

# STAVE DANCES

## The Clubs

The local Friendly Societies of the nineteenth century were formed for mutual benefit in the days before the affiliated clubs or the trade unions, to provide financial cover against sickness, unemployment and funerals, in return for making regular contributions. There was often more than one club in a village to cater for different age groups, as older workers drew more heavily on funds. Solidarity was shown by attendance at meetings, in particular the annual club day, during which there would often be a procession, a church service with an invited sermon, and a dinner.

The annual club walks with their bands, dancing and entertainments are well known throughout England and southern Scotland and mentioned in newspapers and other records. William Barnes, the Dorset dialect poet, described one such event. Although not widely known now, they still exist in some villages such as South Harting (West Sussex) and Priddy (Somerset) and as the "women's walk" at Nether Stowey (Somerset).

The Friendly Societies in the 19th century gradually became absorbed or affiliated into the various National Societies. Although many died with the introduction of the welfare state and the National Health Service in 1945, some persist, as at Bampton (Oxfordshire), as savings clubs. Today Friendly Societies still have an official Recorder, although they act more as conventional lending or building societies.

## The Staves

A staff as a badge of office is well known in many cultures. Tipstaves are carried in front of prominent office holders. There is Black Rod and Golden Rod, and churches usually have two for wardens, one for the throne and the other for the bishop. The stave used to and sometimes still does symbolise a crowd controller, being on occasion a simple stick or even with a whip end as a "whiffler". Although in the Middle Ages it might also represent a spear, pike or halberd, it probably reminded the Friendly Societies of long handled farm implements. These themselves could become weapons for impoverished rebellious groups.

The staves could vary in length from the equivalent of a walking stick to a long rake handle. Club officials sometimes had a more elaborate or a larger stave and stave head. There are some examples of staves in the reserve collection of the Reading Rural Life Museum which show that many were tapered, like natural wood. This is advantageous when the mass of a stave head has to be balanced to avoid or minimise the bouncing impacts on the shoulders whilst moving.

(Several years ago, with a visiting party of Americans, we had the opportunity to dance with them outside at the Museum.)

At South Harting most of the staves are made of fresh wood with the bark still attached and carved decoratively. This was a common practice with wood cut from hedges for walking sticks before WW2. In the south of England the finial was often wooden, of an acorn, pineapple or door knob shape. In the south west

use was made of the brass plate industry around Bristol to provide standard club designs. Some can be seen in most of the area's museums. Because it was for only a single day it was also common to decorate the head with natural flowers, often looking like the poles of the Tuttimen at Hungerford.

Modern dance teams have found a variety of solutions for the stave heads. Somerset Maids have a valuable set of real antique brass heads. Knobs and Knockers have reproduced the Henstridge design. Fleur de Lys used golden curtain rail finials, Abercorn small door knobs as being typical of the area, but Magog have large engraved emblems. Other sides should research the local practice. The decoration can be various weights of ribbon, draw cords and other haberdashery, even small banners. A common experience is that the longer poles need to dismantle into halves for carriage.

### **The Sources**

As the old Societies demised, their records were supposed to revert to the Recorder who usually passed them on to the appropriate County Archivist Department. I stumbled on relevant material when researching for possible details of 19th century rural ceremonial costume. This turned out to be best clothes, wide blue sash over one shoulder, and rosettes or cockades on the hats. The common blue colour was considered traditional for workers. Most minute books gave the club's regulations, including details of dressing and descriptions of the requirements for staves on the club day as well as all the economic business. There are few references to dancing and several of these have now gone missing. There has been no systematic search of existing Friendly Society records.

If dancing occurred it would happen at stops during or after the procession. Normally the staves would be stacked, as was often insisted at the entrance to a church, to allow performing reels and country dances, presumably as often as not with accompanying women. There are probably many references that still can be found through newspaper and library searches. Keith Chandler has noticed many in the Cotswold area.

### **The Dances**

The first dance I was given was sent to me as an undated 19th century newspaper cutting for a wedding at Buckhorn Weston where members of the grooms club in Wiltshire came and danced around the bridal pair in front of the church, "They footed it, crossed over and did the figure with great abandon." Then I found a note in a minute book of the "first" and "second" parts to be practised at Stourton Caundle in north Dorset. The next obtained was another Wiltshire notation from Maud Karpeles who said that she had seen a performance.

The best find was a list of dances apparently from Fifehead Magdalen, which is near Marnhull from where Hardy's Tess of the Durbevilles was supposed to have come, that had been done during a local club walk. Many were the well known Victorian country dances but several took some tracing through dance books, and these, such as The Dorsetshire March and Spithead Fleet, turned out to be of considerable dance interest. All the material was sketchy and required significant interpretation.

