

Tell Me More — Cottey House

by Graham Christian

One of the dances selected by Kate Van Winkle Keller and Genevieve Shimer for inclusion in *The Playford Ball* (1990) was “Cottey House,” which first appeared in Playford’s *Twenty Four New Country Dances* (1702), and was then added to the 13th edition of *The Dancing Master* the following year, and maintained in the volume through the last edition; Douglas and Helen Kennedy interpreted it for modern dancers in *Country Dance Book (New Series)* in 1929. The dance instructions are unambiguous, but the significance of the dance’s title is less clear. Keller’s notes rightly draw attention to the playful, allusive, and even mystifying customs surrounding dance titles in the period, when gossipy references to figures in the news, pseudonyms, riddles, and snatches of popular song might be expected, and so “Cottey House” seemed. The likely explanation, however, is perhaps even more curious.



Kit's Coty House. Sketch by William Stukeley, 1722

Near the village of Addington in Kent there is a monument of great antiquity called Kit’s Coty House, a long barrow of three standing stones topped by a table-like fourth stone. Today, historians suggest that it dates from around 4,000 B.C., but it was noted and described, sometimes with great imaginative flair, by historians and antiquaries such as Lambarde, Stow, and Camden from the sixteenth century onward, as a relic of a romantically savage past. Kit’s Coty House was supposed to be the funeral monument of the shadowy figure of Catigern, said to have been the younger son of the early English king Vortigern, who unwisely invited the Saxons into England; Catigern died in battle with the Saxon leader Horsa around 455 A. D. Folk etymology explained “Kit’s Coty House” as Catigern’s House, built with “coits” (large flat stones); the true meaning of the name remains debatable.

We should not wonder at the intrusion of heroic legend into the genteel assembly rooms of the 18th century; the English had been in the grip of antiquarian fascination with their remote past for more than a hundred years by that time, eager to

discover something raw, authentic, and noble beneath the veneer of contemporary refinement. Samuel Pepys visited the site on 24 March 1668/69: “I ‘light out of the way to see a Saxon monument, as they say, of a King, which is three stones standing upright, and a great round one lying on them, of great bigness, although not so big as those on Salisbury Plain; but certainly it is a thing of great antiquity, and I mightily glad to see it.”

In 1722, the pioneering proto-archaeologist William Stukeley (1687-1765) sketched Kit’s Coty House in something like its original state, before carelessness and vandalism had diminished its impact. Stukeley, a friend and biographer of Isaac Newton, convinced himself, in the course of his research, not only that Britain’s ancient stone monuments had been erected by the Druids, but that the Druids were Phoenician—and Jewish: “the Druids were of Abraham’s religion intirely, at least in the earliest times, and worshipp’d the supreme Being in the same manner as he did” (*Stonehenge: A Temple Restor’d*, 1740). By the end of the 18th century, Edward King came to a different, and thrillingly bloodcurdling, conclusion: Kit’s Coty House was the scene of ancient human sacrifice, “a great Stone Scaffold, raised just high enough for such an horrid exhibition” (*Munimenta Antiquae*, 1799). That Kit’s Coty House was a tomb most scholars now agree; much of the rest is fanciful speculation, except for the lasting gift of this sprightly contribution to the modern dance floor, where human sacrifice is rarely practiced.

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Cottey House. ♩♩♩♩

Longways for as many as will.

The 1. cu. caft off and crofs over to the 2. cu. place, 1. Man and 2. Wo. lead to the Wall, 1. Wo. and 2. Man do the fame at the fame time. 2. The 2. cu. do the fame as the 1. cu. The 1. and 2. cu turn back to back and clap Hands, then face about and clap again, then Right-hands a-crofs half round, all 4. turn S. the 1. cu. go half a Figure of 8. thro’ the 2. cu. all Hands a-breast to the top and back again, the 1. cu. lead between the 2. cu. all a-breast down, the 1. cu. change places while they lead down, then all 4. clap hands twice, and turn their Partners half a turn into their places.

Cottey House (DM 1:17)