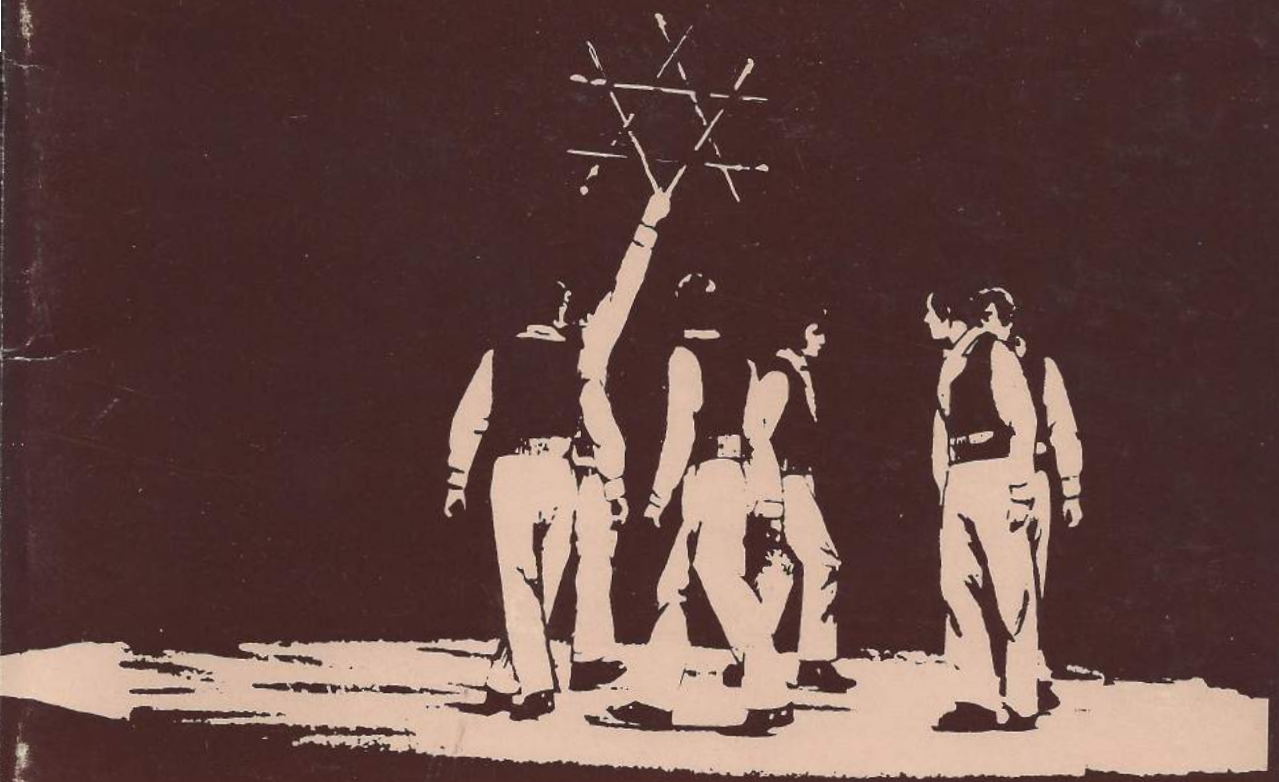
rattle up, my boys



the story of Longsword dancing - a Yorkshire tradition

by Trevor Stone

rattle up, my boys

the story of Longsword dancing – a very old and fascinating Yorkshire tradition.

The research and writing of this book has been a pleasure. I am very interested by the history and customs of my home county and especially fascinated by the story of Longsword dancing.

I should like to dedicate the result of my efforts to Kathy Mitchell who is an enthusiastic supporter of the English Folk Dance & Song Society. Kathy first introduced me to the subject at a workshop at the Society's Whitby Folk Festival.

Additionally I should like to thank the many people who have enabled me to indulge my interest especially those who have enabled me to spend many enjoyable hours talking about the dance, teaching it, but most importantly, performing it.

With the help of the EFDSS librarian, Mrs Thom, I obtained the approval of the Director of the English Folk Dance & Song Society, Brian Shuel, FrDamian Webb and A L Lloyd for permission to reproduce photographs and quote from other authors.

This enlarged second edition would not have been possible without further help and comment from many people, especially Ivor Allsop and Bob Schofield.

What do people think of as typically Yorkshire?

The chances are that most people will think of such things as Yorkshire pudding, pidgeon racing, working men's clubs, possibly Rugby League or even the ailing woollen industry.

What about Longsword dancing?

Never heard of it? ..... hence the reason for this booklet.

Longsword dancing is a type of traditional folk dance which hails from Yorkshire - and very few other places within Britain. It is much older than our famous pudding but most people, even Yorkshiremen, know little if anything about this distinctive part of our heritage.

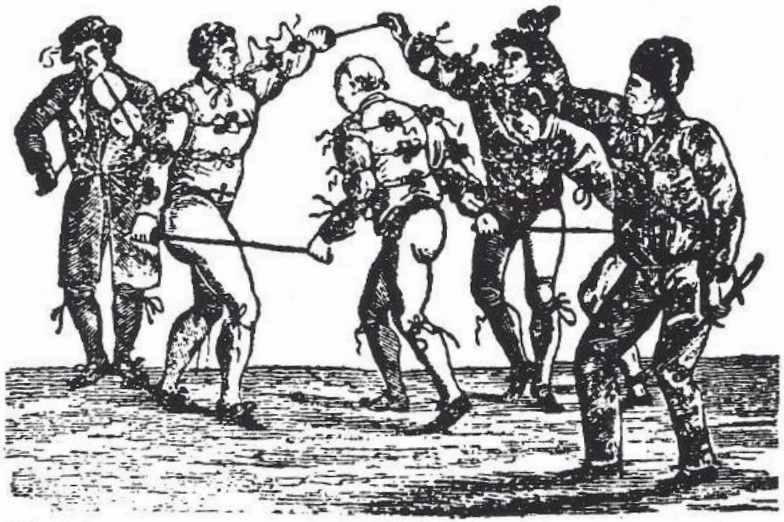
In an attempt to cure this lack of knowledge and appreciation I have collected, edited and re-presented some of the available information. I have added personal views and interpretations where these seem to be of help although I am aware that these views may conflict with other, more authoritative opinions.

Good Luck!

Our forefathers thought that ritual dance brought good luck for the coming year. The old magic may still work. I hope it does, but more importantly, I hope that a wider appreciation and knowledge of the dance will give a stimulus to the restoration of Longsword dancing as a living tradition. We can ill afford to lose yet one more part of our traditional past.

Longsword Dancing

England has a number of differing styles of men's ritual or ceremonial dance, all commonly, but in my opinion confusingly, called Morris dances. One of these styles is Longsword dancing which, with few exceptions, is native to Yorkshire and parts of County Durham.



This 17th century woodcut clearly illustrates a sword dance movement and must be one of our earliest pictorial records of the dance.

The dance involves from five to eight performers who each carry a rigid metal bar or wooden lath approximately 30" to 40" long including the handle. The usual pattern of performance starts with the rhythmic clashing of these "swords". This is followed by the formation of a ring in which each man holds the handle of his sword and the point of his neighbour's. There follows a number of weaving and twisting movements which demand a high degree of teamwork if the circle is to remain unbroken throughout the dance.

