

History of Cornish Dance

Folk dance is more than just a collection of steps movement and music; it is a form of human expression and its essence lies within its community role and social context rather than purely commercial or artistic interests. Sharp was riding the crest of European romantic nationalism when he collected, and mediated, folk dances as an expression of Englishness in the first quarter of the twentieth century. At much the same time there was a parallel, but Celtic, revivalist movement in Cornwall. As well as identifying with the revival of the Cornish language and links with the other Celtic communities this movement was also pro-active in recording and promoting folk customs, including dance. The story of folk dance in Cornwall, from medieval roots, through narratives of the nineteenth Century folklorists, the activity of the Celtic revivalists and on to the present day, is a fascinating one that reflects the distinct cultural profile of Cornwall.

A tantalising glimpse of medieval dance in Cornwall is provided a twelfth Century Cornish / Latin vocabulary which was written to aid the learning of Latin. It is a short vocabulary of common words people were expected to be familiar with and includes the translation of the Cornish *lappior* as *saltator* and *lappiores* as *saltatrix*; male and female dancer respectively. *Lapyeor* continued to be used as a dialect term for dancer in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and by the early twentieth century was associated with step dancing. It is poignant to learn that the small boys employed as surface workers in the tin industry were called *lapyeors* because one of their first tasks was to aid separation of the ore as it was washed by “dancing” on it ankle deep in the cold water.

Dancing held pride of place in the Gwary Mur, the cycle of mystery plays performed in Cornish during the late medieval period. They were used as the finale for various sections of the play and introduced by the master of ceremonies issuing the instructions:

*Minstrels growgh theny peba
May hallan warbarthe downssya
Del ew an vaner han geys*

*Minstrels, do ye pipe to us
That we may together dance
As is the manner and the jest*

In the Cornish of the time *geys* (pronounced “geeze”) had the meaning of a jest or mock and *geysor* had the meaning of jester so the above could be interpreted as a call for all to join in with the dancing or for a specific troupe of *geys* dancers to perform. There is certainly thought to be a firm link between the mystery plays and the travelling players and dancers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which show up in a parish, town and country house accounts. The “geys” nature of the play or dance is hinted at by descriptions such as those of the household accounts at Lanherne (1466/7): “paper for disgysynge”; “whit bonnets for mynstrells”; and “dosyn bellis for the Morrushes of Betty”. Although *morrushe* is clearly *morris* caution must be exercised with drawing conclusions about the activities concerned as the term was used as a description that would have been closer to the French *morris* of Arbeau’s *Orchesographie* than than Oxfordshire dances of the early twentieth century. Indeed it is Arbeau’s *Mattachins* (sword dancers) which link us to the ultimate icons of early music and dance in Cornwall, the sixteenth century bench end carvings at Altarnon Church on



16th Century Bench End Carvings of dancers and musicians at Altarnon Church

Bodmin Moor. These carvings depict a bagpiper, a crowder (the 'crowd' is an early form of fiddle) and three dancers including the *geysor*.

Nineteenth century Cornwall provided rich pickings for the folklorist and antiquary, and they were in no doubt about the links between the medieval *geys* dancer and the *guize* dancing customs they observed which they were quick to point out was pronounced as *geeze dancing*. The *guize* dancers disguised themselves by blacking up, cross dressing, wearing veils or masks and generally outlandish costume. The *guizers* processed around their local area stopping off every so often at a suitable venue such as the Inn or farm house kitchen where they performed their piece. The dances were sometimes integrated into a folk play, sometimes a solo step dance performance and sometimes a country dance for all. The Padstow *guizers*, for example, incorporated a step dance into their play to the song of Tom Bowling and the Madron *guizers* rounded off their performance with a dance for all to join in called Turkey Rhubarb.

Turkey Rhubarb is a mazaruka and similar, almost to the point of being interchangeable, with a dance variously called Patsy Heeny or Father Murphy's topcoat found across the Celtic Sea in Southern Ireland. The mazaruka is of course a widely travelled European dance. Turkey Rhubarb is a reminder that Cornwall might have been remote from London before the coming of the railway but its geographic position provided sea communications that helped to maintain close cultural links with mainland Europe, Ireland and Wales.

If one were to identify two distinctive forms of Cornish dance it would be the Furry dances and the Scoot dances. The Furry is a simple processional dance for mixed couples performed on fair days (the Cornish for fair is *Fer*, thus *Furry* dance) of which Helston is the best known and earliest recorded (Gentleman's Magazine 1790). They were nevertheless quite wide spread, certainly in West Cornwall at the beginning of the nineteenth century and currently enjoy popularity throughout the Duchy. With a basic formula of a movement forward followed by a simple figure it is an easy dance to improvise upon. Cecil Sharp collected different versions from Helston and Grampound and the practice today is to write a new variation whenever the opportunity arises. Katie Moss's 1911 incorporation of the Helston Furry Dance tune to her composition, *The Floral Dance*, and the later arrangement for brass band by Brighouse and Rastrick in 1977 has encouraged the substitution of *Floral* for *Furry*. An inevitable part of the folk process this may be but it is unfortunate as it obscures the origins on the dance.

