

Scoots & Troys – The Cornish Dance Tradition: Sidmouth Folk Festival Workshop 2nd Aug 2014-07-28

Illustrated with displays from **Kemysk Cornish Dancers** and some audience participation.

This workshop follows the threads of Cornish folk dance from medieval roots to 21st century Cornwall. Before we proceed it is worth a quick review of what we mean by “Folk” and “Tradition”.

A Short Definition of Folk Tradition

Folk tradition is a dynamic social process taking place within a community rather than something fixed and historical but it does have continuity with the past and does not suddenly pop into existence out of nowhere.

It is a “people thing”, a psycho-social process involving identity and I use Jones’ de-constructions of the “tradition debate”¹ to distil a number of features associated with identity and how people perceive themselves in relation to tradition which in turn impact upon the process of tradition:

1. *continuity through time*
2. *social and communal nature rather than individual*
3. *defines events and marks the passage of time*
4. *becomes moribund or inactive at one stage only to be revived and engaged in later*
5. *a process where people will select which aspects they will learn, perform and actively transmit involves symbolic constructions of the past in the present for the future*

First and Second Existence in Folk Tradition

This is a useful concept first devised by Hoerburger² and further developed by Nahachewsky and Ruyter³:

- The “first / reflexive existence” is where the tradition takes place takes place unselfconsciously in its original cultural location and is an integral part of community life. Change here is reflexive, i.e. a response to popular trends in the wider social milieu rather than carefully considered.
- In contrast to this, the “second / reflective existence” is where tradition is consciously revived, or cultivated by a given group of people, rather than owned by the whole community. Change here is reflective i.e. carefully considered in terms of what is perceived as traditional / historic / authentic / appropriate.

When a dance is part of a local custom, or a step dance done to show off at a party or pub session, i.e. in an original community setting, then this is a first / original existence. When it is carefully taught and rehearsed in order to be performed away from its original location for dance displays at festivals and concerts etc then it is in a second existence. In Cornwall dance traditions have to an extent continued in their original locations but the Celto-Cornish revival of the 1920s and the rise of festival culture since the 1970s have encouraged folk dance displays an expression of Cornish identity away from their original locations.

Four Threads of Cornish Folk Dance:

- Scoot Dancing
- The Guize Dance
- The Furry Dance
- Social Dance

Lapyor / Lapyores / Scoots

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. In the 19th Century the term “Scoot” became used to describe the dances of the Lapyor. Scoot 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.. Mrs Parkyn’s Jig is a good example taught to us by a Community Nurse from Lostwithiel. 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

1/Dance Display: Mrs Parkyn’s Jig (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45_S6TPZKps)

Guizing

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 thus *geysor* is a jester or mocker. This phrase could be understood as a call for all to join in with the dancing or the *geys* dancers

to perform. Parish and country house accounts of this time also have records of purchasing material for the “dysgysynge” and it seems to have been quite widespread. The Bench ends at Altarnon Church dated 1530 also give

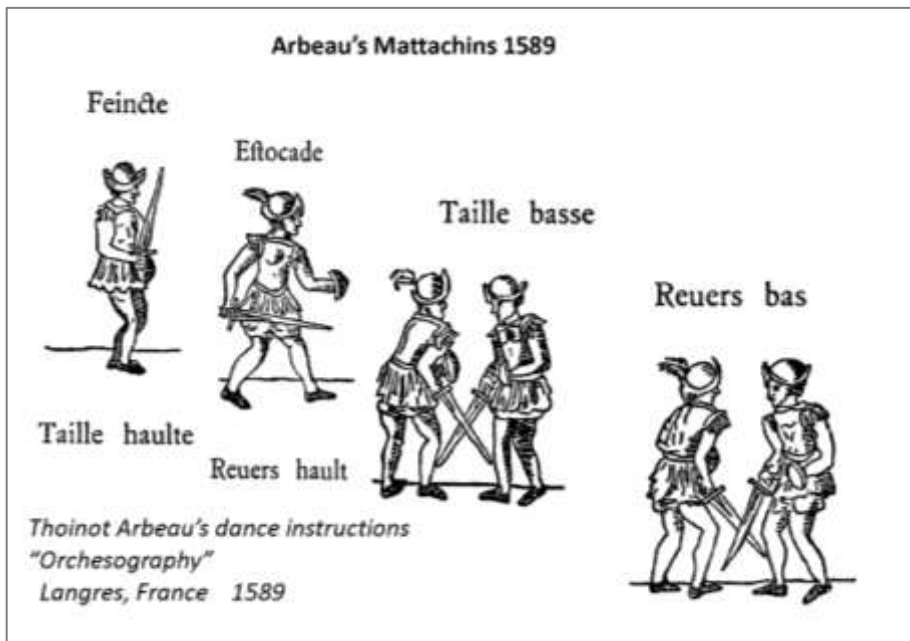
Dancers on Bench End at Altarnon Church 1520
Similar to images of Arbeau’s *Mattachins*



a glimpse of some guizers, this time performing a sword dance which might have been part of a play. It looks very like the drawings the Mattachins in Arbeau's Orchesographie published some 70 Years Later.