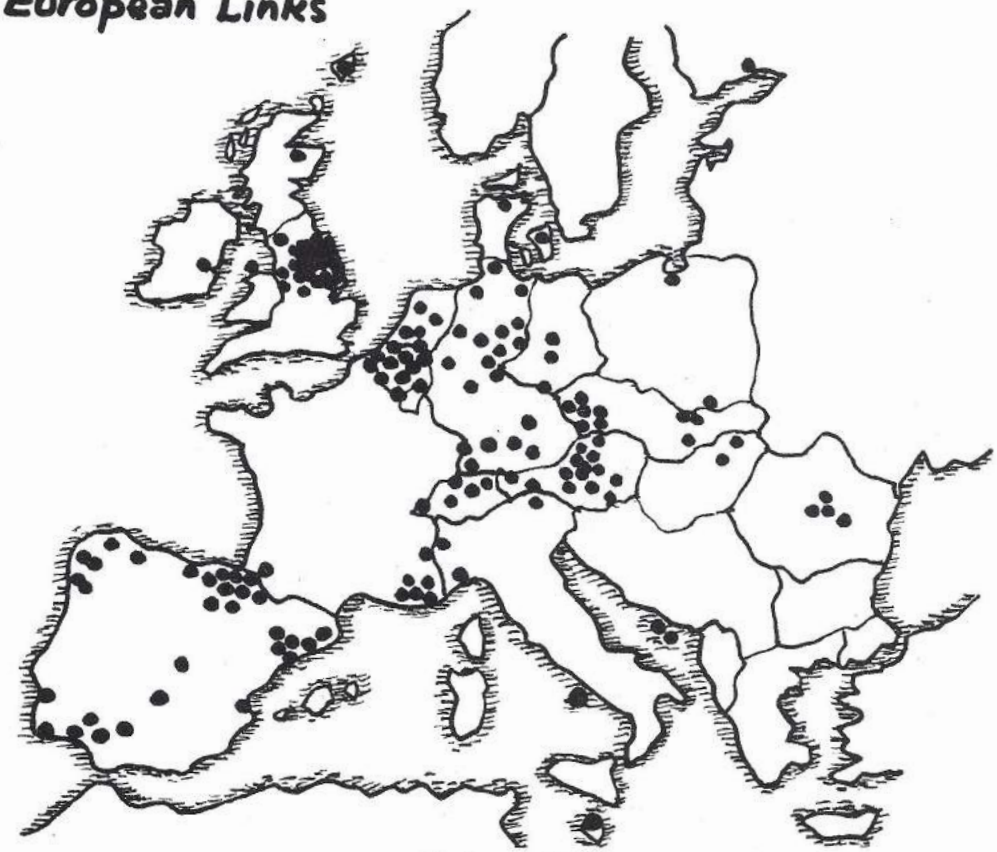
Traditional dances in which the participants are linked together and then perform a similar range of moves are found throughout Europe but all of our English dances share one feature in common not often found on the Continent: that is the formation of the "Lock", sometimes known as the "Rose", in which the swords are interwoven into a hexagonal star shape and displayed high in the air, usually as the climax of the dance.

The Sword Lock

The English Folk Dance Society adopted the sword lock as their symbol. This was retained when the separate societies representing song and dance merged in 1932.

It is evident that the dance is descended from pagan rituals, and in common with other rituals, details of the dance were seldom written down but were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The earliest written English records are from the 16th century. Any earlier links must be based on conjecture. However, we know of a dancing priesthood in Ancient Greece which performed linked circle dances and there is a barely discernable carving from Ancient Egypt which could depict a similar type of dance Neither is conclusive proof of ancient origins but they do present food for thought and imagination.

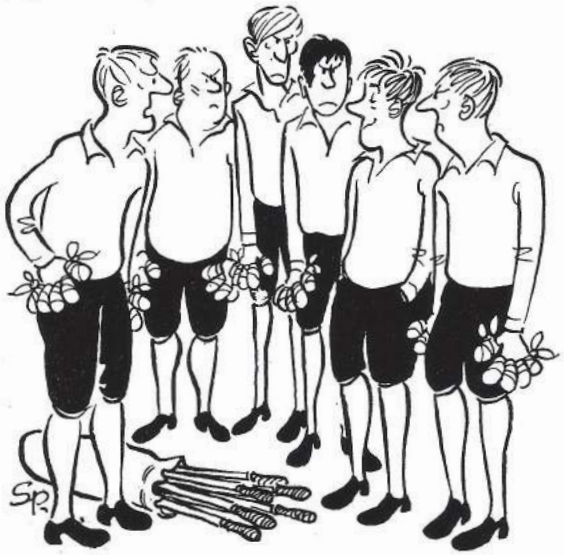
European Links



● Dances with similar features to our Longsword dances.

Similar dances in Europe are usually associated with religious ceremonies in the Latin countries and with craft or city guilds in Germanic countries. Many of these dances have well documented histories with records going back to the 14th century and, although they exhibit many unique features, they share many basic moves found in English Longsword dances.

Very little research has been done to make comparisons of detail nor is there much knowledge of the factors which influence the international spread of dances of this family. Such a study may provide more understanding of the origins of all sword dances.



"O.K.—Who's the joker that sharpened the swords?"

Nowadays the swords do not have a sharpened edge. It is debatable whether the dance was ever done with real swords as a test of skill and daring. It is much more certain that the dance has little or no connection with the mock combat or battle dances found in the Middle East.

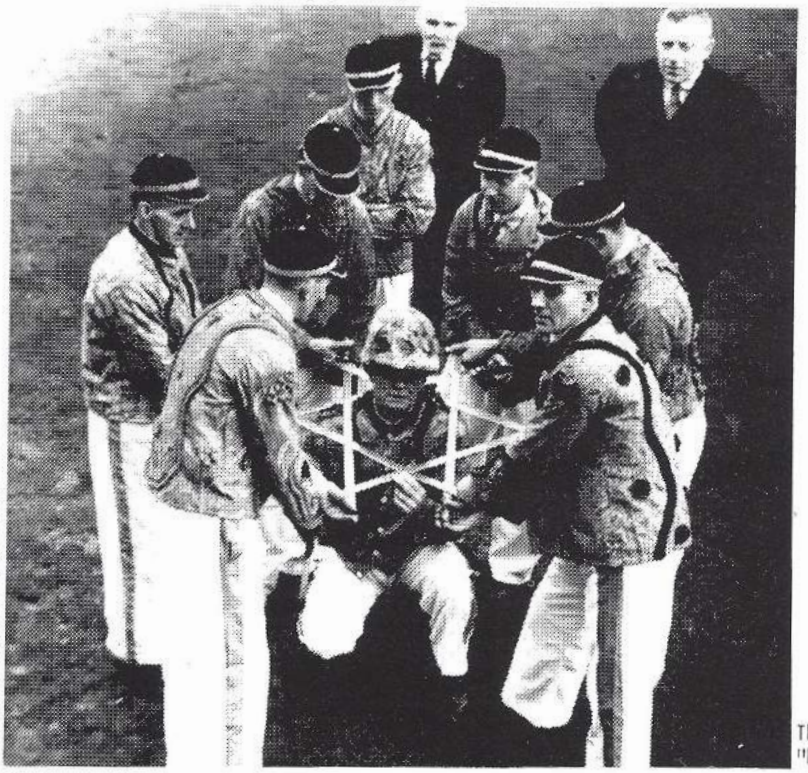
Some years ago a theory was advanced which linked the dance to the Vikings based partially on the existence of the dance in many areas with strong Viking links. The proponents of this theory also referred to the work of an author who presented a romantic image of the Vikings. One of his works includes a passing reference to a sword dance.

Whilst it is very likely that the Vikings knew of and practiced sword dances, it is by no means certain that the dance was exclusively theirs or that it was spread by them. If it had been such a major part of their culture as to have been imposed in conquered areas we would expect to have found more evidence of the dance in their relics.

This is just one of the areas which require much more research before we can be at all certain of the factors which influenced the spread of the dance.

The Magic of the Dance

We can be more certain about the original purpose behind some of the components of our present-day dances. For example magic circles, ritual beheading and subsequent revival, clashing of the swords to drive away devils – all seem to be the remnants of pagan rituals which have evolved over the years into our present-day displays of skill.



