there has been further research and more documents have been unearthed, bringing additional insights for those who want to recreate the dances as accurately as possible. Of course, everything is open to interpretation, a process that goes on today not only with dance but with any other art form.

A group of medieval dancers accompanied by bagpipes and shawm. There are no clues as to what dance they may have been performing.



What evidence have we got from before 1500, and can it be described as country dance? The "Abbots Bromley Horn Dance" has been dated to 1228, although this is now disputed, or possibly even earlier, and within the Church at Abbots Bromley, there is a set of antlers that has been carbon-dated to Saxon times. This is very much a ritual dance, performed once a year through the village, and not a country dance as such. It is probable that it was danced to popular tunes of the time; certainly, the tune that was noted down in 1857 was not the one used in the village when I went there to watch it a few years ago.

I like to think that people in the Middle Ages danced to whatever music and songs they heard, just as happens anywhere and at any time. What we do not know is whether there were specific steps to particular songs or tunes or, as may be more likely, people just danced with what they felt fitted popular music and songs. One of the most famous of these songs is "Sumer is Icumen in" which was discovered in a manuscript in Reading Abbey and probably dates from the late 12th or early 13th century. However, while this tune has often been used for dancing, most versions are much more recent realisations and cannot be claimed as authentic. So it can't really be called a country dance by the definition of the term that I have chosen for this book.

What else is there? A 1303 reference describes a raucous village dance through a churchyard, the participants holding hands in a line and singing about female-male pairings. In "The Miller's Tale" (c.1395), Chaucer's character Absolon can "trip and dance in twenty different ways, kicking his legs". These are the only English clues we have for figures or steps, and though they tally with the images we have of dancers, we can't do more than guess at the details of dances or music.

Many European medieval tunes and songs were associated with religious processions or pilgrimages. The phrasing and rhythms of these processional dances are similar to the much later branles, estampies, measures, and country dances. Examples of other tunes known today that could have had people dancing are "Tempus Adest Floridum", now used for "Good King Wenceslas", and "In Dulci Jubilo"; both are still known as carols and both were later collected in the 16th-century *Piae Cantiones*.

According to dance historian Anne Daye, our own version of these dances became the column dances or Long Dances, which still exist, for instance, in the "Helston Furry Dance", and traces can be found in dances published much later.

From the Italian Renaissance and from various courts around Europe at that time, we have Basse Dances and the Tordion; these, and others, were all quite formal dances. We do have more information on Estampies, which different interpretations have as "generally rustic and even wild" or more sedate, gliding, and formal (see illustration on page 14). The nearest we can get to country dances would be Brawles and Almains, which we know were danced in England but cannot be clear about when they first appeared. Clearly, dancing was happening and being enjoyed, and in the fragments of information that we have, we can, if we are optimistic, see signs of what is to follow. For more of that, read on.