(Link to Mattachins tune played on Cornish pipes at Altarnon Church: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPP19XoC8Wk>)

In the nineteenth century, the guize dancers disguised themselves by blacking up their faces , 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.



Christmas Guizing: Left, Calstock Guizers circa 1980 and below the Guizers make an appearance for Penzance's Montol Festival in 2012



The dances were sometimes integrated into a folk play, often included a solo step dance performance and usually finished with 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.

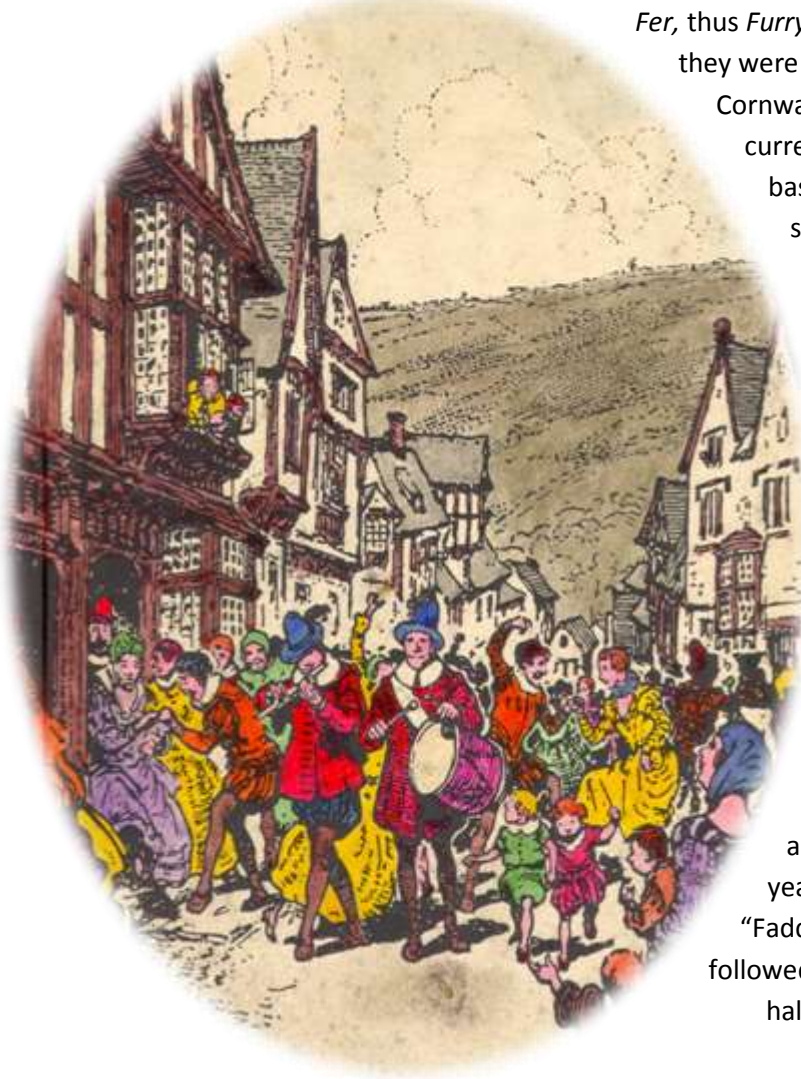
Turkey Rhubarb is a mazurka and similar, almost to the point of being interchangeable, with a dance variously called Patsy Heeny or Father Murphy's topcoat found across the Celtic Sea in Southern Ireland. The mazurka is of course a widely travelled European dance. Turkey Rhubarb is a reminder that Cornwall 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.

2/ Audience Participation: Turkey Rhubarb

(link to music and dance notation: http://www.an-daras.com/cornish-dance/Turkey_Rhubarb.html)

Furry Dances

Although the first record we currently have of the Furry Dance in Cornwall is a description in the Gentleman's Magazine 1790 it was presumed to be much older by contemporary writers. The Furry is a simple processional dance for mixed couples performed on fair days (the Cornish for fair is *Fer*, thus *Furry* dance). Helston is the best known example but 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 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 Brighthouse 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 of the dance.*



Although the name "Furry" is widely used for this group of dances today this has not always been the case and a succession of terms have been used over the years. In the late 18th century it was known as the "Faddy", the "Furry" for the latter half of the nineteenth followed by "Flora" and then "Floral" in the second half of the twentieth century.

