Beginners’ Guide to English Folk Dance

A brief introduction to the vibrant and diverse English folk dance traditions

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Maltby Phoenix Sword, rapper sword dance
EFDSS in partnership with Youth Dance England, U.Dance 2012, Southbank Centre, London 2012
Photo EFDSS; Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

Introduction

English folk dance encompasses a rich diversity of dance forms that have developed over many centuries in communities throughout England.

These traditions are alive and thriving as part of a living and evolving tradition, alongside many other forms of traditional dance present in England today.

This presentation aims to show both traditional folk dance and its contemporary interpretations.

Morris Offspring, Cotswold morris
Sidmouth Folk Week 2012
Photo: Sue Swift

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Introduction

English folk dance spans a hugely varied range of activities, from solo dancing in informal social settings to elaborately costumed and choreographed group dances. Dances can be spontaneous or ritualised, fixed or improvised, irreverent or solemn and all points in-between.

This presentation introduces some of the distinctive features of English folk dance and its most popular forms.

Thousands of people, of varied ages and backgrounds, perform and enjoy English folk dance in its many guises.

Ceilidh dancing
The Big Session Festival, Leicester, 2010
Photo: Bryan Ledgard

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Introduction

English folk dance is colourful, exhilarating, exciting and diverse! Although distinctive, it has surprising similarities to traditional dances from across the British Isles, Europe, and other parts of the world.

For example, stick dances that share visible similarities to morris dancing can be found as far afield as the Basque country and Kerala in Southern India. Appalachian clogging combines British roots with Native American and African influences: it evolved in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of the USA, and is now a popular performance dance form in England.

Since the early 1900s, dances that originated in one place have been taken up by folk dancers in different regions and are now danced all over the country and increasingly in other parts of the world.

May Day in Padstow, Cornwall
Date unknown
Photo: Doc Rowe

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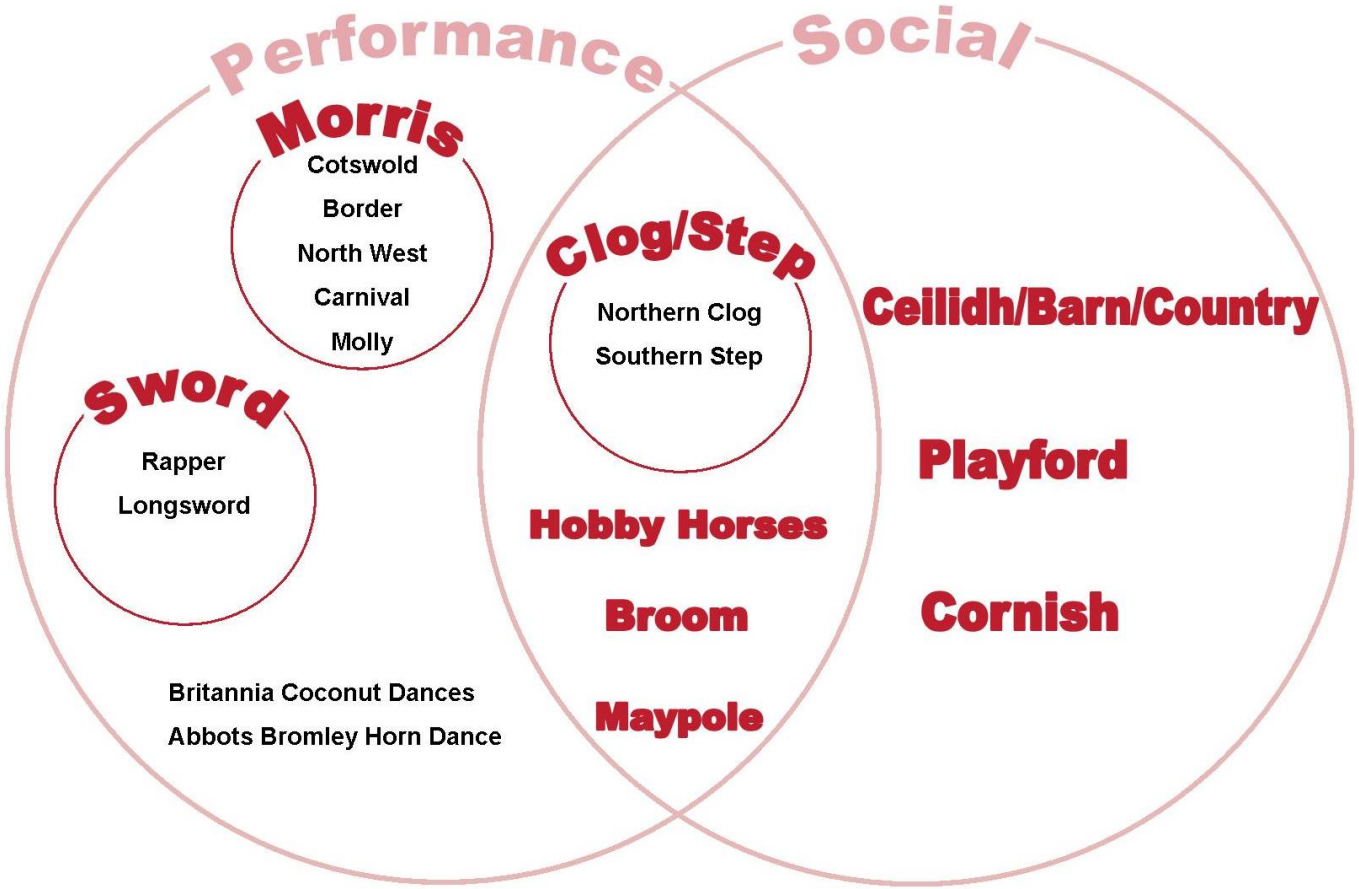
English folk dance