Rather than rush into print and spawn endless and ultimately unsatisfactory interpretations, the dances were passed on to see how they worked and to find if something distinctive emerged. For variety in performance other southern material has been resurrected such as ribbon dances, mostly from Sharp MSS, and a handkerchief dance constructed called "Under the Greenwood Tree", based on the country dance movements recorded in the Thomas Hardy MSS.

Stave dances from the Stourton Caundle set were first taught to the Bath City women with wonderful results. The dances have since been passed over on request to any interested southern sides. One was even seen on TV, as a background in a Whicker's World interview in Los Angeles, being danced with bamboo poles. The Abercorn Stave team existed for a few seasons to explore the other material. The Stourton Caundle set has lent itself to innovative choruses. Some teams have changed the figures around to make each dance more individual. Besides modern inventions I have looked out for set dances that suit the stave idiom.

### **Reconstruction**

**Basics** : There was no guide available for the details necessary for dancing, so various people's experience from meeting country dancers in the south were tapped.

**Stance** : When stationary, with the stave butt on the ground, stand leaning on it, like pictures of soldiers in Elizabethan plays. During Once to Yourself the stave was raised, then sloped over and rested on the right shoulder with its decorations hanging down the back. Unless the stave is short, this would not be like a soldier carrying a rifle, nor in the Border Morris style. Most sides found that a grip which had the arm and hand wound round the stave steadied it best.

**Travelling Step** : a 1 2 3 and more of a body rise rather than a full hop, an asymmetric "chasing step", without much knee rise.

**Setting Steps** : It was hard to find suitable evidence as the various local Four Hand Reels are now danced with a cross-over polka step and the Sidbury Reel is very simple. Around the Hampshire-Dorset border the setting step was either a simple hopping backstep or a cross-over step in which the free foot was slapped down flat behind the supporting foot.

**Passing** : It proved advantageous that passings of dancers were by the left shoulder for preference rather than the right, to avoid the all too easy entangling of the stave decorations. It helps if the dance style is flowing so that the movements take the full measure of the music with no dancing on the spot waiting for the next action.

**The Staves** : The best stave dances involve using the staves and exploiting the swirling of their decorations. It is natural to "cross staves" at the end of dances in various manners before walking off.

## **THE WEDDING REEL**

**Set** : for six dances starting 3 v 3. It works also with garlands or with nothing in the hands.

**Footing It** : Step on the spot for 4 bars, facing opposite.

**Cross Over** : Change sides with opposite and face back across the set. This can be either straight across, passing left shoulders with opposites and turning right to face back, or through the ends. For this the middle dancer of each line moves forward to their right to pass between the end pair, who both can retire a little to generate space, passing the right hand opposite by the left shoulder and going round their place to the opposite middle place. The end pair cross, passing right shoulders and turn the easy way to face across. The effect is to be like a half hey.

Repeat Footing and Cross Over

**The Figure** : This means a figure of eight. Figures of eight on the sides or ends do not provide an obvious movement around a bride and groom standing a little apart. One objective of the dance is to prevent them kissing at the end of the dance by keeping them separated by the staves. A common figure in British Wedding Reels is a reel of three danced in chasing pairs producing a single figure of eight. Each pair works together, passing in the centre alternately. After eight bars all reverse their direction of travel, and retrace their path, in reverse order in each pair.

## **COUNTRY DANCES**

**Set** : in units of four that split and progress to dance with other pairs in a longways set for as many as will. In Victorian times sets were seldom as long as 6 to 8 pairs. The dance started with the top two pairs only and the rest were brought in progressively, and the dance continued until the top pair at least where back into their starting place. Probably most people's dancing experience was at small dance booths where they paid by the dance and wanted to get the maximum value for their money.

The major problem in carrying staves when interpreting progressive country dances is the progression which was so often a partners swing and change positions with neighbours. However there were other progressions used including a version of the ubiquitous Figure. In any case the information is very limited.

### **Pop Goes The Weasel**

**Set** : progressive longways for as many as will. In each four,

A1 Nos 1, 2 and 4 circle clockwise two and half times, staves crossed in the centre, until No 4 is opposite their starting place, and then "pops" under the staves to place, while Nos 1 and 2 pick up No 3.

A2 Nos 1, 2 and 3 circle anticlockwise two and half times etc.