The Grenoside men "behead" their Captain

Some evidence for this theory can be found in the dance from Grenoside, in South Yorkshire. This dance enacts the ritual killing of the leader, or Captain, by placing the sword lock over his head. Each dancer then withdraws his own sword with a sweep and the victim falls to the floor. The Captain also wears a cap of animal skin which may indicate another link with earlier rituals.

The stages of development from ritual to our present displays were described by a well known folklorist, A L Lloyd, in an article for the English Folk Dance & Song Society's "Folk Music Journal" in 1978:

> "It is in the nature of folklore that rituals become mere customs and customs end up as spectacles. So it is with our Morris dances, which were once part of magical ceremonies that lived on here and there as customs after the magic had leaked out, and, from being a custom attached to a particular season ..... they have evolved into a set of dances with no other purpose beyond providing a good time for all."

Undoubtedly for hundreds of years the dance has been performed because it does provide a good time for all, a feature which was especially important when communities had to make their own entertainment. Even when the dance was primarily regarded as a ritual there must have been an element of enjoyment in its performance.

But it is important to strike a balance between the idea of the dance solely as an entertainment and the opposite extreme of an overdue regard and emphasis on its traditional aspects. There is a danger today that our fascination for the past will give rise to misplaced romantic attitudes which could easily condemn the dance (and other customs) to the role of an archaic museum piece, displayed too frequently and performed with a reverential zeal.

Decline and Revival

The dance has a long history of fluctuating interest. Decline was followed by restoration and each cycle added in some way to it's evolution.

At one stage it assimilated influences from the Christian church, from the Crusades, and more recently from the major social changes of the last century. It only just managed to survive the influences of the World Wars.

It's importance to us now lies not in its leaked out magic but rather in our need to retain and nurture remaining regional idiosyncracies in order to counter the trend towards the day of the "British Standard Englishman".

To help to speed up this restoration of interest Longsword dancing needs a sympathetic audience, preferably with a commitment to this regional ethos. With suitable encouragement and backing todays teams may develop the confidence to allow the dance to evolve in the way it did so often in the past.

Dancing Today

The 1970's saw a revival of interest in types of folk dance. Yorkshire now boasts twelve teams, often called sides, who specialise in Longsword dances, plus at least six other sides who mix Longsword with dance forms once native to the Cotswolds, the North West or Tyneside. The motives of these revival dancers vary considerably. Some seek exercise, some companionship, some look for a chance to display their skills; but many still have a dedication to local tradition.

Very few dancers have an academic interest in the origins of their dance. They prefer to leave the theories to others while they concentrate on keeping the tradition alive. It matters little to them, nor to their standard of performance, to know whether the dance spread with the Viking invasions, or if it was influenced by travellers returning from the Crusades, or if the dance was once the exclusive right of a guild of metal workers.

Whilst earlier dancers usually had respect for the past, they seldom regarded the dance as inviolate, allowing it to change and take on new elements

Sometimes in the past the dance acquired links with other customs such as the folk play, known as the Mummers Play, in which the dance became part of the total performance as at Ampleforth, near York. The full play from Goathland also included the dance and is reputed to have taken two hours to perform. Not surprisingly it was condensed over the years so that only fragments of the play are known today. The dance is still performed.

Eventually the relevance of the play as a vehicle to transmit folk legends declined leaving the sword dance as the only surviving element. However, many dances retained some of the characters of the play often for no other reason than that they had become part of local folk memory.

One of the characters from the Mummers play is Beelzebub, who traditionally carries a club and a pan and dresses in multi coloured tatters. This dress may have influenced the early dance sides.

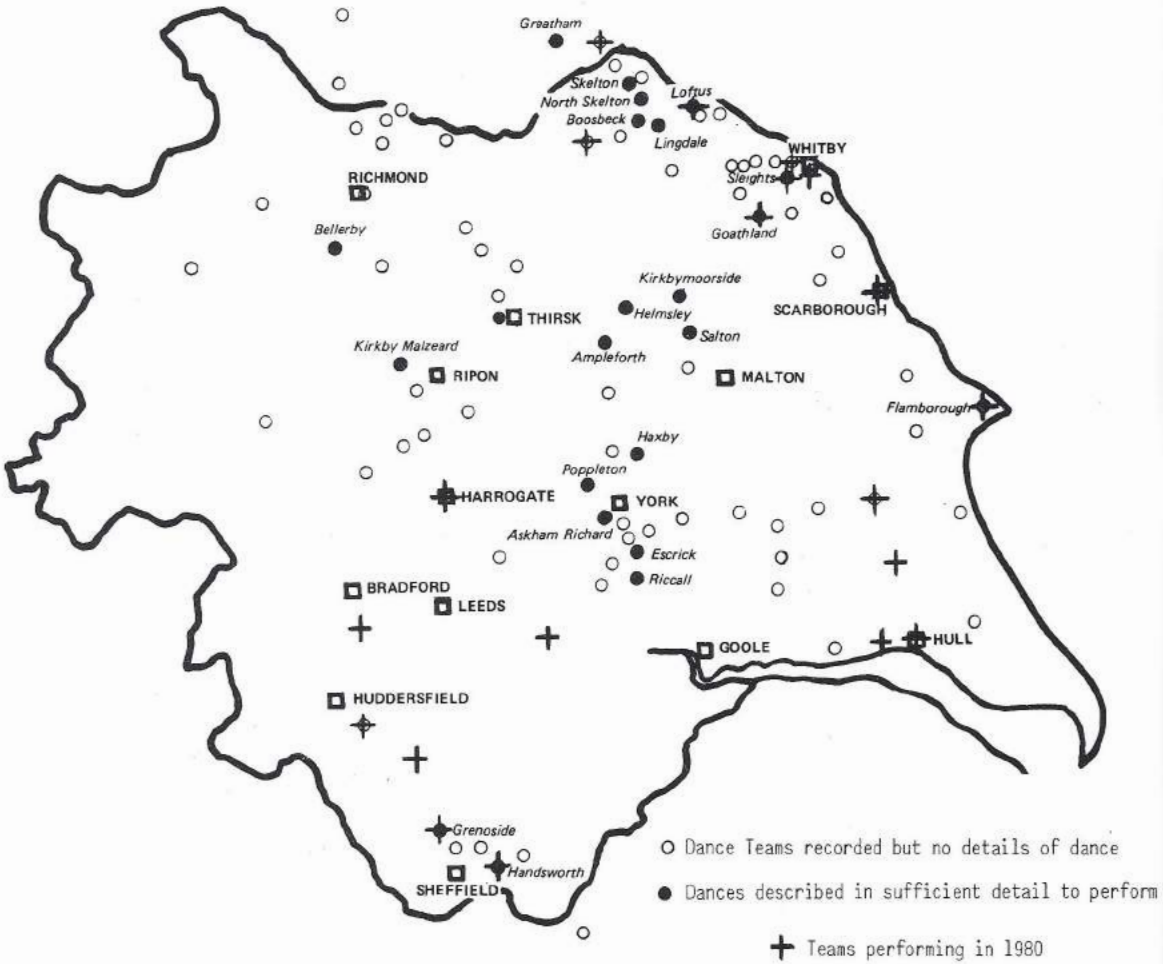
Not all other influences are so clear cut. Some sword dances involve polka or skip stepping. We do not know if this stepping came from social dances or if the social dances borrowed the steps from a much older ritual dance.

The Folk Dances of England

Another unresolved question hinges around the geographical distribution of various types of dance and their earlier concentration in specific areas.

Longsword dancing flourished in Yorkshire in the 1800's but had it once existed elsewhere and died out?

We will never know, but it now seems certain that these regional links are gone forever as teams of men from John o' Groats to Lands End perform all styles of dance.



Longsword Dancing in Yorkshire

By 1910 social attitudes had changed and the dance came to be generally regarded as crude and rustic. There was a rapid shift from rural communities to the towns with the result that by 1910 the dance had become a vague memory in the majority of the East Riding. It was still performed, or had only recently died out in the Cleveland area, the Vale of York, and to a lesser extent in South Yorkshire near Sheffield.

