

THE WINLATON SWORD DANCE

This notation was originally published by Cecil Sharp in 1913¹

WINLATON is a small mining village on the Durham side of the Tyne, close to Newcastle. A sword dance has been danced there every Christmas within living memory, though of late years the performances have become rather irregular.

The dance is, perhaps, the most primitive example of its kind now to be seen in the North of England. It would be difficult to exaggerate the force and energy with which it was executed when I saw it in December, 1912. The performers were men well-advanced in years-the leader, Mr. William Prudhoe, is sixty-five years old-and, although the dance is a short one, they were quite exhausted by their efforts.

Although its figures are few in number, and none of them, technically, of special intricacy-compared, at least, with those of the Earsdon and other dances-the dance is by no means an easy one. The great difficulty is to catch its barbaric spirit, to reproduce the breathless speed, the sureness and economy of movement, the vigour and abandonment of the "stepping" displayed by the Winlaton men. The movements must be absolutely continuous, and, from the conclusion of the Calling-on Song to the final exhibition of the Nut, there must be no stop or pause of any kind.

There are five dancers, a Betty, and a musician who plays a tin-whistle.

COSTUME

The dancers wear white shirts, sparsely decorated back and front with ribbons, dark trousers and belt, and have nothing on their heads. Each man carries a rapper of the usual type, but of smaller dimensions than those used by the Earsdon and Swalwell men. The blade from hilt to tip is nineteen inches in length by one- and-an -eighth in width, and the revolving handle is three inches long, making twenty-two inches over all.

The Betty, a man-woman, wears a bonnet and a dress of coloured stuff, and carries a rapper. Holding her sword horizontally above her head, harlequin-fashion, she dances up and down outside the dancers, throughout the performance, encouraging them from time to time with wild and uncouth cries.

THE MUSIC

The tune to which the Calling-on Song is sung is a dorian variant of the Irish air "Colleen Dhas," the tune which is usually sung by English folk-singers to "The green, mossy banks of the Lea" (see "Folk-Songs from Somerset" No. 67).

The jig tune, played between the stanzas of the song, is the first strain of "The Tenpenny Bit." No special air is associated with the dance itself, various jig tunes being played by the musician at his discretion. In the accompanying music-book (*see* "The Sword Dances of Northern England: Songs and Dance Airs," Set 111.), "The Tenpenny Bit" and "Irish Whisky" are given; and these, it is suggested, should be played to alternate figures.

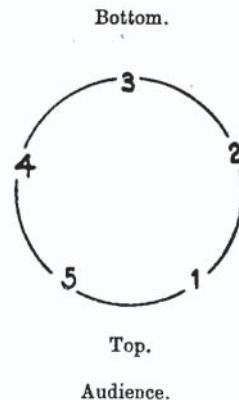
As already stated, there is no pause between the figures. The musician, however, should always play the second strain (B) of the music to the Ring, the movement which concludes each section of the dance, and then change the tune for the succeeding figure. The exhibition of the Nut, at the conclusion of the dance, should be accompanied with the second strain of the music (B).

THE STEP

Except where otherwise directed in the instructions the dancers perform the movements at a rapid, elastic, walking stop, executed on the ball of the foot, at the rate of 160 steps to the minute. When directed to "step," they are to dance in the way explained in the Grenoside dance² (see Part L, p. 56), as vigorously and rhythmically as they can.

THE DANCE

The dancers stand in a ring, facing centre, each holding his rapper erect in front of him in his right hand, hilt at breast-level, thus:



The Betty then walks round in a small circle, clockwise, between the dancers and the audience, and sings the following song, the dancers singing in unison with her the last line of each verse.

Good people give ear to my story;
I've called here to see you by chance,
And I've brought five lads blithe and bonny,
Intending to give you a dance.
Winlaton is our habitation,
The place we were all born and bred,
There's no finer boys in the nation,
And none so gallantly led.