A diagram showing the most widely danced forms of traditional English folk dance

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English folk dance

As seen on the previous diagram, English folk dance can be usefully placed into two broad groupings:

1) Performance Dance: Usually performed outside in the street or village green and, in modern times, often at festivals or as a performance in an evening of social dancing. Teams of dancers can be single or mixed gender and usually have colourful costumes or kit. Some of these performance dances are often linked to calendar events and are thus sometimes referred to as Display, Ritual, Ceremonial or Customary dance. Dances in this category include: morris, sword, clog/step, hobby horse, broom and maypole. These can also be found in social contexts.

2) Social Dance: Community dancing for everyone to enjoy, often held in venues such as school and village halls or under a marquee. Sometimes as part of a special event or celebration, other times a dance for its own sake. People are grouped in *sets* and formations and interact with each other as they move around the dance floor in a regular sequence of movements. A *caller* teaches the dances and prompts the dancers as they move to the music. Terms include country, barn, Playford and ceilidh dancing (a Gaelic word, now used throughout Britain and Ireland, pronounced *kay-lee*).

Solo Cotswold morris jig dancer with melodeon player Simon Care
Moulton Morris Men, The Big Session Festival, Leicester, 2010.
Photo: Bryan Ledgard

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Music

Live music is an integral part of English folk dance. Performance dancers rehearse and perform with one or more musicians, and social dances are usually accompanied by a band.

Dance and musical accompaniment are inter-connected. Dancers use both traditional and newly composed tunes that have grown with the dances; musicians and dancers work closely together.

It could be a solo fiddle bending the tune to match the steps and leaps of Cotswold morris, inspiring them to leap ever higher; or a massive marching band with a big bass drum, brass instruments and melodeons driving the dancers through the streets for a procession of North West morris; or *diddling* (singing sometimes used for step dancing) using the percussion of the dance steps as part of the music.

The instruments played have changed over time and what is considered traditional has also changed as musical traditions and instruments have evolved and come in and out of fashion. For example, pipe and tabor (drum) were originally played for Cotswold morris; later, fiddle, and nowadays the louder melodeon is common.

Morris dancers wearing face paint

Some morris dancing traditions, notably Molly and border, use face paint as part of their costume.

A variety of colours and patterns are used on faces (and sometimes masks) to combine with their costumes and provide each dance sides with their own distinct look. Some dance teams, particularly during the revival of morris dancing in the 1970s, chose to use black face paint which it was believed followed a tradition of applying burnt cork or soot to blacken faces. The earliest origins of such disguise were recorded in the 16th century and confirms that dancers wished to look 'exotic' and 'foreign' as part of their elaborate and exotic costume at masques and courtly entertainment and pageants. In the 18th and 19th centuries the popularity in England of the minstrelsy tradition from the USA can be seen to influence the dancers' appearance.