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1790 The Gentleman's Magazine

*"It is called the Furry – day supposedly Flora's day; About the middle of the day they collect together to dance hand-in-hand round the streets to the sound of a fiddle playing a particular tune, which they continue to do till it is dark. This is called the "Faddy".*⁴

1803 Richard Polwhele

Also presents “Furry” as the name for the celebration and dismisses the use of “Flora” as a “vulgar error”. Polwhele uses Fadè as the name of the dance.⁵

1823 Davies Gilbert

“This specimen of Celtic Musick is heard in Ireland and in Wales, when the people dance round their bonfires, originally kindled in honour of the Summer Solstice.

1846 William Sandys

Sandys dismissed a connection with the Roman Floralia as improbable he continues to describe the day as the “Furry Day” and the dance as “faddy-ing around the town”. In his dialect gloss he describes “fadè” as meaning “to go” and particularly applied to the Furry Dance⁶.

1880s Romanticism: Margaret Courtney and Robert Hunt

For Hunt⁷ and Courtney⁸ in the latter half of the nineteenth century the “Furry Day” and the “Furry Dance” were indistinguishable. Courtney still recognises “Faddy” as an alternative name. Hunt, however, subscribes to Classical romanticism and for him there was “... no doubt of the Furry originating from the 'Floralia', anciently observed by the Romans on the fourth of the calends of May".⁹

1901 Influence of dialect: off to Truro

Whatever the provenance of the name Flora, for the dialect speaker the opportunity to rhyme with Trora was clearly irresistible

*Jan said to me wan day
'Can' ee dance the Flora?'
Iss I can with a nice young man
Ere we'm off to Trora¹⁰*

1911 Influences of pop music: Katie Moss

The use of the term “Floral” can be dated to Katie Moss’s composition, “The Floral Dance” which was inspired by her visit to Helston in the spring of 1911. Although to all intents and purposes this was an entirely new composition with Edwardian lyrics celebrating the rural idyll, the Furry Dance tune from Helston was employed as a recurrent theme by Moss.¹¹ Peter Dawson recorded it on a 78-rpm disc in 1912 with a number of subsequent re-issues due to its popularity. The term “Floral” subsequently became inextricably linked with the Furry Dance and used interchangeably with “Flora”.

1913 Sabine Baring Gould and Cecil Sharp

For all they confuse the tunes of the Furry Dance and the Hal an Tow both Baring-Gould¹² and Sharp¹³ refer to the dances as the Furry not the Faddy or Flora and are clear about the provenance.

1931 Celto-Cornish movement

The Celto-Cornish movement challenged the correctness of the term “Flora” in the correspondence pages of the Western Morning News and the Mercury. The Old Cornwall Society published a booklet discussing the origins of the Furry in detail¹⁴ and this is referenced to and expanded upon by Toy in his history of Helston.¹⁵ For all the Celto-Cornish movements’ preference for the term “Furry”, “Flora” became embedded in popular usage. The Helston Flora Day committee today takes the position that the day is “Flora Day” but the dance is the “Furry”.¹⁶

1978 Top of the pops

Katie Moss’s song was popularised again and the term “Floral” reinforced by the Brighthouse And Rastrick Band LP recording of 1977 and Terry Wogan’s 1978 Top of the Pops performance.

1978 Disapproval

Helston's Furry Dance tune has been raped from its home town and given a place among the best selling L.P. records, flooding the media with its haunting melody. Although irritating no doubt to many who think it a breach of unwritten copyright, it has the advantage of free advertisements. It also brings a whiff of sanity to the cacophony accepted by many as music. The popularity will pass; in time it will become again Helston's own tune, and we who love its unique appeal conjured up by true Cornishmen will be joining the crowds in the old town's revelry as usual.

Old Cornwall Society Journal 1978¹⁷

2014 Furry v Floral

Whilst the popularity may have passed, there has nevertheless been a reflexive impact upon tradition in that the term "Floral" often replaces the term "Furry" .

3/ Audience Participation: Furry Dance

(Bolingey Furry on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJItxf7hfQ>)

Social Folk Dances: Troyls, Tea Treats, Ceilidhs, Barn Dances, Nosow Lowen

Although anchored in folk dance as a genre of popular dance these events are "party time" and tend to be about what is fun and what works. In the 19th century they were called Troyls or Tea Treats and these terms have since been joined by Ceili, Barn Dance and Nos Lowen (Cornish for party).

Methodism and chapel culture in Cornwall is often thought to have discouraged folk traditions like dancing. In fact the Tea Treats were instrumental in preserving dance tradition. 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 and the snail creep together with step and broom dances. The Cornish serpent dance is a survival of the medieval farandole.