The first is the son of bold Elliot,
The first youth to enter the ring,
And, I'm proud and rejoicing to tell it,
He fought for his country and King,
He would conquer or else he would die;
Bold Elliot defended the place;
Their plans he soon caused them to alter,
Some fled and some fell in disgrace.

Now my next handsome youth for to enter,
He's a lad we've got very few such;
His father beat the great Duke of Wintle,
And fought the great fleet of the Dutch.
His father was the Lord Duncan,
Who played the Dutch ne'er so a prank
That they from their harbours went shrieking,
And fled to the Doggerty Bank.

The next is so bold a descendant,
Lord Nelson, who fought on the Nile;
Few men had more courage or talent;
The Frenchmen he did them beguile.
When the Frenchmen they nearly decoyed him,
The battle he managed so well,
In the fortress he completely destroyed them;
Scarce one did get home for to tell.

Now my next handsome youth for to enter,
He's a lad of abilities bright;
Ten thousand bright guineas I'll venture
That he like his father would fight.
At Waterloo and Talavera
Lord Wellington made the French fly.
You'd scarcely could find such another,
He'd conquer or else he would die.

Now my last handsome youth for to enter,
He's a lad that is straight and tall;
He's a son to yon big Buonaparty,
The hero who conquered them all.
He went over the Lowlands like thunder;
Made nations to quiver and shake;
Many thousands stood gazing with wonder
At the havocs he always did make.

O now you see my five actors,
The only five actors so bold,
And they bear as good a character
As any did stand upon earth.
And if they're as good as their sires,
Their deeds are deserving record;
So, lads, the company desires
To see how you handle your swords.

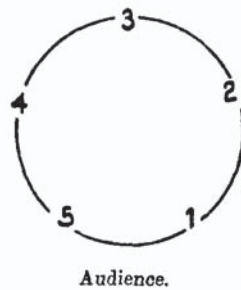
At the conclusion of each stanza, the musician plays the first strain of "The Tenpenny Bit" (8 bars, A music), to which the dancers, standing as above directed, "step" very vigorously.

During the singing of the second stanza, No. 1 leaves the ring and walks round in front of the Betty, returning to his place at the conclusion of the verse for the "stepping." In the four following stanzas, Nos. 2, 8, 4 and 5, in turn, leave the ring and walk round in front of the Betty, each returning to his place at the end of the verse.

After the "stepping" at the conclusion of the final verse of the song, the Betty moves away, the musician strikes up the dance air and the dancers perform the following figures.

FIGURE 1 - RING-CLASH-AND-STEP

All dance round, clockwise, each placing his left arm over the left shoulder of the man in front, while holding his rapper erect, hilt at breast-level, and extending his right hand toward the centre of the circle (8 bars, A music). The pace should be so regulated that at the conclusion of this movement Nos. 1 and 5 may be at the top with their backs to the audience, thus:



On the first beat of the first bar of the following strain, all clash their swords together, place them over their left shoulders, each grasping with his left hand the tip of the sword in front of him, and, standing still, "step" (8 bars, B music).

FIGURE 2 - THE NUT, ROSE, AND RING

(a) The Nut

Nos. 1 and 5 stand still and make an arch with the sword between them (No. 5's). No. 1 makes rather more than a whole turn counter-clockwise; while, simultaneously, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 move forward together under the arch, face centre by turning counter-clockwise, separate their hands and lock the swords together, hilts under points. This operation must be executed very smartly, and should be completed in two bars of the music or even less.

(b) The Rose

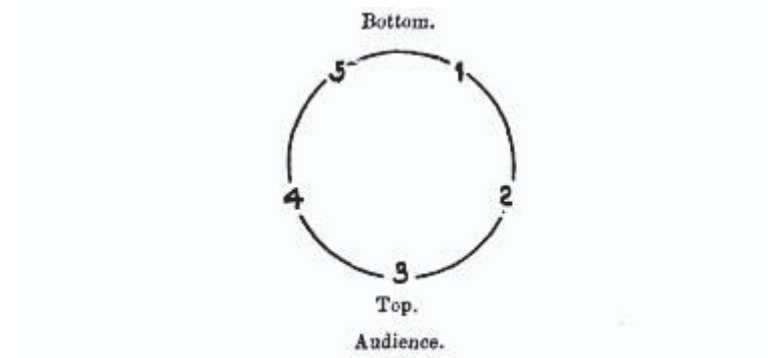
Immediately the Nut is tied the dancers raise it above their heads, horizontally, and "step" to the end of the phrase (8 bars, A music).