Red Leicester Border Morris, dancer Martin Barstow
Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival, Cambridgeshire, 2012
Photo: Sue Swift

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Cotswold morris

Cotswold morris, also known as South Midlands morris, comes from Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire – the areas which include the Cotswold hills.

The same tunes and dances might be found in several neighbouring villages, but each *tradition* has its own steps, arm movements, and symmetrical patterns, usually following a set sequence of steps and figures such as, *foot-ups, gyps, rounds,* and *heys*.

Cotswold morris is an energetic, buoyant and athletic form of dance. Steps include *slows* (steps with jumps performed to a few bars of half-speed music), and the leaping capers mentioned by Shakespeare.

Hammersmith Morris Men
5000 Morris Dancers, Southbank, London, 2010
Photo: Urban 75

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Cotswold morris

Teams of dancers are usually called *sides.*

Kit includes bells attached to pads of leather worn just below the knee, brightly coloured ribbons or rosettes, decorated hats and often *baldrics* - two crossed sashes worn across the chest.

There is often a *fool* who jests with the audience and dances in and out of the set, traditionally whacking dancers with an inflated pig's bladder on a stick. Nowadays a balloon is more common.

Windsor Morris
Isle of Wight, 2012
Photo: Peter Waddell

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Cotswold morris

Dances are usually performed with sticks, handkerchiefs, or clapping and in *sets* of six dancers.

Or as a *jig* - a showpiece dance performed solo, or as a *double jig* for two or more dancers.

Comic dances, broom dances, and bacca pipes jigs (a dance for one or two people, performed over crossed clay pipes) are occasionally seen, and some dances include singing.

Champion jig dancers: Dom Moss, Hammersmith Morris Men & Ben Moss, Great Western Morris
5000 Morris Dancers, Southbank, London, 2010
Photo: Urban 75

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EFDSS display team, Le Havre, France, First World War

Cotswold morris for rehabilitating troops

Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Spring Force contemporary Cotswold morris, dancers So We Boys Dance
EFDSS in partnership with Pavilion Dance / Dance South West, Royal Albert Hall, 2010
Photo: photos2u

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Fool’s Gambit Morris, Cotswold morris

EFDSS May in a Day! festival, Cecil Sharp House, London, 2013

Photo: EFDSS; Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

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Florrie Warren & unknown dancer, Cotswold morris
Mary Neal's Espérance Club, London, early 1900s
Photo: Mary Neal Project courtesy of Vida, Cicely and Dorothy - daughters of Florrie Warren

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The Belles of London City, Cotswold double jig
5000 Morris Dancers, Southbank, London, 2010
Photo: urban75

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Border morris

Border morris dancing is from the English counties on the Welsh border: Shropshire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire. The dances are usually performed in sets of four to eight dancers.

Nowadays the style is wild and exuberant, performed almost at a run, with the dancers whooping as they sweep through patterns and clash sticks with great vigour.

Cecil Sharp, one of the folklorists who started the 20th Century revival of morris, dismissed border dancing as degenerate – a point of pride for today's performers, perhaps.

Boggart's Breakfast
5000 Morris Dancers, Southbank, London 2010
Photo: urban75

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Border morris

Traditional costume includes *tatters,* a rag jacket made of strips of material sewn loosely at one end to a jacket, and bells tied around the knee.

Dancers and musicians (usually several) might also wear top hats decorated with feathers, and most will have coloured face paint or face masks.

Black Brook Morris, Border morris
EFDSS in partnership with Youth Dance England, U.Dance 2012
Southbank Centre, London 2012
Photo EFDSS; Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

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Border morris side
Upton-on-Severn, 1910
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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North West morris

North West morris dancing is from Lancashire, Greater Manchester, and Cheshire and is usually performed in sets of 8 dancers, although sets of 6 to 12 are not unusual.

Dances were originally processional, moving through the streets of the local town or village.

The dancers often wear iron-shod clogs, sometimes with bells on. Nowadays they dance with the distinctive cross polka step or *rant* and high kicks.

