

Tell Me More—Childgrove

by Graham Christian

One of the most lastingly popular dances derived from the historical tradition of English country dance is “Childgrove,” which first appeared in the 11th edition of Playford’s *Dancing Master* in 1701, and continued there through the last edition of that volume in 1728; thereafter, the tune was dropped, but the figures appeared in publications by Walsh and Johnson with different tunes, and under the titles “Scornfull Nancy” and “Hunting the Stag.” Cecil Sharp interpreted the Playford dance and tune in 1922 in Part VI of *The Country Dance Book*; it has a driving D minor tune, and a straightforward but satisfying track. Investigation into the dance’s title has proved frustrating: as the Keller and Shimer *Playford Ball* points out, there is a little village called Chilgrove near Chichester, but it has proven difficult to make a connection between that hamlet and this fine dance.



One tempting possibility is to read the name as an elision (or compositor’s error) for *Child’s Grove*. There was, in fact, a very prominent and visible Child in the later 17th century: Sir Josiah Child (left), c. 1630-1699, who rose from a humble mercantile family, through a career that included providing victuals to the Royal Navy, to very great wealth and even more substantial influence as Director and finally Governor of the East India Company. Under his leadership, the East India Company acted with ruthless ambition, going so far, in 1685, as to declare war—independent of the British government—with Emperor Aurangzeb over the Company’s desire for exclusive access to trade opportunities throughout the Mughal Empire. Child and the East India Company lost the war in 1689, but given the Emperor’s clemency, and willingness to allow the British, after the payment of indemnities, to establish footholds in Bombay and Calcutta, it may be said that they won the war, given the later history of the British on the Indian subcontinent. Child was also the most-read economic theorist of his day; his *Brief Observations Concerning Trade and the Interest of Money* (1668), controversially proposed the imposition of low interest rates. In the later 1660s, Child rented the splendid estate of

Wanstead House in Essex, purchasing it in 1673. His improvements were limited almost entirely to the grounds, adding grand radiating avenues and trees of many types, as well as fishponds. The occasional asperity of visitors’ remarks is certainly colored by their sense of Child as an upstart and nouveau riche. Intellectual and diarist John Evelyn “went to see Sir Josiah Childs prodigious Cost in planting of Walnut trees, about his seate, & making fish-ponds, for many miles in Circuite, in Eping-forest,” but condemned the place as “a cursed and barren spot, as commonly these over-grown and suddenly moneyed men for the most part seat themselves,” and the man himself as “sordidly avaricious.” In 1691, James Gibson noted the addition of elms and ashes and ponds, preferring the grounds to the gardens, which were “but indifferent.” In 1702, the poet James Harris, just a few years after Child’s death, was kinder, describing Wanstead as “a pleasant Villa in the Forest near Leighton Stone made very delicious by the New Plantations Sir Josiah Child has honoured it with.” Child’s son did not long outlive his father, but his grandson Richard (1680-1750), improved upon the family tradition, vastly altering and expanding the house in the Palladian style, and assigning the leading garden designer of the day, George London, with the task of updating the gardens and grounds to match.

Why, then, *Child[s] Grove*, rather than *Wanstead House*? In the course of the 18th century, Johnson and Walsh did indeed publish a “Wansted [sic] House,” “Wanstead Assembly,” “Wanstead Favourite,” and “Wanstead Maggot.” By the 1740s, the Child family had, through its ambition, found a secure place in the English scene—but at the turn of the 18th century, it would have been difficult to think of Wanstead and its grounds without recalling Sir Josiah and the force of his personality; the selection of “grove” may have seemed at once more quasi-Classical (Arcadian groves, and so on), and more entrancing—a grove, more than a Park, is the very place for a romantic entanglement.

Graham Christian is an internationally-known dance teacher and historian. He is most recently the author of [The Playford Assembly](#) (CDSS, 2015), <http://store.cdss.org/>. “Childgrove” can be found in [The Playford Ball](#) (CDSS, 1990, Keller and Shimer).