

# The Dancing Tradition in Suffolk

In the late 1940s I'd go with my mum down to Boxford Village Hall on a Monday night where to 78 gramophone records us kids were allowed to join in with the grownups. There'd be men and women just as they had left off from the land and who had had a quick wash and tea and come down. Us kids quickly learnt The Barn Dance, The Blue Danube, The Polka, Schottische, St Bernard's Waltz, The Square Tango, The Boston Two-step etc and would roar round the room in the Pally Glide to the tune of Horsey-Horsey or Underneath the Spreading Chestnut Tree. My sister used to try and get me to do the Lancers and the Quadrilles but I struggled. All this for sixpence which included a glass of Robinsons lemon barley water at half time. There were no Ceilidh's here then and there never have been. There may have had such dances in the outer Hebrides but not about here. The only K Lee around here was the one who played for Melford in the team that won the Eastern Counties league in the 1950s. A time when Lightening Lock would stand on Melford hill and take anyone on bare fist for five bob on a Saturday night but Lightening is another story. All of these old-time dances are still done in the Northern Borders by rural communities to 'Scottish bands'. In Belford in Northumbria ago about 10 years ago whilst on holiday as is my wont, I went for vernacular culture down to the local Working Men's Club and they had one of these Scottish bands playing and they were doing all of the old time dances that I knew as a boy. Sitting close to a party of local people I endeavoured to get into conversation. A fellow that I spoke to was foreman on a farm about six miles away and he told me that that night his governor was having a Harvest Home and had invited some famous Northumbrian folk artist with a concertina.

'Why should I want to be there' he said 'this is what I was brought up to know and what I enjoy'.

The fashion for American Square dance came in about the early 50s. Nibs Matthews came round to Boxford Village Hall and such like to teach us what Buck Rabbits were already doing! There were 'hops' in most village halls both mid week and Saturday nights where the then modern pop culture demanded the Quick Step. The Fox Trot, Modern Waltz, Samba and a few Old Time in-between. At the Young Farmers dances we would do the Stripping the Willow, Dashing White Sergeant and Eight some Reel. Always to live bands such as Johnny Haines from Sudbury and Mrs Punchard's in the Saxmundham area. Nibs Audus at Newmarket to name but a few from hundreds. At Hunt Balls they still did 'Gallops' as well, going round the room quite mad and the Paul Jones which was a great mixer. In the pubs, yes people danced there as was well, in many places most Saturday nights when they had a 'musicianer'. At Onehouse Dog on certain nights there was a 3-piece modern type band there but in-between people would get up and sing country ditties - folk songs in other words. Likewise at Gosbeck Greyhound and Witnesham Barley Mow, where there were pianos. There were no Ceilidh's although the Virginia Reel did seem to hang on from the short phased American Square dancing fad.

At places like Shotley Boot where on special occasions people would dress up and dance. Albert Bromley who was as good a traditional singer as you can find would dance and be involved in the high jinx. Saturday night at Blaxhall Ship where I recorded over 70 traditional songs in the early 60s (Double CD NLCD10) was the same with Eli Durrant and his wife Lilly to the fore. Herself encouraging the young men on the floor for the polka. 'Oh Joe the boats going over' was only ever played for a polka and not as a stepdance where I have often heard it in the revival. The only time I have ever heard it for stepping was when Billy French of Sudbury diddled this, Jacks-a-lad and the Sudbury Hornpipe (on NLCD05) and he made it sound almost like a march. 'The Yarmouth hornpipe' (a version of pigeon on the gate) was favourite or the old boys would do it to 'Scotland the brave', 'Eleven more months and ten more days'. Travellers invariably asked for 'In the taxi honey' - The Dark town strutters ball. There was stepdancing in literally hundreds of pubs right across Suffolk and there are many more places that I could mention. It is a pity that that which has influenced today's local revival seems to have come off just a few East Suffolk dancers from the 70s and later.

In most places in West Suffolk if you asked for stepdancing they did not know what you meant for it was always known as Jacks-a-lad. Jacks-a-lad is an 18th century tune that was re-written in the 19th century as the 'Sailors Hornpipe'. When I went into Polstead Shoulder of Mutton in the 1950s Jock Richardson in his gumboots soon taught me to Jacks-a-lad. I said 'I've got my squeezebox outside I'll play for you', 'no, no I don't want that' he said. They preferred someone diddling it and I am told that

this is because of the more constant rhythm. Pippin Riddlestone diddle it for him and he sang a verse or two of 'Jack's a lad' (Lavenham NLCD01).

At Boxford White Hart Tonardo Smith the wall of death rider would play the piano for them to dance to. The Old Time Waltz tune that everybody seemed to request to end the evening was 'Springtime in the Rockies'.

The tradition seems to survive in remote pockets and there it manifests. At The Bell Little Wratting in an isolated part known as Paradise there was an oasis of stepdancing tradition. I do not know where the word Paradise comes from it could well have originated from this part! The pub traditionally went with the Blacksmiths forge and this the Rowley family had combined for generations. Basil Rowley will tell you that he was kept awake almost every night by the old boys jacks-a-ladding in the bar down below which resounded as it was a wooden floor over the cellar. George Sizer was judged the best but everyone yes everyone in the pub stepped - to either Isaac Mizon or Arthur Robinson on concertina. When the pub closed on 26 September 1968 there were so many stepping at the same time that bets were taken as to when the bar room floor would also become the cellar floor beneath. Of course you will not have heard of them in the world of the folk perception because they were never recorded, collected or discovered for that but as sure as Africa and the Africans were about long before Livingstone 'discovered Africa' so these old boys were getting on with their natural way of life. I think that there is a lot that we do not know and that has been lost about stepdancing from its beginnings which I guess was probably in the era of Elizabeth I.