Flower garlands, short sticks with bells on or *slings* (short lengths of braided ropes) are used in the dances.

Severn Gilders
Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival, Cambridgeshire 2012
Photo: Sue Swift

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North West morris

The men’s costumes are usually breeches and shirts with hats decorated with flowers and strings of beads worn around the neck.

Women often wear mid-length dresses with a pinafore or waistcoat.

Earlsdon Morris Men
Sidmouth Folk Week, 2011
Photo: Sue Swift

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Old Palace Clog, North West morris
Tower Bridge, London, 2009
Photo: Quentin Fletcher

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North West Morris dancers accompanied by a concertina player
Royton, Manchester, date unknown
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Kettle Bridge Clogs (an English side), North West morris
Vermont, USA, 2009
Photo: Steve Cordery

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Carnival morris

The huge variety of English folk dance styles reflect the constantly evolving nature of tradition.

19th and 20th century revival and ‘created’ traditions have now become traditional for many participants.

Traditional processional dancing in the North West of England has evolved into carnival morris, also called fluffy morris, which dates from the 1920s and bears strong resemblances to American cheerleading, using pom poms and modern costumes.

Unknown team
Photo: Mainly Morris Dancing magazine 2004

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Molly

Molly dancing is from East Anglia – from Essex up to Lincolnshire and parts of the East Midlands. It is associated with the tradition of plough boys performing on Plough Monday (the first Monday after Twelfth Night in January).

A variety of steps are used, the most popular modern variant being a hop step with a high knee lift and strong swinging arms with an earthy and vigorous style. They share many figures with social dancing. Little was known and collected about the dances until the 1970s, so many teams developed their own dances and styles with varying set sizes.

Gogmagog Molly
Whitby Folk Week, 2014
Photo: Alicia Danks

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Molly

Traditionally, dancers would dress in their work clothes (often they were farm labourers), or others in their most unusual clothes or Sunday best. Modern teams wear a variety of costumes, from old fashioned country tweed and corduroy to brightly coloured clashing clothes and coloured face paint.

One of the dancers, the Molly, is usually a man dressed in women's clothes, but the entire team may be cross-dressed (men and women) as another form of disguise.

Pig Dyke Molly Dancers performing a broom dance
Sidmouth Folk Week 2012
Photo: Roland Stringer

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Little Downham Molly Dancers on Plough Monday

The Red White and Blue pub, Ely, Cambridgeshire, 1932

Photo: W. H. Palmer, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Ramsey Junior School Molly Dancers

EFDSS in partnership with Youth Dance England, U.Dance 2012,
Southbank Centre, London 2012. Photo EFDSS; Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

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Rapper sword

Rapper sword is from North East England, originating in the region's mining communities. Five dancers are linked by rapper swords – short, flexible metal strips with wooden handles on both ends. This dance is traditionally performed indoors on wooden floors.

The dance is fast and compact; each dancer linked to the next by their swords, forming patterns and shapes above the dancers' heads. During the dance the swords are interlinked and displayed to the audience before the furious whirling and weaving movement resumes. The rapid movements are punctuated by percussive footwork – step dancing.

Maltby Phoenix Sword
EFDSS in partnership with Youth Dance England, U.Dance 2012
Southbank Centre, London 2012
Photo: EFDSS; Photographer: Roswitha Chesher

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Rapper sword

Periodically, and especially at the end, a star or *lock* is made by interlinking the swords, which are then held high to demonstrate its symmetry and strength.

Jumps and flips are often executed whilst maintaining the link to the other dancers.

Sometimes the dance is preceded by a short *calling on* song introducing the performers.

The costumes are simple shorts called *hoggers,* or short skirts, and shirts with hard-soled shoes.

There is often a *Tommy & Betty* (usually a man dressed in woman's clothing) who introduce the dances and entertain the audience.

Stone Monkey performing a tumble
5000 Morris Dancers, Southbank, London 2010
Photo: Sue Swift

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Newcastle Kingsmen Sword Dancers, rapper sword lock held high, with Tommy & Betty on each end

Location unknown, 2010

Photo: John Asher

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Rapper sword
Earsdon, County Durham, date unknown
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Longsword

Longsword dancing comes mainly from Yorkshire and a little further north. It is usually danced in teams of 6 or 8 dancers linked by the swords. The longswords are rigid, single handled strips of metal or wood, longer than rapper swords.