Any study of the spread and development of a custom must consider how, where, when and why it took place in the form that it did.

For example, most of our information on the distribution of dances dates from 1830 to 1914. This must have a bearing on our interpretation of the facts. It is tempting to assume that regional concentration of dances was due to the slow spread of ideas and to the difficulty of travel. This was obviously a factor but it must be kept in balance.

Travel within limited areas, or for some sectors of society was common. Large numbers of soldiers travelled for England was almost permanently at war. This may have resulted in the inclusion of the character the Turkish Knight in folk plays and the fact that some dancers are introduced as historical heroes. There also existed large numbers of itinerant workers who carried out such seasonal work as harvesting and sheep shearing and had the opportunity to see customs from other regions.

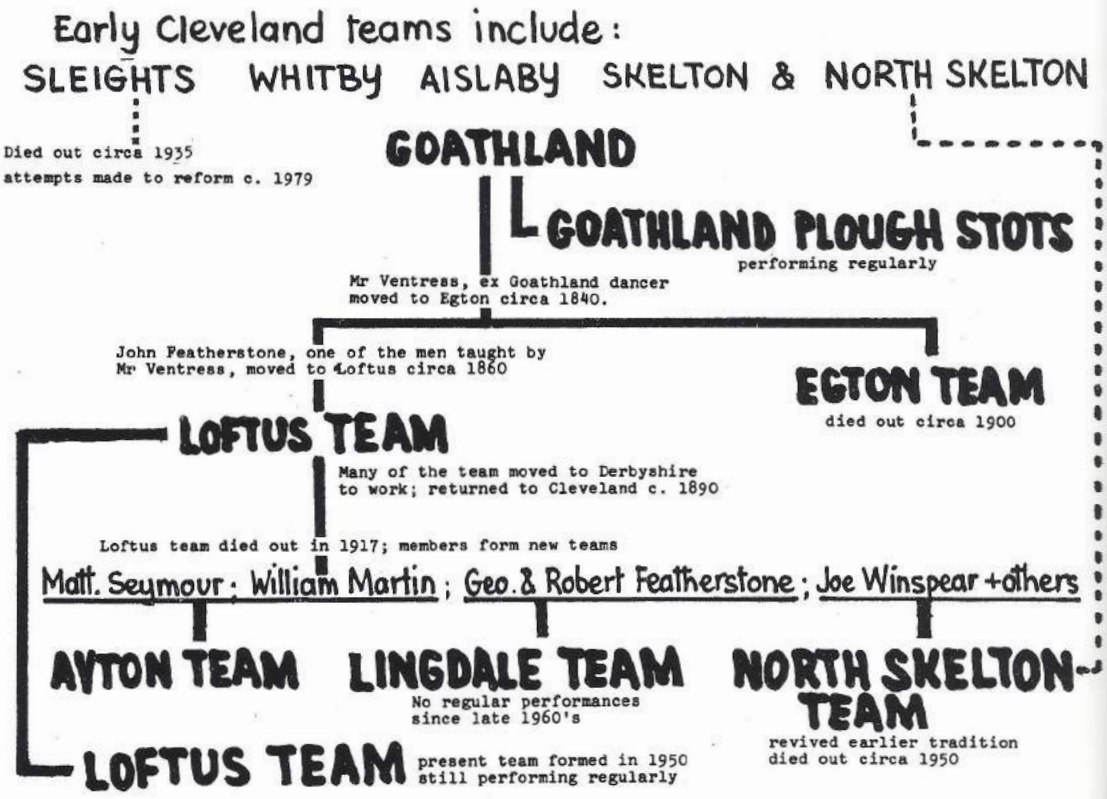
Rather than assume lack of knowledge of other traditions it is necessary to appreciate the strong emotional commitment which attached to a local tradition. We find that the dance was usually most healthy where there was a strong sense of local community. This is a particularly valuable characteristic which many modern teams would be well advised to foster.

The Development of the Cleveland Dances

A study of some of the most tenacious teams often reveals the influence of a dedicated family. Teams often contained a number of brothers and it became usual for sons to follow their fathers into the team. From the recent history of teams in the Cleveland area we can trace the influence of the Featherstone and Winspear families.

Two men from each of these families were once members of the same team which was disbanded in the 1920's. George Featherstone moved to a different village and formed the Lingdale Progressive Sword Dance team. Joe Winspear formed the North Skelton White Rose team which became very highly regarded in the 1930's and is recorded on an excellent film made by the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

The differences in style and format between the present day North Skelton and Lingdale dances clearly illustrate the way in which new variants can arise. Even though both leaders originally learnt the same dance, they developed new dances due to personal invention, forgetfulness and the incorporation of elements from other dances they had seen.



Both North Skelton and Lingdale dances are now universally accepted as part of the Longsword tradition. The North Skelton dance must be the most performed dance of the genre, possibly because it is the most sophisticated and most fully recorded dance readily available to new sides. The English Folk Dance & Song Society publish a leaflet which gives full details of the dance as it was in the 1930's, a description which incorporates minor changes compared with notes taken in 1911.

Homage to North Skelton

In the 1920's and 30's the North Skelton team attracted a good deal of attention. Rolf Gardiner, a collector and writer, visited the team just before Christmas in 1925. In the late 1950's he published a private magazine for a group called the Springhead Ring. One of these "Letters from Springhead" in 1959 contained an article entitled "Homage to North Skelton: a recollection of 1925" which includes the following:

> "About three o'clock the miners came in, one by one or in pairs, unobtrusively, quickly. They were all neatly dressed, with clean white scarves around the throat, and cloth caps. Since six in the morning they had been in the pits: the shift was over at two. They were distinctive types of men, with interesting individual faces, and were very quiet, hushed, a curious expectant light in their eyes. One jaunty looking fair haired man, a blend of Cornish and Dane, carried a box containing his accordian; another held the swords, shining steel weapons beautifully tempered, about forty inches long and very heavy.

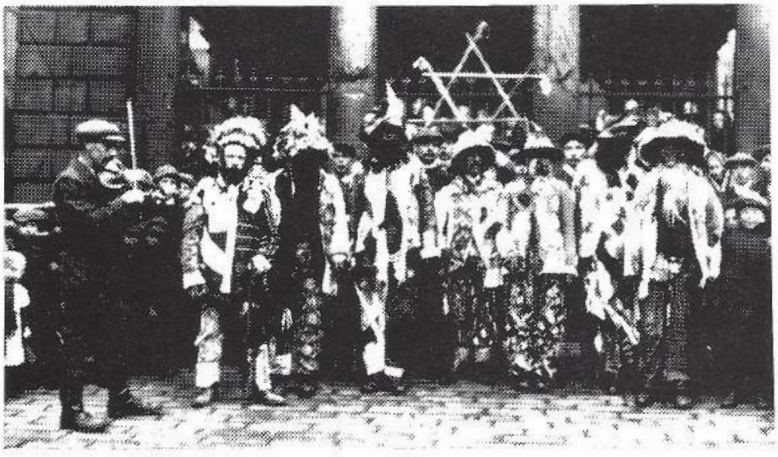
> Presently they took off their coats and stood in their white shirts and black trousers that reached rather high up the waist. Each wore a black tie that neatly fastened with a gold badge. Then they took up their swords feeling them from end to end, partly as if to regain familiarity with their shape and weight, partly as if to test them.
>
> The musician held his accordian on his knees. He gave a sly, sidelong glance at the dancers, then he drew out the concertina with a long deep note like a mighty inbreath. The men were looking towards the tips of their swords, concentrating. The tune came suddenly, quickly, passionately. The dancers were away in a flash, stepping round in a circle, clashing the swords above its centre, a glinting cone of metal in movement. The effect was electrifying."

