

DANCE

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Some English folk (social) dances have been recorded since Medieval times, and are documented from the 16th century. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth the native country dances became established in court. She was a very enthusiastic dancer who encouraged all kinds of dancing. Having seen the dances performed by the country folk, had them brought to Court where they were performed along with the more formal galliards, pavaues and branles and became firmly established. The country dances were lively, performed to songs of the time, easy to remember so that children and newcomers could pick them up quickly. They required few steps but gave pleasure by their patterns and figures. The appeal of performing with a group of friends was also attractive. In the 17th century John Playford, a printer and publisher in London at that time, wrote down and published collections of these dances in *The English Dancing Master* (1650), which preserved the tunes and figures of the dances. Although some of these were supposedly new and no doubt some were the dances that they spread to many other parts of Europe and were taken to America by the early settlers to develop into the squares and contras danced in England today. The earliest dances were the round – a circular dance performed round the original may pole, a tree or bush, no the beribboned pole of the 19th century; the farandole – a chain dance known to exist as early as 12th century; and the hey. Some of these has survived to modern times.



Folk dance



Upper_class ball

Alongside these social dances developed the English ritual dances – morris dancing (four separate traditions) from very early times, clog and step dancing (from many regions in its own forms), long and rapper sword and a wide variety of other dances performed with anything from brooms, clay pipes and faggos to decorative staves, antlers and “coconuts”.

In the 18th century the French aristocracy had romantic ideas about the delights of country life, and the country dances were very popular. They would be danced in the second half of the evening.

After the introduction of new dances in the 19th century, during the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign, the country dance began to lose its popularity amongst the upper classes (Sir Roger de Coverley being the exception, surviving also as Virginia Reel in America). Quadrilles, Polka and Waltz would kill off country dances from the ballrooms. But the old dances would remain alive in the villages in rural England and in America, and figures from them would survive in the Lancers and quadrilles. In England folk still danced simple dances at their feasts and festivals to entertain themselves, let off steam and show off. The similarity of dances from far flung places in England is immediately apparent .

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Towards the end of the 19th. century, with industrialization and materialism, some people began to feel nostalgia for simpler life. Cecil Sharp was amongst them and travelled round the country collecting songs and dances that would be later published.



Cecil Sharp with George Butterworth and Maud Karpeles started to collect the Cotswold morris and traditional dances as well as “translating” the dances of Playford. There was a revival that would be shattered by the First World War. In between wars the old country dances remained and got a renewed interest, but in a modified form, mixture of English and American Dances. Because of the Second World War the dances declined again in the '40s, although they were still taught in school and some enthusiasts continued to record both the traditional and historic dances. In the '50s the dances experienced another period of popularity both sides of the Atlantic with a square dance craze before social folk dancing became largely impromptu to pop music in the '60s and '70s. The tradition, however, is alive and thriving amongst enthusiasts who are writing hundreds of new dances in traditional style. Cecil Sharp House is the headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, which exists to preserve and promote English dancing, and houses the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library with its collection of relevant material.



Cecil Sharp



Cecil Sharp House



Vaughan Williams



Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

Nowadays the dance is held in a barn, scout hut or the ballroom of the Town hall. Usually a hall is rectangular and has a stage at one end. This will be where the band and Master of Ceremonies perform and it is known as the 'Top' end. All the dancers line up from this end, and all the dances start from it. For longways dancers will line up to the band on the stage as the 'Top'. The Caller teach the dances to everyone and help them through by clever prompting. When enough people have arrived the Caller will announce the name of the first dance, and will also say how many dancers are needed for each group in the dance. This is called the 'Set' in the country dancing.

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**Crouch, W. : English Traditional Dancing in the National Curriculum (key stage 2), published by The English Folk Dance and Song Society, London 1995, p.5,48.*

**Lobley, P. And R: Your book of English Country Dancing, published by Faber and Faber, London Boston 1980.*

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