The dances range from stately to brisk in tempo. They feature circular patterns performed by stepping or leaping over or under the swords, occasionally breaking into parallel lines to form other shapes. Depending on the dance, the step may be a lope, a march, step-hop, or sometimes include percussive footwork.

Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers
Abingdon, Oxfordshire 2004
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Grenoside Sword Dancers, longsword
International Sword Spectacular, York 2008
Photo: Sue Swift

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Longsword

There may be extra characters associated with a longsword dance – a fool or captain. As in rapper, the dance finishes with a sword lock which is held up by one of the dancers for the whole audience to admire.

The costumes vary from the Flamborough fisherman in their work sweaters to the more elaborate and dignified military style costume of the dancers from Handsworth.

Flamborough Longsword
Flamborough, Yorkshire, 2004
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers, longsword

Date unknown

Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Other Dance Traditions

There are a number of other dance traditions more specific to certain places. These all have their own unique characteristics which echo elements of other traditions but stand alone, showing how the individual character of a town or village had an impact on the type of dancing done there.

One such unique dance is the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance from Staffordshire . This features the Horn Dancers comprising six Deer-men, a Fool, Hobby Horse, Bowman and Maid Marian.

A carbon analysis discovered that the antlers used in the dance date back to the 11th century.

Abbots Bromley Horn Dance
Staffordshire 1998
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Hobby horses

Hobby Horses have been recorded as part of carnivals, processions, folk plays, folk dances, calendar customs and rituals since Medieval times, throughout Europe.

Thousands watch them whirl and cavort through the streets of Padstow, Minehead and Combe Martin in the West Country every May.

There are various kinds of hobby horses; they can be two-legged horses or other mock animals.

Combe Martin Hobby Horse
North Devon 1999
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Hobby horses

Many morris sides now have a hobby horse or similar ‘animal’ – from dragons to unicorns to sheep – as one of the characters in the side.

Many are based on the hooden horses of East Kent, which have long snapping jaws made of wood.

In the morris, such beasts (dancers in disguise) collect money and playfully interact with the audience. Sometimes they join in the dances too.

Hooden horse of East Kent
1950
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Hobby horses

The most famous traditional British hobby horses are those of the May Day ‘Obby ‘Oss festival in Padstow, Cornwall.

There are two rival horses: the Old Oss and its supporters wear red sashes and kerchiefs, whereas the Peace ‘Oss or Blue Ribbon followers wear appropriate blue - all are dressed in white.

Old ‘Oss
Padstow, Cornwall, 2004
Photo: Doc Rowe

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The Four Hobby Horses of the Apocalypse

Performance piece by artist Matthew Cowan

Photo: performance still © Matthew Cowan, 2005

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Broom

Traditional broom dances are found throughout England from as far afield as East Anglia and Devon.

Broom dances can include *stepping* along, around, or over a broom, as well as difficult tricks or figures such as balancing the broom on the hand or head, various flip-up moves of the broom, swings and spins, throws of leg over the broom, broom between the legs or around the back, and *percussing*, (beating a rhythm with one or other end of the broom).

Simon Pipe of The Outside Capering Crew
Sidmouth Folk Week 2008
Photo: Pete Thomas

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Broom

Morris dancer Sam Bennett, of Ilmington, was famed for his own broom dance. A 1926 film of him performing it, complete with sound, was made in the year before the release of Hollywood's first 'talkie.'

Sam's broom dance is still performed in Ilmington, and his hobby horse – also called Sam – continues to turn out with the village side, despite being more than 100 years old.

Sam Bennett
1926
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Children performing a broom dance

EFDSS and Our World Festivals Molly Dance Day, Cecil Sharp House, London 2010

Photo: Peter Noblet

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Clog and step

Clog and step are percussive forms of dance, generally performed by small groups and solo dancers. At one time most of the country would have had some kind of step dance tradition, often danced in the street, in pubs, and during social occasions. Nowadays they are quite commonly found along with other types of performance dance.