This undeniably evocative description highlights one of the problems we face when trying to examine the history of Longsword dancing. The folk revival of recent years has invested many of our customs with a romantic image they never had nor sought when they were village traditions. Our romantic vision of teams of dedicated men, enthusiastically performing and defending the local custom was usually very far from the truth. Records from the 1890's show that a major reason for dancing tours was to collect cash - to go out busking.

There are also records of teams collecting for the local poor and needy. To this day many teams regularly support local charities, a facet made more difficult by the approval systems introduced by local authorities. Such controls were set-up to control the harassment of street collecting but they have prevented the spontaneity and informality which was a feature of dance tours in years gone by.

Agricultural workers were usually laid off after the Christmas festivities and no work meant no pay. Also in some areas strikes by miners resulted in financial hardship and plenty of spare time so the Longsword dancers toured the area, often accompanied by teams of extra characters whose main aim was to collect money.

One tour by a group from Goathland was estimated to involve over 100 in the party. This number included at least two teams of dancers who were accompanied by some of the traditional characters once associated with the play such as the King and his Lady, and the Fool with an old woman called Betsy. As in most customs based on rituals, the part of female characters was always taken by men suitably attired. The party also included musicians, banner carriers and a large number of Clowns known as Toms.



Sleights Toms and Clowns

A smaller tour was staged regularly in the area around Sleights and was photographed circa 1910. The dancers were accompanied by lots of Toms but there is no record of a Mummers play being performed.

The elegantly dressed King and his Lady walked in front to give the procession an air of dignity, although the sight of 40 or more Toms must have quickly destroyed this impression for they blacked or "raddled" (redded) their faces, dressed in clothes covered in multi-coloured patches and shook their collecting boxes, demanding contributions at every house enroute and from every startled passer-by.

Remember the Plough

Some teams in farming areas retained links with older and once separate Plough Monday customs. They used to drag a plough around and plough up the gardens of householders who did not contribute when invited to "Remember the Plough".

The Goathland Ploughstots often take a model plough with them to displays.

The present day Goathland team are still known as the Plough Stots, the word stot being local dialect for bullock. They still carry out a plough blessing ceremony before they set off on their traditional tour, usually held on the nearest Saturday to Plough Monday (which is the nearest Monday to 6th January). Nowadays the plough is represented by a model and the entourage is smaller but it still creates a lot of interest locally.

The old tours must have created a major diversion as they moved around the local towns and villages but the party seemed good humoured in spite of reports that fisherwomen in Whitby pelted them with mud, eggs and even red hot coins before they were allowed to dance. The takings on the tour were usually pooled with a prize going to the best collector. The rest of the collection, which sometimes included gifts of produce, was shared among the men after deduction of expenses, which would include the cost of the "Plough Stot Rosh", a supper and social dance to mark the end of the tour. The Skelton team is reputed to have modified it's dance in the late 1890's to suit six men, rather than eight, so that they did better out of the collection.

These tours often covered large distances. In the 1850's the team from Askham Richard, near York, travelled to the outskirts of Leeds calling at 24 villages on their 60 mile round trip.

These early tours, and the absence of detail in the few written records we have, make it very difficult to establish which villages had their own team and which were visited regularly by touring teams.

"A Rustic Sword Dance of Great Antiquity"

Not only do most early records fail to state the origin of the dancers but they also neglect to describe in any meaningful detail, using such phrases as "there followed a rustic sword dance of great antiquity."

The educated elite, usually the local landowner, vicar and schoolmaster, were often newcomers to the community or had spent long periods in more cosmopolitan surroundings. They were the people with the education to make meaningful records of what they saw but they usually neglected to do so as they did not appreciate the value of what they regarded as naive attempts by the peasantry at entertainment. They seldom considered the power of the underlying folk memory which reinforced the social and

financial reasons for keeping the dance going long after the belief in the value of it's magic had waned. This lack of interest by the educated classes reduced the number of written records available to us but it also reduced the risk of over zealous academic influence which is a feature of so many of our folk plays in which whole sections were bowlderised to accord with the morality of the day.

This left the dance for the village people to change for more prosaic reasons – and change it they did, as instanced by a study of their costume.

Early records indicate that many teams simply added ribbons, bows and pieces of coloured material to their shirts or jackets. For two or three ceremonial outings a year this was an effective and economical way of ensuring that the dancers stood out from the crowd.

As the number of social outings increased and the teams were invited to participate in more formal events, a more impressive style of dress was sought.

An obvious source of inspiration lay in military styles of dress. In some cases actual uniforms were acquired. In the 1850's such army surplus was so readily available that old musket barrels were being used to pipe gas supplies in a number of towns, including London.

Most teams changed rapidly to this quasi-military style, encouraged by the growing popularity of large scale tableaux such as the Ripon Millenary Festival, mounted in 1886 by an impresario named D'Arcy Ferris. He recruited the Kirkby Malzeard Longsword dancers and dressed them in new military style costumes. He even persuaded them to change the traditional characters to include a pikestaff bearer.

The Handsworth Team outside the local church on one of their Boxing Day tours.

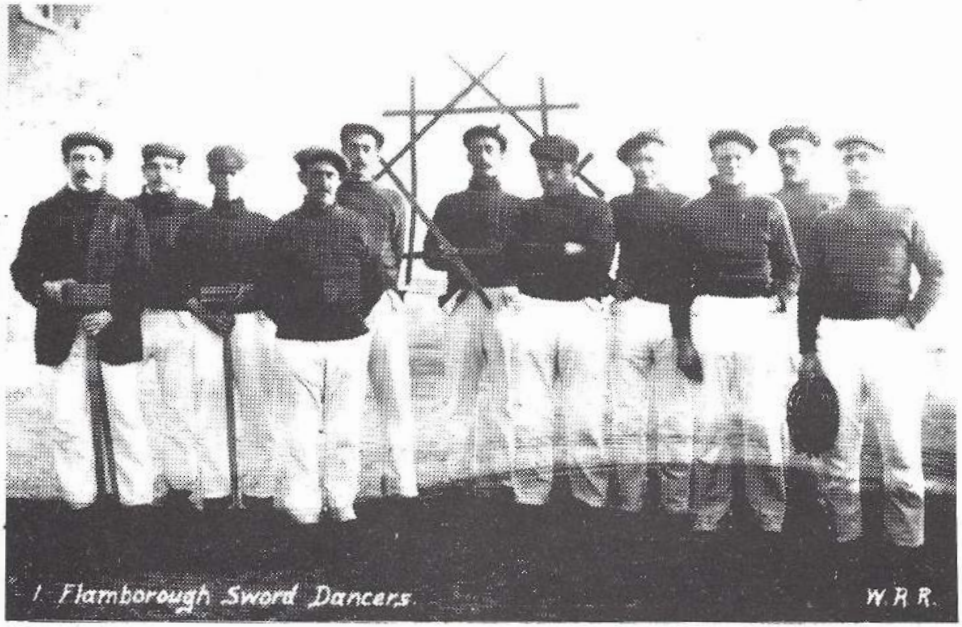
The Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers, from South Yorkshire, wear a costume reputedly based on a Dragoon's uniform of 1825. They have made minor changes to both the costume and their dance since Cecil Sharp recorded details in 1911.

The Goathland team is reputed to have had a more opportunistic approach to costume. They dressed members of their two sides in the colours of the popular political parties. When the team danced at one of the large houses in the area they sent forward the side dressed in the colour appropriate to the occupants political affiliations.

Sleights dancers of 1910

The Sleights team wore coloured jackets and a white sash around their waist. The Goathland Plough Stots currently sport a very similar costume and it is likely that this style of dress may once have been very popular throughout this area.

The team from the fishing town of Flamborough was even more down to earth. They abandoned the idea of special costume and danced in their working clothes. Their dance is also unique in that they hold wooden laths, similar to those used to repair fishing nets, in their left hands whereas other teams hold their swords in their right hand.