Scoot dancing is named after the metal plate used on the toe and heel of working shoes to prolong their life. These shoes make a very satisfying musical *clack* when struck against slate floor slabs, well illustrated by William Bottrell's description of a wedding (1873):

Presently the fiddler struck up with a jig. "Les have the double shuffle, Uncle Will," said the young people. Up he jumped as lively as a kid, though he was near eighty, and footed it out to the delight of all. Young Jan of Santust (St Just) followed, making the fire fly from the heels of his boots, like flashes of lightning; and all the company were quickly whirling, in reels, without much order.

This dance form also endured well into living memory and a number of different steps have been collected. These represent the core material of Cornish dancing tradition and have been used as the basis for new composition, not only for scoot dances but to some extent for social dances as well.



Kekezza
Using traditional steps in contemporary choreography

Penguizers
Keeping Guizing traditions alive

Our own Brenda Wooton, folk singer extraordinaire, once commented that when Wesley came to Cornwall he “saved our souls and cost us our culture”, and it is certainly the received wisdom that religious attitudes discouraged traditional music and dance. Things are seldom what they seem, however, and the *Tea Treats* associated with Cornish Chapel culture were as important a vehicle for promoting traditional dance as the less temperate guizing customs. *Tea treats* were in their heyday during the turn of the 19th / 20th century and were popular well into living memory. They comprised

of a procession around the town or village, sometimes in the form of a furry dance, and culminated in social events such as the serpent dance together with step and broom dances.

Another Cornish dance tradition from this period is the *Troyl*, a word meaning a reel, a spiral or a turn in the Cornish language which was used in dialect to describe an evening of social and step dances accompanied by good food and, unlike the *Tea Treats*, strong drink. These were smaller affairs than the *Tea Treats*, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the space in empty barns or fish cellars at certain times in the season. The atmosphere of the *Troyl* is captured by an entry in the North Hill Old Cornwall Society's records of 1933:

There be dancing of all zorts gain on. Heard told how one girl who was dancing, had the misfortune to dance on a rotten part of the barn floor and it gived way. One leg went through and she found herself standing on the back of a cow that was standing beneath.

The Old Cornwall Societies were born out of the activities of the Celtic revivalists in Cornwall in the early 1900s. Not only did the revivalists seek to promote the Cornish language and have Cornwall recognised as one of the Celtic Nations they also wished to record and revive Celtic traditions such as the guize dancing. The Old Cornwall Societies were set up as locally based groups who would record their own experiences and recollections of local traditions together with that of their contemporaries. They were instrumental in reviving such customs as the Hal An Tow at Helston, the St Ives Guize dancers, the Midsummer "Golowan" bonfires and the Crying the Neck ceremony at harvest time. As a roots organisation, who retained ownership of their own traditions, they were quite different from other British folk revival movements of the time. Their activities sowed the seeds for the inter-celtic festivals held in 1950s together with dance classes and associated events, which included on one occasion an evening of Breton and Cornish dancing which followed the performance of a Cornish Mystery Play.

Against this background there was a renewed interest in Cornish dance in the mid seventies, inspired by the growth of Celtic Festivals such as the *Pan Celtic*, then held in Killarney and the *Festival Interceltique* in L'Orient, Brittany, to which Cornwall was invited to send representatives. Two dance display teams formed as a result of this interest; *Cam Kernewek* and *Ros Kelttek* (translated as *Cornish Step* and *Celtic Circle* respectively), who were able to build up a repertoire of dances both collected from living tradition and reconstructed from archival sources. Thirty years later there are eight groups that can field dance teams including two for young people together with a number of bands using Cornish material for social dance. In the twenty first century Cornish dance nevertheless continues to be found in its traditional settings of the *Guize Dance*, the *Processional Furry* and even the occasional *Tea Treat*.

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From Scoot Dances, Troyls, Furrys and Tea Treats: The Cornish Dance Tradition by Merv, Alison and Jowdy Davey. A history of dance in Cornwall, from the earliest references in Cornish literature to the dances of the folk revival today, collected by members of the Davey family. Notations for 45 dances – social, broom, snail creeps, guize and furry dances – with tunes. Published in August 2009 by Francis Boutle Publishers www.francisboutle.co.uk