The term *step dancing* can refer to several styles of traditional percussive dance and can also be called *step clog, clog,* or *stepping*. Traditionally, dancers would have danced in their work shoes. For example, in Lancashire, wooden-soled clogs were worn in the mills, and on Dartmoor, hard-soled leather shoes or boots would have been worn for farming. Nowadays, clogs, tap shoes, and hard-soled shoes are all worn depending on the style of dance.

Costumes vary – some choose to wear costumes derived from archive photographs of mill workers in their working clothes or even their Sunday best, whilst others have adopted more modern outfits. On Dartmoor, in East Anglia and in the Romany/Gypsy and Traveller community, no special costume at all is worn, just everyday clothes.

Lily and Eli Durrant, Step dance
East Suffolk, 1953
Photo: courtesy of Blaxhall Archive Group
via East Anglian Traditional Music Trust

Pat Tracey, Clog dance
Accompanied by Peter Kennedy
Royal Albert Hall, 1960
Photo: VWML collection

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Northern English clog

The north of England is the home of step dancing in wooden-soled clogs.

Dances and steps are most notably found in Durham, Northumberland, Lakeland (Cumbria), and Lancashire.

Solo clog dancer Toby Bennett
Cressing Temple, Essex 2013
Photo: Hugo Lane

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Northern English clog

As well as being danced in social settings, there are also some competitions, which has helped define some of the styles.

Competition style dancing is often focused on very precise footwork with very little upper-body movement.

Stony Steppers
Shrewsbury Folk Festival 2011
Photo: Alan Cole

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Northern English clog

There are many similarities between regions, but there are also some differences that have been developed by particular dancers and families in particular regions.

Teams now perform choreographed routines and solo dances.

Sarah Dalrymple of Gaorsach Rapper and Step
Towersey Village Festival 2000
Photo: Sue Swift

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Southern English step dance

There are continuing traditions and thriving enclaves of hard-soled shoe stepping in East Anglia and Devon, including within the Romany/Gypsy and Traveller community.

More recently, stepping is enjoying a resurgence across Cornwall, Hampshire, Sussex, and Kent, often encouraged by the example of Romany/Gypsy and Traveller dancers from the area.

Richard, Ben and Fiona Davies, East Anglian step dancing
Traditional Music Day, Stowmarket, Suffolk, 2005
Photo: Chris Gill, courtesy of the East Anglian Traditional Music trust

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Southern English step dance

Step dancing is most commonly found informally as part of a social event, including music, singing and dancing, such as in a pub session.

Each dancer has their own style, without set routines, and will have a favourite type of tune, for example hornpipes, that they best like to dance to.

Dartmoor step dancing
South Zeal, Devon, date unknown
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Maypole

Dancing at May time is an old custom, common in many cultures, to welcome in the summer, and probably began by dancing around a significant tree or bush in the village. In Europe, from mediaeval times, the maypole was a tall tree trunk bedecked with greenery and hoisted onto the village green at the beginning of the festivities.

Many maypoles were destroyed during Cromwell's rule as being 'heathenish vanity…' but erected again in Charles II reign. The tallest was in the Strand, London, standing at 130 feet.

The custom of dancing around the maypole with plaited ribbons was introduced in 1889 by Professor John Ruskin for his student teachers at Whitelands College, Roehampton and is still practised today. The idea possibly came from similar European traditions. The weaving of ribbons around the maypole became popular throughout the country. Today, maypole dancing is performed by a variety of ages in schools, community celebrations, and other festivities.

Maypole crown
The Full English Folk Marquee, Big Weekend, Cambridge, July 2013
Photo: EFDSS; Photographer: Frances Watt

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Maypole dancing

The Full English Discovery Day, British Library 2013

Photo: EFDSS; photographer Roswitha Chesher

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May Day Maypole dancing
Ickwell, Bedfordshire, date unknown
Photo: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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Social dance

English social dancing is dancing in groups, most often with a partner and one or more other couples with a caller to guide and lead the dances. The dances are made up of a sequence of *figures*, which may be more or less complex.

Many people have danced social folk dances at a wedding, or community event – they can be very accessible to new dancers.