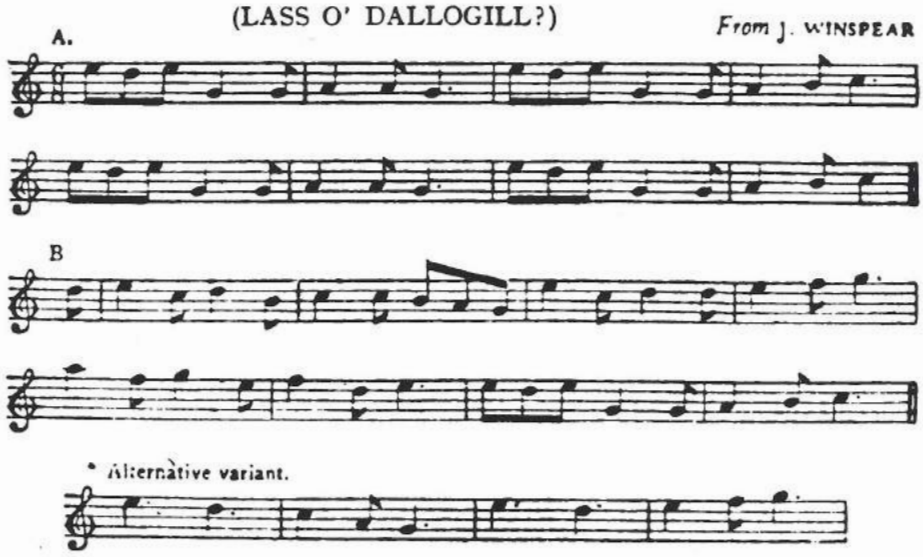


The Flamborough Longsword team were photographed and details of the dance recorded in 1913. Teams have performed in the town at irregular intervals since this time – a new team was established as recently as 1979.

If modern dance sides, especially the new revival sides, had the confidence to adopt a similarly pragmatic attitude to costume we could see sides with outfits based on denim instead of the highly fanciful , and often wholly impractical outfits based on theatrically historical styles most teams sport today.

Musician - Strike-up and Play

Earlier sides had a similarly straightforward attitude to the performance of the dance. For example the musician would play popular tunes of the day as well as, or sometimes instead of the older traditional tunes. Personal preference led them to select combinations of tunes which, so long as they had the correct tempo for the dance, would be included in the repertoire. Records show that tunes such as "Fisher Laddie", "Oyster Girl", "British Grenadiers", "Keel Row" and Mulberry Bush" were in general use in addition to a few tunes specifically associated with one village or dance. One such tune is "Lass O'Dallogill which was used for parts of many dances from the Cleveland area.



Most of the teams remembered, or still performing in 1910, had music played by a concertina or fiddle and drum. It is likely that earlier teams performed to the music of the pipe and tabor, or even to the unique type of bagpipes found throughout this area up to the late 18th century.

Six Heroes Bold

Some dances still retain links with the folk play. Others have long since lost this connection or it has been truncated to the form of an introductory song, called a "calling on song", in which each of the dancers is introduced to the audience as a traditional character or hero. Often it was even further reduced to the form of a brief introductory verse. The North Skelton team used the preamble:

> Sword dancers we are young,
> We've never danced here before,
> We'll do the best we can,
> And the best can do no more.

The captain or fool would then call on the team to "Rattle up" and the performance started.

Rattle Up – My Boys

Many of the 24 fully recorded dances comprise a single, continuous performance. In others the dance is broken into five, or in one case, seven separate figures, each figure starting with a repeated chorus and ending with the formation of a lock. Both types share many movements and features. Almost all dances start with a"high basket" in which the tips of the swords are crossed high above the centre of the circle. As the music starts the dancers rhythmically clash their swords and begin their circling. The step used varies from a skip-step to a smooth, fast walk, with many variants in between, but it seldom involves the complex footwork which marks other types of ritual dance. Very few Longsword dances include variations to the basic stepping although the dance from Grenoside in South Yorkshire involves some sequences of clog "shuffle stepping".

Watch the Swords Dance

In the sword dance it is the movement of the swords and the precision teamwork, not the skills of the individual dancer, which are the key factors. A good performance relies heavily on teamwork with each dancer needing to be very sure of the moves to be made by the rest of the team members as well as his own.

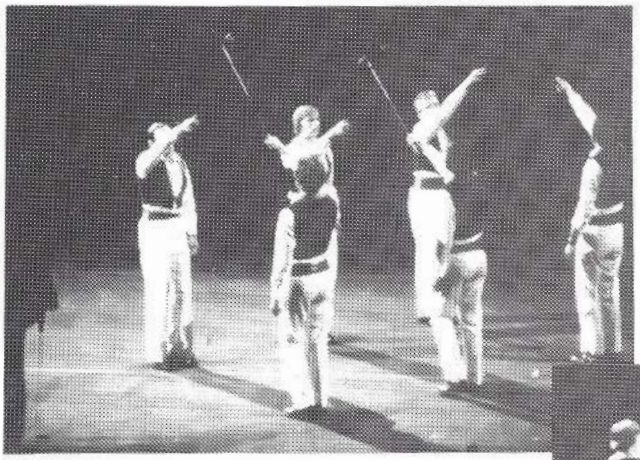
Flamborough team of 1913 perform "Shoulders"

Ampleforth College Boys:revival team of the early 1950's perform "Double Under"

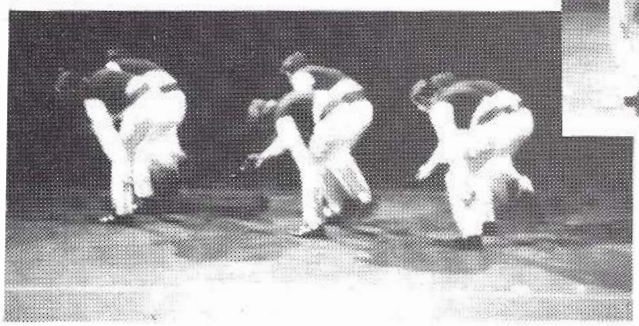
Moves with names such as Double Over, Over your own sword, Third man over, Single sword down, all involve dancers passing through the unbroken circle with each performer initiating the

movement in turn. In these figures the circle must not be broken. Any dancer dropping a sword risks seven years bad luck, the jeers of the audience and even worse, must buy the next round for the rest of the team. No wonder many dancers look so relieved to see the lock raised at the climax of the performance!

Some dances include a section in which each dancer deliberately breaks the ring and shoulders his sword to perform individual movements. This may involve a figure of eight weaving move, or passing under arches made by the others.



Loftus, one of the finest Longsword teams performing today perform (above) "Arches" (below) "Own Windows"



Be-heading the Old Lady

This section is often known as the "No mans Jig" and is usually performed to music of a different tempo and the number of dancers is usually increased to eight by the addition of two of the fools.

The inclusion of such a substantially different section is very hard to explain. It incorporates moves found in country social dances and may be a relatively recent addition tagged on for variety and interest.However, it is found in dances which otherwise seem very basic and original which leads me to believe that it is a very old element of the dance which was performed as a seperate section of the dance, possibly after a break for part of the folk play.

Links with Mummers

Ripon Mummers in the late 1960's

Many other features exist to support this view. For example very many Mummers teams carry swords, even those not involved in the "battle" found in most plays. The Mummers team from Ripon, in Yorkshire carry swords and include a song known locally as the "Sword Dancers Song", even though they do not perform a dance.

There are over 25 distinctly different moves. Even those having the same name and basic format are performed differently by different teams, so the range of variations in style and combination of movements is very great, even among teams performing dances derived from the same family of dances.