(c) The Ring

The Nut is now lowered to waist-level and all move rapidly round in a ring, clockwise (8 bars, B music) to the following step, which is executed sideways, the legs alternately opening and closing scissor-fashion:



so regulating their pace that at the conclusion of the movement Nos. 1 and 5 are facing the audience, thus:



The above movement is an extraordinarily effective one, when properly executed. The dancers should incline outward a little, keep their feet fairly close together, take short steps, and move, or whirl, round rapidly and rhythmically.

FIGURE 3 - THE NEEDLE

The dancers bring their hands together and loosen the swords. Whereupon, No. 1 moves forward (i.e., up) and, followed by Nos. 2 and 8, turns to his left and moves round in a small circle counter-clockwise. Simultaneously, No. 5 moves forward and, followed by No. 4 (who turns out to his right, clockwise), moves round in a small circle, clockwise. This initiates the Needle, which, from this point, is danced in precisely the same way as in the Swalwell dance³ (see Part L, p. 77), No. 3 changing from one circle to the other in alternate circuits.

This movement is continued until No. 1 calls "Nut," when the dancers at once repeat Figure 2. No. 1 must be careful to make the call when he and No. 5 are at the top, facing the audience, and when No. 3 is in his circle, thus:

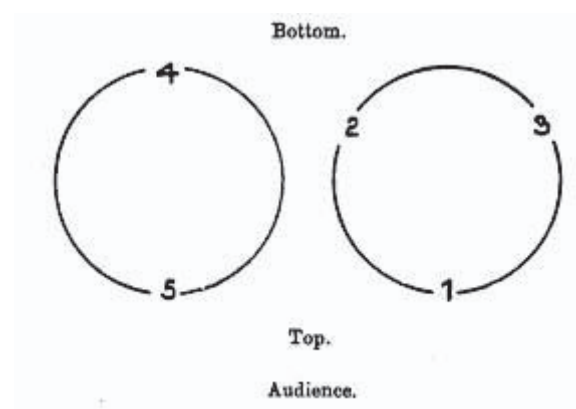
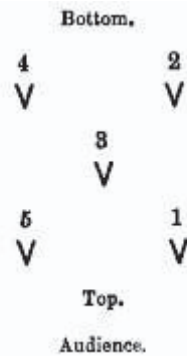


FIGURE 4 - THE FIDDLER

Nos. 1 and 5, who are now facing the audience, raise the sword between them (No. 5's). No. 1 then makes a whole turn clockwise, while, simultaneously, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 move down together, pass under the arch, turn clockwise, face up (2 bars), and stand thus:



No. 3, standing in the centre, holds his hands at breast-level with No. 2's sword over his left shoulder and his own sword over his right shoulder; while No. 1 rests his own sword, and No. 5 that of No. 4, on inside shoulders. Standing thus all "step" to the end of the phrase (8 bars).

No. 5 now lowers his sword, over which No. 8 leaps, and all "step" (8 bars).

No. 6 again lowering his sword, No. 8 leaps over it backward, returning to his place, and all "step" (8 bars). Whereupon the dancers repeat Figure 2.

FIGURE 5 - MARY ANNE

The beginning of this Figure is executed in the same way as that of the preceding Figure, the dancers falling into the formation shown in the diagram.

No. 1, raising his left arm, then turns out to his left and, followed by No. 2, dances completely round No. 3, counter-clockwise, and returns to his place, while, simultaneously No. 5, raising his right arm, turns out to his right and, followed by No. 4, dances completely round No. 3, clockwise, and returns to his place. When the two couples meet, behind and in front of No. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 pass *inside* Nos. 5 and 4.