Ceilidh
Cecil Sharp House, London 2011
Photo: Sue Swift

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Social dance

The terms used can be interchangeable and have much crossover. The nature of the occasion in which the dances take place tends to determine whether it's called a ceilidh, country or barn dance.

For example, ceilidh, country, and barn dance may be used at an event with a party atmosphere; a school might organise what they call a barn dance, whilst a social dance at a festival might be called a ceilidh.

Family barn dancing
EFDSS Apple Day festival, Cecil Sharp House, London 2011
Photo: EFDSS; Photographer: Matt Christie

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Social dance

A slightly more formal occasion may have a predominance of the older period dances, such as those from the Playford collection and other dancing masters, the dance might be called a Playford dance or Ball.

These dances originated from collections of English country dances from the 17th through to the 19th century, beginning with John Playford's English Dancing Master in 1651. They were revived and popularised by Cecil Sharp in the early part of the 20th century and are similar to those seen in the dance sequences in films of Jane Austen's novels.

Social dancers
In the garden at Cecil Sharp House 1950
Photo: John Gay, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection

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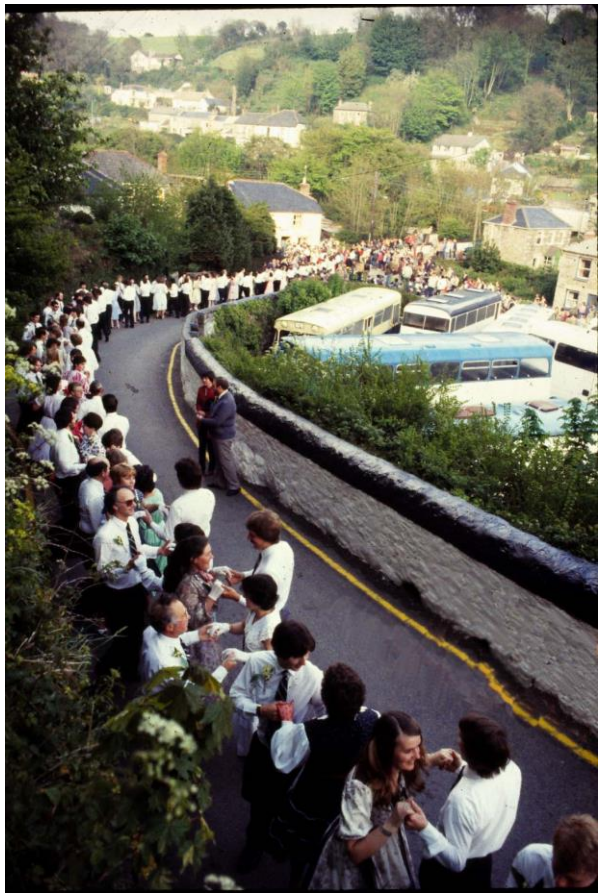
Social dance

The dances can be in several different formations such as, circles, squares and longways sets (a column of pairs). There will always be a caller who first teaches the moves, and figures, and then *calls* the figures throughout the dance. These have names such as *dip & dive, promenade* and *basket* and are danced with steps such, as a *skip*, *slip step*, *hop step*, *rant,* and *polka*.

Cornish social dancing is a distinctive form with visible connections to Breton dances (both with common Celtic roots) and is currently experiencing a revival. The dances are often processional.



Helston Furry Dance
Helston, Cornwall, date unknown
Photo: Doc Rowe

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Social dance

As with performance dance, social dancing is a thriving and evolving tradition; new dances are constantly being devised.

The old dances have moved around the country and indeed, to other countries and back and have developed along with the music, retaining common roots. For example, Contra dance, popularly danced in Britain today, developed in the USA from British roots, and is now an up-tempo, fast-moving, intricate dance form.

Currently, the folk dance scene has many dance clubs, some specialising in one particular form, as well as regular and one-off public dances with a more mixed programme. Most folk festivals will have a ceilidh.

London Folk at the EFDSS National Gathering, social dancing
Cecil Sharp House, London 2011
Photo: Derek Schofield

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Social dancing at a *Knees Up! Cecil Sharp* ceilidh with band The Gloworms
Cecil Sharp House, London 2011
Photo: Sue Swift

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