4/ Audience Participation: The serpent dance / farandole

(More about the Serpent Dance http://www.an-daras.com/cornish-dance/Serpent_Dance.html)

Another Cornish dance tradition from this period is the *Troyl*, a word meaning a spiral a reel or a turn in the Cornish language which was used in dialect to describe an evening of social and step dances involving – spirals and reels. Although we use it as the equivalent of a ceilidh, it is important to remember that Ceilidh is derived from a quite different Gaelic word for a gathering or party. 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. Like social folk dances the world over the dancers at troyls improvised dances mixing existing tradition with ideas obtained from elsewhere, particularly the dances of the country houses.

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.

5/ Audience Participation : Newlyn Reel

(Newlyn Reel on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtsqNyIQB3c>)

Folk Dance in Cornwall Today

There was a great deal of revivalist activity in the 1920s and 1930s which preserved and promoted some folk dance traditions and recorded others for people to take up again in the future thus laying the foundations for the folk dances we enjoy today. The advent of Pan Celtic festival culture of the 1970s greatly encouraged the development of Cornish Dance display teams and there are currently eight or nine 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*.

6/ Any Dance requests

Visit: *Cornish dance index*: http://www.an-daras.com/Index-Cornish_Dance.html

Cornish Dance on Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/user/CornishDance>

Merv Davey, August 2014, Sidmouth Folk Festival

Guizing Bestiary:



The Bodmin Beast



Padstow Obby Oss



Giant Bolster St Agnes



St Ives Guizers



Giant Tavy, Calstock



Pen Glas



Pen Gwyn

Notes

¹Michael Owen Jones, "Tradition in identity discourses" pp.115 - 141. Summarises contemporary debate on the nature of tradition including: Continuities and tradition - Honko, Lauri et al. "On the Analytical Value of the Concept of Tradition", *Studia Fennica* No. 27, 1983, pp. 233-249: Social and communal nature of tradition – Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones, *Folkloristics: An Introduction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): Traditions becoming inactive /extinguished and revived many years later - Kenneth Goldstein, "On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Traditions to the Study of Repertory". *Journal of American Folklore* 84, 1971, pp.62-67: traditions becoming inactive /extinguished and revived many years later Traditions - Elli Kaija Kongas, "Immigrant Folklore: Survival or Living Tradition?" *Midwest Folklore* No. 10, 1960, pp.117-123: Deconstructing tradition– Eric J. Hobsbawm, and Terrence Ranger, ed. *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

² Felix Hoerburger, "Once Again: On the Concept of Folk Dance" *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* (1968), pp. 30-31. Hoerburger's model can be applied to any folk tradition.

³ Andriy Nahachewsky, Once Again: On the Concept of "Second Existence Folk Dance", *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 33. (2001), pp. 17-28: Nancy Lee, Chalfa Ruyter, "Some musings on folk dance", *Dance Chronicle*, Vol 18, No 2 (1995).

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567880>, accessed 19th September 2008. Nahachewsky's and Ruyter's development of Hoerburger's model can also be adapted to any folk tradition.

⁴ Durgan, letter addressed to Editor, *Sylvanus Urban. Gentlemen Magazine and Historical Chronicle for the year MDCCXC*, p. 520.

⁵ Richard Polwhele, *The History of Cornwall*, Vol.1, (London: Cadell and Davies, 1803, facsimile reprint: Dorking, Kohler and Coombes Ltd, 1978), p. 41.

⁶William Sandys, *Specimens of Cornish Provincial Dialect Selected and Arranged by Uncle Jan Trenoodle*, (London: J.R. Smith, 1846), p. 93.

⁷ Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, the Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881).

⁸ Margaret Ann Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore. Revised and Reprinted from the Folk-Lore Society Journals, 1886-87.* (Penzance, 1890).

⁹ Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances*, p171

¹⁰ John Betjeman and A.L.Rowse, *Victorian and Edwardian Cornwall from old photographs*, (London, B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1974), caption to plate 132 "The Furry Dance Helston, 1901".

¹¹ Ian Marshall, *The Amazing Story of the Floral Dance in Words and Music.* (Dobwalls, Cornwall, Songs of Cornwall publications, 2003). Pp. 25 – 32.

¹² Sabine Baring-Gould, and Rev. H. Fleetwood Shepherd. *Songs and Ballads of the West: A Collection Made from the Mouths of the People*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1891).

¹³ Sharp, Cecil J., and George Butterworth. *The Morris Book, with a Description of the Dances as Performed by the Morris Men of England.* Vol. 5. (London: Novello, 1913), p. 102.

¹⁴ James Dryden Hosken, *Helston Furry Day*, (St Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 1931).

¹⁵ Spencer Toy, *The History of Helston*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 367 - 379.

¹⁶ Souvenir Programme, Helston Flora Day, 2009.

¹⁷ "By The Way", Editorial note, *Old Cornwall*, Vol. 8, no.10, (1978), p. 467.