B1 Nos 1 and 2 dance down the middle of the set shoulder to shoulder, turn inwards to face back and dance back to place. Nos 3 and 4 fall in behind as they come up to place, or they follow Nos 1 and 2 down and make an arch for them to come under as they return to place.

B2 All facing up, the first pair split and cast out on own side followed by their seconds and dance a reel of four across the set, ending **progressed** one place.

## **THE STOURTON CAUNDLE SET**

It is probable that the dances were performed in a true country dance progressive format rather than as a set dance but the latter interpretation fits modern needs much better. It is simple to consider the "first parts" as figures used for several dances and the "second parts" as the choruses used repetitively in any one dance. In any case the information is very limited.

**First Parts** - the simplest interpretations but not the only ones.

- 1     *Cross Over*                 : as Soldiers Joy  
       Facing across, cross over along a curved path, passing left shoulders, and turn to right to face back. Repeat to place.
- 2     *Arches*                     : as The Butterfly  
       In fours, top pair dance down centre, turn out and come up outside to place, crossing staves. Bottom pair come up the outside with crossed staves, turning in and going down centre with staves on shoulders. Repeat.
- 3     *Into Line (two at a time)* : as Double Change Sides  
       Into one line down the centre line of the set in pairs, crossing staves with appropriate neighbour. Two ends will have no one to cross staves with and keep stave on shoulder for that half of the movement. Then all cross staves with neighbour on other side and repeat appropriately. Thus first half : 2 1\_3 4\_6 5\_7 8 etc, and second half : 1 2\_4 3\_5 6\_8 7 etc.
- 4     *Down and Up*             : as Double Lead Through  
       In fours, top pair dance down centre shoulder to shoulder and retire to place, then bottom pair dance up the middle and retire to place.
- 5     *The Figure*                :  
       All face up, the first pair split and cast out on own side followed by their seconds and dance a reel of four across the set, passing left shoulders in the centre, ending in own place. To complete the movement in time it may be necessary to start the reel as soon as the seconds pass, and to finish the reel by cutting out the last passing and going straight to place.

### **Second Parts**

- 1     All make 90 deg turn to left and dance off to left for 2 bars, turn out to face back and return to place in 2 bars, turn opposite once round with left hand, 4 bars, with a hesitation in opposite's place. No repeat.
- 2     In fours, circle clockwise half way round, 3 bars, face along the diagonals, 1 bar, and all pass left shoulders in centre crossing to place simultaneously, 4 bars, going straight into a circle anticlockwise and crossing the centre left shoulders again, turning the easy way to face across.
- 3     In fours, go down four in a line, 2 bars, face neighbour and step, 2 bars, half reel of four across the set. Come up four in a line, stop and step, and half reel to place.

file : stave.wri

STAVE DANCE OR COUNTRY DANCE

Collected Seend, Wiltshire by Maud Karpeles 1929.

"BRICKS AND MORTAR" a version of Up the Sides and Down the Middle.

Used as a finishing dance for the annual club walk.

Longways for as many as will.

A 1 & 2 First couple followed by rest go down the middle and cast up the outside,

B 1 All step in position facing partner,

B 2 All cross over giving hands in passing, turn to face back & step on spot,

A 1 & 2 Down middle and cast up outside as before,

B 1 & 2 As before.

Repeat ad lib.

"WEDDING REEL" a version of 6 hand reel danced at Buckhorn Weston

Tune - Spanish Lady - after Katherine of Aragon, first wife of Prince Arthur and Prince Henry (VIII) who changed the world and probably helped bring the country dance and the morris to England.

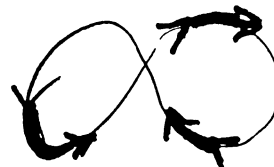
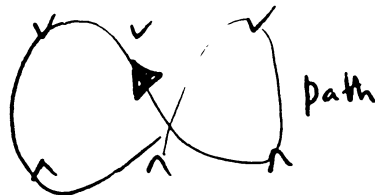
A1 bars 1-4 set steps on spot to opposite

5-8 change sides by middle going between the ends & turning to their left into opposite's place facing back, and ends change over passing right shoulder, so that it looks like half a hey.

A2 ditto: to place.



B1 Dance a figure eight in close pairs. Follow partner and do not let other dances cut between. Important that no.3 dives across quickly so as to let 5 & 6 cross going up as 1 is waiting to come down.



B2 Turn and repeat going the other way round the figure eight - 4 crosses middle first and then 2 and 1.

Repeat all about 3 times.

Dance quite effective with garlands.