That good traditional singer Charlie Cutmore told me that his father who also kept the same Belchamp St Pauls pub had a board with a cross in the middle where he would cross his feet over in various patterns. Similarly Horry White the Coypu catcher of Ringsfield (CD Songs and Stories from East Coast Fishermen NLCD06) told me that at Bampton Dog they did a special stepdance which he called a reed, I said 'I think you mean a reel don't you', 'no, no' he said 'definitely a reed'. I said 'what was that like?' and he said 'well four people would go round in the middle with their hands in the centre and then they went out sideways and stepped'. I'd heard nothing like it before or since. They diddle and sung a good song - 'Southwold Fair' for it.

My first 'akordeen' (it is no coincidence that our dialect word is the same as that which came on the German boxes) was a single row 'Hohner' which cost me a quid from our yardman Fred Smith at Campsea Ashe market. He played it a bit but Boxer Fairweather came in that day and when he played it Fred stepped. A load of people did, even Josh Martin the 95 year old horsedealer that I recently recorded from Soham, stepped and told me tales about the expert steppers that gathered at Barnet Horse Fair in the early 20s. The Whitings were always strong in the Brundish area and still are thanks to Lenny. When we called in The Crown one night in the late 50s and asked if there was anyone who would give us a step one of them went home to put his hobnail working boots on and came back to 'stage a pantomime'. In Blaxhall Ship Eli Durrant reigned. He was a character who had been known to 'mix it' and always had a fisherman's ganzie high up to his neck and earrings when no one else wore them. He seemed to have neat sided Italian boots and did a sort of double step back that no one else did. He was ace. Although there were others like Fred List and Jeff Ling who would have a go no one could 'blow wind near Eli's backside' to coin an old Suffolk phrase. His piece de resistance was at the Harvest Supper held at Lord Alistair Graham's where he worked when he did his 'patchy' dance - I think this should really be called Apache and comes from French cafés. Where he got it from no one knows but Eli had been in the Eighth Army with Monty and them old boys picked things up all over the place. He would throw his partner across the room and the music he did it to was played as a tango - 'oh play to me gypsy'. When he danced it in The Ship other people would get up and follow. Where did it come from I wonder. There was no group of people sitting round playing book tunes for themselves. From The Ship or The Queens Head at Boxted or wherever they only ever had **one** musicianer who always played **for** the people with the tunes that **they** wanted, be they pop, traditional songs, Mazurkas or Schottisches. Polkas were almost every other dance. Sometimes old time waltz's or occasionally Lilly Durrant would get up and to 'The Monkey cocked his tail up' lift her leg for the candlestick dance. Eli would lead the company in the conga often down the street and back.

Wherever Alf Peachey went people would follow and dance as he allegedly had perfect rhythm. His legend was that of the greatest Akordeen player of all time. They would put a piece of string two inches across his box top and bottom and he'd play any hornpipe whatever you'd like to mention.

Either at his local the Ashfield Swan or wherever. Earls Soham Volunteer. Alf learnt a lot of songs off the old Sailor who kept Ashfield Swan and he can be heard on The Contented Countryman NLCD14 with two step tunes and seven songs.

At Long Melford Hare Darkie and Lightie would entertain on mouthorgan and spoons respectively and the highlight of their performance was to see Bert Lamb the traveller who lived in a caravan on Alpheaton Aerodrome dance the break that they put in 'Toot-toot-tootsie'.

It was never a staged performance as in the Music Halls of the North and there seemed to be few stepdancers who were also singers. I think that this is because everyone needed to have a party piece and there was respect for others - not competition. There is a lot of guesswork as to where modern tap dancing comes from. American tap is nearer to the Suffolk stepdancing than anything else. In going from being one of the most populated counties to one of the least. Loads of people emigrated from Suffolk to the 'revolting colonies' hence all the Suffolk towns and villages in New England and beyond (there are five Haverhill's in USA - they seem to like it better than we do here!). Furthermore they took our dialect and words, which is another story. I do not think there is too much doubt about from where modern tap dancing comes. It is a pity that people did not take more interest in what was and still is going on around them to pass this idiom of the people onto the next generation. For we cannot reincarnate it now off ink stains on a page. To do that is nearer to the idiom of the pop world. As Ronald Blythe says in Akenfield 'it is the singer that counts not the song'.

Steve Monk, who absorbed as much of the tradition around him as he could, always wore his Suffolk Horseman's Suit when stepping. It was what the old boys were most proud of and as important to them as their button sided brogue boots (see: article [www.traditionsofsuffolk.com](http://www.traditionsofsuffolk.com)). But who will be wearing one when they hold a competition in Steve's honour I wonder? I would give him who wears one a head start for it shows that he has absorbed the all important 'idiom' that Monk was so keen to pass on and is not just copycatting. We do not need 'artists' from the folk revival or other outsiders at all to show us how it is done. We have our own inherited tradition that can still be found amongst the indigenous species 'born to the east wind' if as WG Hoskins, the father of local history said 'one cares to look over the hedge'.