Full written descriptions can be found in the book by Cecil Sharp, "The Sword Dances of Northern England", originally published in three volumes between 1912 and 1914, but now reprinted as one volume. It contains information on some Rapper, or short sword dances from Tyneside, which appear to be a developed variant of the more basic longsword dances. It also contains much fascinating background information and detailed instructions for the longsword dances from Grenoside and Handsworth from South Yorkshire; Haxby, Askham Richard, Ampleforth and Escrick from the Vale of York; Kirkby Malzeard from North Yorkshire; and Sleights from the Cleveland area.

Do-it-yourself Longsword Dancing

There is a temptation with such detailed written instructions to try to learn the dance from the book. I consider that learning a dance can be compared with following a recipe, one should follow the basic recipe but also allow for personal interpretation and a measure of innovation. It is difficult to avoid a stultifying effect when limited to learning such things as dances from a book.

It is much better for the beginner to join an established team or for the newly formed team to seek the help of an experienced dancer. In this way the dance continues to develop and it is not turned into a formalised, academic exercise.

The Value of Change

Most dance sides have avoided an approach which would confine their dance within an antiquarian straight-jacket. This has resulted in a vigorous and expanding tradition which is much more stimulating than the stilted performances of those revival sides whose aim is to be slavishly faithful to the written record. By doing so they restrict their dance as it was at one point in time, usually the collectors hey-day circa 1910.

The Early Collectors

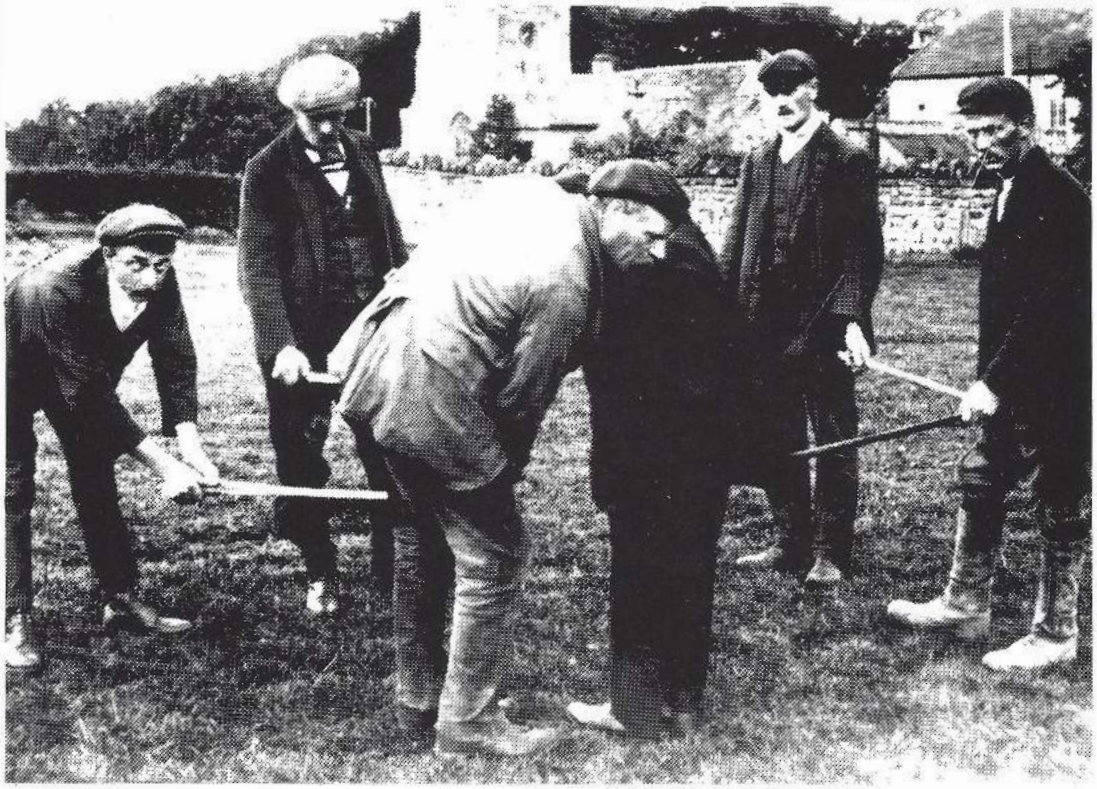
The early collectors cannot be blamed for the stultifying effect which has been introduced as a result of their efforts. They saw many traditions in a state of decline, especially the Morris dances from the Cotswolds. Many dances had already been forgotten and had disappeared. It is certain that we would have lost many more, including some Longsword dances, without their dedicated work.

The foremost collector was Cecil Sharp who travelled the country collecting songs, details of the music, and notations for hundreds of traditional dances. He was one of the most active collectors and he played a major part in preparing the ground for the renewal of interest in all aspects of folk which has arisen over the last forty years. Sharp went on to play a major part in founding the forerunner of the English Folk Dance & Song Society.

Initially he concentrated on the Morris dances and tunes from the Cotswolds but in 1912 he wrote to the vicars in many Yorkshire parishes. He wanted to get some leads to follow-up on a visit he planned for 1913/14. For some unknown reason he confined his attention to the part of the county to the east of the A1 road thus excluding from his search many villages we have since realised had dances around this time.

The replies to his enquiry provide us with a very valuable picture of the spread of the dance within living memory of the date of his survey. This information, together with the work of later collectors resulted in records of the dance once existing in over 70 villages in Yorkshire. One of the regularly performed dances collected by Sharp in 1913 was that from the North Yorkshire village of Kirkby Malzeard.

The men of Kirkby Malzeard demonstrate a figure of their dance.



When Sharp returned to London from his collecting trips he would teach the dance to teams of enthusiasts who were often ladies from "The Espérance Club," a London hostel for teachers etc., run by Mary Neal. Miss Neal was particularly anxious that the dances should be enjoyed by the masses whereas Sharp took an increasing interest in the technical accuracy of their performance.

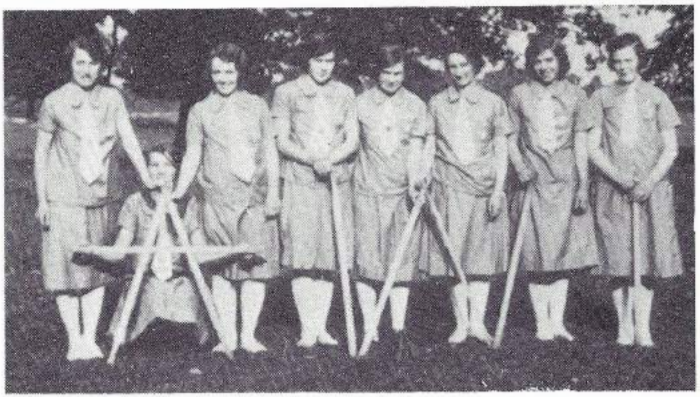
The enthusiasm and teaching of ladies from the Espérance Club, and subsequent generations of teachers, was instrumental in reviving interest in the period 1914 to the late 1930's when Longsword dancing was most at risk. The influence of these teachers can be traced to school teams in many parts of England.

Links with Earlier Teams

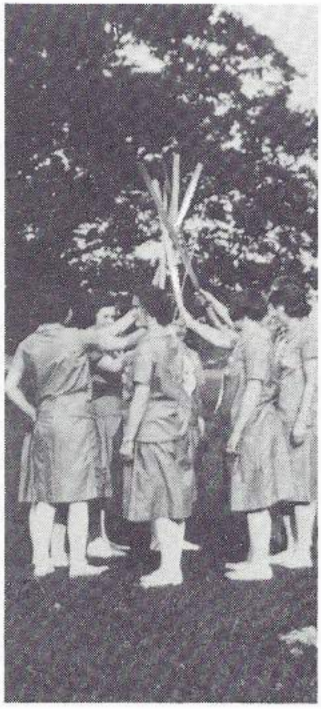
Longsword dancing did not suffer from such a dramatic decline in interest as that which affected Cotswold Morris. In the late 1920's there were at least four teams still performing regularly who had links with earlier generations of dancers and it is these teams who provide continuity through various methods. It is obvious that one of these teams, from Kirkby Malzeard, did not exhibit the hostility shown to women dance enthusiasts by many modern teams.