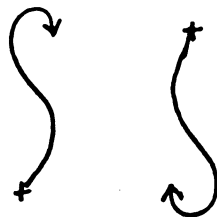
THE STOURTON CAUNDLE SET

- Set : a longways set of 4 or preferably 6 pairs  
 Source : the mss of "first" and "second" parts from "Stert'n Candle"  
 Titles : either in the order in the mss by number or by title of tune used now.  
 Start : all face across, standing still  
 Structure : 5 figures followed by a different chorus for each dance, ending on a chorus. One side now starts with a chorus. Some sides vary the order of figures a little.

THE COMMON FIGURES - "The First Parts"

- 1 ONCE TO SELF : face in, in two lines.  
 2 CROSS OVER : as in "Speed the Plough"

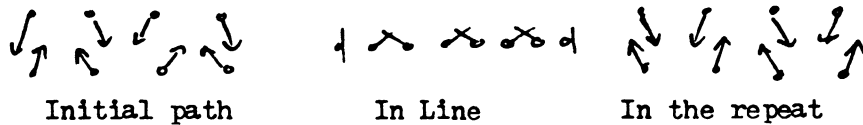
Dancers pass opposite to change sides, passing left shoulders, and going a little past opposite's place, turning to the right in a loop to face back. The dancers follow a curved path. This is repeated to place, passing left shoulders again and turning to the right to face across in own place. The speed of travel and the turns are judged to avoid any pauses in the movement.



Fleur de Lys dance this rather as Cross and Turn, Ilmington, with a very small circle to turn.

- 3 ARCHES : as in "The Butterfly"  
 (a) all dancers face up. The odd pairs cast out and go down the outside to the even pair's place using their staves to make an arch as they go, and turn in, into the even pair's place and shoulder staves, then dance up the middle to their own place, shoulder to shoulder, stave on shoulder, under the arch being made by the other pair. The even pair dance up the middle, staves on shoulders, shoulder to shoulder, cast out and go down forming an arch etc. Repeat all this. Each part movement takes 2 bars, 8 bars in all. Do not duck in passing under but have the staves held higher. Some sides always face in and do not turn put, it does not look good.  
 (b) alternatively it is done by the odd pair going down the middle and the even pair casting out and coming up the outside and making the arch, etc.  
 The first is preferred but it depends the team wish is to be confused with the start of "Tops Down" or the "Figure". (a) puts the onus of knowing what figure it is on the odd pair, (b) puts it on the even pair.  
 4 INTO LINE : as in "Single Change Sides" - "into line two at a time!"  
 Dancers move into a single line along the centre of the set, shoulder to shoulder, but in pairs, not as in a morris half-gyp.

Neighbouring pairs, 1&3,4&6 etc go in together, making and keeping an arch with their staves between them, through the half figure, so that when in line there is a row of crossed staves along the centre line. In the repeat the stave is crossed with the dancer the other side, ie 2&4, 3&5 etc so that different arches are made. The single dancers at the end of the line on one side of the set or the other have no one to cross staves with so keep them sloped over their right shoulder.



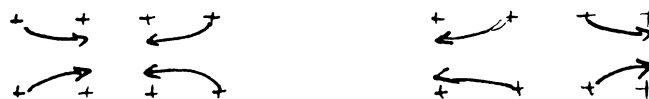
The movement is two bars forward and two back to place, retiring with the ordinary travelling step not a backstep.

5 TOPS DOWN : as in "Double Lead Through" - "downs and ups"

In the first half, the odd pairs dance down the middle for 2 bars, between the even pairs who remain facing across and not dancing, shoulder to shoulder, with staves on shoulders not raised to form arches, and then retire backwards to places with the travelling step not a backstep.

In the second half, the even pairs dance up the middle for 2 bars and retire to place while the odd pairs face across, stationary, not marking time.

When dancing with 8, sides often make this movement symmetrical by either the end pairs dancing in to form lines of 4 facing each other across the centre of the set and then in the repeat dancing to face outwards in lines of 4 or vice versa.



In this case the inactives at least turn to face the same way, and might step throughout on the spot.

6 THE FIGURE : cast into a figure of eight - a common movement in early 19th cent.

All pairs face up. The odd pairs cast out, followed by their even pair, and as soon as the odd passes the even, they turn in to start a reel of 4 across the set, passing their opposite with the left shoulder first. The reel will be done about halfway between the odds and evens positions. Reel across and back and end in one's own place. In practice it is better if the reel starts passing left shoulders as the alternative is more of a scramble round. Again, it is better if no.1 of the 4 does not finish the reel by passing around the back of no. 4 but cuts straight to place having passed their opposite on the way back, so the even pair also goes straight across the set passing left shoulders to place.



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