Upon reaching his place, No. 1, followed by No. 2, makes a complete turn (or loop) counter-clockwise, and again dances round No. 3, counter-clockwise; while, upon reaching his place, No. 5, followed by No. 4, makes a complete turn (or loop) clockwise, and again dances round No. 8, clockwise. When the two couples meet in the second circuit, Nos. 1 and 2 pass *outside* Nos. 5 and 4.

Upon the completion of the second circuit, Nos. 1 and 5, followed respectively by Nos. 2 and 4, make a complete turn (or loop) as before, No. 1 counter-clockwise, No. 5 clockwise, and face the audience. Whereupon, without pause, Figure 2 is repeated.

FIGURE 6 - THE ROLL

All, except No. 5 (who stands in his place throughout the figure), face counter-clockwise and raise their hands. No. 1, followed by Nos. 2, 3, and 4, then moves down in front of No. 5 (i.e., between No. 5 and the centre of the circle), turns to his left and moves round in a circle, counter-clockwise, twice. At the beginning of each circuit, No. 5, as No. 1 passes him, raises both hands and makes a whole turn clockwise.

On the completion of the second circuit, No. 5 moves forward to his place in the ring, all face centre, separate hands, lock the swords together and then dance the Rose and the Ring of Figure 2.

FIGURE 7 - STRAIGHT LINE

No. 1 makes a whole turn, clockwise, and faces the audience; while Nos. 2, 3, and 4 move forward under No. 5's sword and stand in line facing the audience, No. 2 turning to his right, making a whole turn clockwise and standing on No. 1's left; No. 4 turning to his left and standing on No. 5's right; No. 3 making a half-turn, clockwise, and standing between Nos. 6 and 1 (2 bars), thus:

4 5 3 1 2

It will be found that, when the hands are lowered to hip level, Nos. 4 and 1 have their hands crossed right over left, and Nos. 5 and 2 have theirs crossed left over right; while No. 3 has his hands wide apart.

Standing in this position all "step" to the end of the strain (8 bars).

No. 3 now moves forward and makes a half-turn counter-clockwise ; No. 2 turns out to his left, makes a whole turn counter-clockwise, passes behind No. 1, and stands between Nos. 1 and 3; while No. 4 turns out to his right, passes behind No. 5 and moves up between Nos. 5 and 3. Simultaneously, No. 1 makes a whole turn counter-clockwise (2 bars). This ties the Nut. Whereupon the remaining movements of Figure 2, the Rose and the Ring, are again repeated.

At the conclusion of the Ring, No. 1 raises the Nut in his right hand, arm erect, and all stand in line, facing the audience, thus,

4 5 1 2 3
V V V V V
Audience.

and "step" to the end of the tune (8 bars, B music). This brings the dance to a conclusion.

NOTATION

The Calling-on Song
Fig. 1. Ring-Clash-and-Step
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose and Ring
Fig. 8. The Needle
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose, and Ring
Fig. 4. The Fiddler
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose, and Ring
Fig. 5. Mary Anne
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose, and Ring
Fig. 6. The Roll
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose, and Ring
Fig. 7. Straight Line
Fig. 2. The Nut, Rose, and Ring
Exhibition of the Nut in line

References:

1. Cecil Sharp, *The Sword Dances of Northern England*, London: Novello, 1913; volume 3, pp. 91-102
2. *ibid*, 1911, volume 1, pp. 54-67
3. *ibid*, 1911, volume 1, pp. 72-81

Converted into digital form by John Asher and Pete Milne. Design Copyright © 2004 John Asher.
This may be printed, copied and distributed freely provided it is not done for profit and that it is distributed in its entirety.
The text of the notation is now out of copyright and the words may be reproduced without restriction.
PDF file published at Rapper Online <http://www.rapper.org.uk/>