The Kirkby Malzeard men agreed to give a display at an event organised by the Women's Institute in the York area. For many years a part of the programme at these annual events was a dance competition featuring ladies' Longsword dance teams.

A member of the Ainsty Women's Institute dance team recalls that the display by the men was often followed by an informal coaching session when the men would give advice and help to the ladies teams.



The Ainsty Ladies perform the Askham Richard dance.



"Ride it lock" demonstrated at Castle Howard

The 1929 Womens' Institute competition was held at Castle Howard with three entries in the Longsword class, the results being Ainsty W.I. (92 marks), Norton W.I. (88 marks) and Middleham W.I. (84 marks). These teams only lasted a few years but they helped to retain interest in the dance when it may otherwise have died out.

Sharp's work was easily the biggest single contribution to our knowledge but other writers from Olaus Magnus in 1555 through to the 19th century novelist Sir Walter Scott have recorded details of Longsword dances.

The seven dancers in the Papa Stour dance are given the titles of the Seven Champions of Christendom.

Sir Walter Scott - Dance Collector

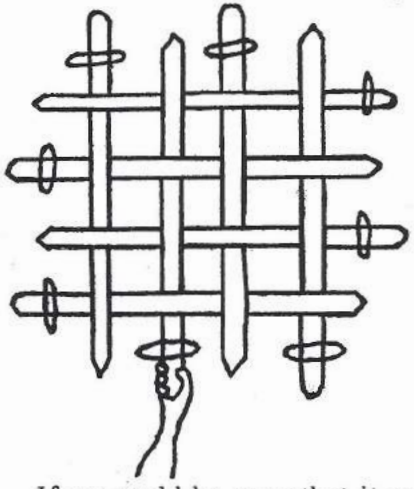
Sir Walter Scott saw, and carefully recorded the details of one of the few fully performable dances from outside Yorkshire. In the 1820's he saw a Longsword dance performed at Papa Stour in the Shetlands and later included reference to this in his novel "The Pirate". This reference, together with other studies, enabled the local men to revive their dance after a break of many years.

Careful research is still unearthing information which gives us a fuller picture of the history and spread of the dance. It is certain that much valuable information is still in existence in the ownership of people who do not realise its value.

The author would be very interested to hear of any information, no matter how fragmentary, relating to Longsword dancing or any other customs which pre-date the second World War.

Occasionally a chance find can provide an answer to some questions but raise others. For example, the chance discovery of an early 19th century notebook provided details of a play and sword dance from Riccall, nine miles south of York.

This find reinforced the theory that there had once been a thriving family of dances in the East Riding. This notebook, written by the local school master, refers to an event circa 1820 but the note had been re-written sometime before 1885 as part of a glossary of local dialect words and phrases.



At this time a drawing of a sword lock had been added, a lock quite unlike any we previously knew of. We do not know whether this drawing was added as an artists impression based on the written reference or if it was drawn from first-hand observation.

If we could be sure that it was the latter it would add support to the view that other shapes were in regular use for the lock.

It would also add support to the validity of the double triangle lock, used by the men of Kirkby Malzeard when Cecil Sharp visited them. This lock is regarded with suspicion as a non-traditional appendage by some researchers.

The author displays the disputed triangular lock.

Such suspicion is beyond my understanding. It is the men of the village who should decide on the components which make up the dance which bears their name, not the archivist.

This idea that an element must be very old before it can be afforded due reverence is perhaps the most restricting and potentially damaging threat to the future development of the dance, or indeed, to any custom or tradition.

Pop-Folk Revival - Friend or Foe?

During the late 1960's and early 1970's there was an increase in the popularity of folk music, especially when it temporarily became part of the popular music scene during the era of flower power and hippie culture. Young people flooded into Folk song clubs to sing songs of protest or songs of romantic escapism which reflected the current mood.

This folk revival threw up many problems, mainly caused by the adverse influence of big business and a very un-tradtional communications system. Fortunately it had some saving features which helped it to outlive short term, fashionable enthusiasms.

In the wake of this renewed interest in folk music came an increased interest in all forms of tradtional dance, an interest often taken up with all the fervour, and inconsistency of converts to a cause. Links with the past became revered, except in such fundemental aspects as the regional distribution of dances.

In the same way that generations of children have been brought up to think of Ruskin's continental import, Maypole dancing, as an English custom, so children throughout the country have been taught Morris dancing as a national dance rather than a regional dance.

Thankfully, a spread of knowledge is helping to restore concern for local traditions. For example, a 1980 Competitive Dance Festival held in the heart of Longsword country at Whitby, attracted twelve junior Longsword teams, substantially outnumbering other types of dance. These junior teams which, together with the men's teams, regularly perform at events throughout the county and have helped to spread the knowledge and appreciation so essential to encourage a thriving, developing tradition.

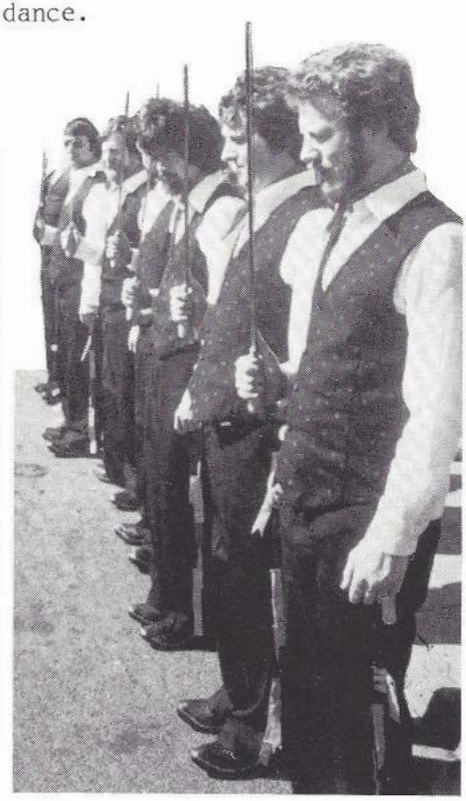
The Future is Safe

The Beaver Sword team, winners in their class in the 1980 Whitby Competition.

A boys team watched over by Joe Brown who has taught many school teams in the Whitby area.

I welcome the initiative of the men from Kirkburton, near Huddersfield, who found evidence that the Longsword dance, known locally as the "Rapier" dance, was once performed in their village. They did not have a detailed dance notation but they set out to create a new Kirkburton dance.

A Developing Tradition



The Kirkburton men perform a figure of their own which they call "The Cage".

If they and future generations persist and develop their dance it will obviously become an accepted local custom, a part of the changing and developing Longsword tradition. Such progressive thought may stick in the throats of some conservative and romantic folk fans but it is much closer to the traditional process than the fantasy often practised today.

Still Interested ?

Longsword dancing has survived enormous changes at the hands of countless generations of dancers, collectors, impresarios etc. - it shows every sign of continuing to do so for generations to come.

Why not try Longsword dancing for yourself and get first-hand experience of the thrill when the lock is raised proudly over the set?

There are many workshops or training sessions held at folk festivals throughout the country. Details of these, and other similar events can be got from the English Folk Dance & Song Society at their headquarters at Cecil Sharp House or from their local organiser.

A detailed list of books on many aspects of folklore, including Longsword, can be obtained from the library of the English Folk Dance & Song Society. Enquiries should be addressed to:

The Librarian
Vaughan Williams Memorial Library
English Folk Dance & Song Society
2 Regents Park Road
London NW1 7AY

Members of the general public can use this reference library by arrangement

Details of teams who dance Longsword (and other types of men's traditional dance) can be obtained from the Bagman, Morris Ring, 21 Eccles Road, Ipswich, IP2 9RG.

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