

DERT Newcastle 2019

Notation and notes on a dance by

Sallyport Sword Dancers

Based on notations for the

Winlaton Short Sword Dance

*“Each Christmas they
raced each other to get to
dance at the big houses
first – and get the whisky
which went with it!”*



Introduction

Winlaton is located approximately two miles from Swalwell, home of today's Sallyport Sword Dancers. The neighbouring villages of Winlaton and Swalwell each had their own sword dancers and the two teams were great rivals (each Christmas they raced each other to get to dance at the big houses first – and get the whisky which went with it!).

Sword dancing was first mentioned in Winlaton in an 1813 song by John Leonard and the famed team of the 1910s–40s – known as the White Stars from the 1920s – were certainly going by the 1880s. They won the Cowen Trophy (a North East predecessor of DERT) numerous times over those two decades, including winning the original cup outright for their consecutive victories in 1922, 23 and 24. In 1930, they competed in the afternoon after burying their whistle player that morning. They would also teach the younger Winlaton Blue Stars their figures, bit by bit, in return for drink.

By the time they ceased dancing around 1945, the White Star team were all aged into their 80s. Other teams with a direct link to the White Stars continued after the war, until about 1960, taught by Jack Atkin, a Blue Star dancer who had himself learned from the older White Star men.

These notes are based heavily on details published in Phil Heaton's book "Rapper" to whom thanks are due.

Sources

We are using as reference our primary sources; the core framework of the dance is as published in "Sword Dances of Northern England" volume 3 (SDoNE). Sharp witnessed this in August or September 1910, then in December 1912 and finally in early 1913. We also have invaluable footage of the Winlaton dancers themselves in the form of Pathé News reels take from 1920, 26 and 30 (the Winlaton White Stars) and the Blue Stars in 1937. These sources can be found online at the following locations.

Transcription of Sharp's notation: <http://www.rapper.org.uk/notations/winlaton.pdf> (NB the online transcription contains various errors, eg "No3" appearing as "No8").

Pathé News footage on YouTube:

1920* White Stars - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvdTOfBKsvU>

(*Also credited as 1930)

1926 White Stars - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWNqYUS1XXg>

1937 Blue Stars (taught by the White Stars) -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMQQBJPbnq8>

1937 White Stars - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JXJaLIN3V4>

This archive footage is valuable in showing how the dance evolved over a relatively short period, given that the published dance was intrinsically similar to those in later years while the dancers themselves had aged. It suggests that some of the details in Sharp's notes are how they intended to perform the dance rather than what it looked like danced out. In the following notation, apparent inconsistencies between the versions will be highlighted. The video versions show a variety of figures, many the same as Sharp's notation plus some additional ones.

However it is worth noting at this point that the speed and timing of the dance varies between footage with each successive dance containing less 'dead time' stepping between figures. Indeed the stepping and timings in the 1937 Blue Stars footage is more reminiscent of a modern team than Sharp's earlier notation.

Additionally, the video footage shows that what we may today consider as a baseline standard of quality had not yet been set. It would be safe to surmise that, given they knew they were being recorded, these dances should represent their idea of a good dance. Without wishing to judge a different era, few teams nowadays would be prepared to compete dancing to these standards.

As a result, we have chosen in our dance to also be informed by the numerous years we have performed this dance, complementing Dr C.E. Cawte's 1955 statement: *"this is not to suggest that one version is to be preferred to another; indeed it is to be hoped and expected that the dance will change further in the future"*.

The Dance

Costume

Sharp refers to kit as being: a white shirt sparsely decorated with ribbons; dark trousers and a belt. However, this is not the more formal kit in the film footage of the same team where they are wearing white shirts with a tie, but no ribbons.

Whilst the DERT Traditional competition is not a re-enactment we feel some sort of a nod to the original kit does add to its atmosphere. Given these variations, Sallyport will draw on the white shirts and ties of the film footage, with belts rather than a sash. We feel that no-one should be subjected to the sight of any Sallyporter being 'de-britched', so will not be swapping to trousers.

Calling-on song

Sharp notates a seven-verse song to a dorian variant of an irish air; from the second verse onwards each is accompanied by a dancer performing a single guard to be back in time to step for a full 8 bars. This would be longer than the full dance itself and, as Sharp notes, more of a throwback to the common long and short sword dances origins as a ceremonial play: "Hence the dance proceeds with little degeneration; the play gradually loses form, meaning, and coherence" – a view strengthened by the fact it was no longer being performed by the time of the film recordings. Because of this, Sallyport will not be performing a calling on song.

Stepping

This is perhaps the toughest part of the entire dance to determine any conclusive version. Within the figures, movements are described as using "*a rapid, elastic, walking step, executed on the ball of the foot*". Sharp describes the step as "*in the way explained in the Grenoside dance (see Part 1, p. 56), as vigorously and rhythmically as they can*", referring to SDoNE. This further complicates the notation as the modern understanding of the Greno' step is not as Sharp notated. What he describes is actually a double step with a finishing stamp but it is also notated in 6/8; 9/8 and 4/4 suggesting the step should be adapted to fit the circumstances. The earliest footage suggested double shuffling, however mostly performed poorly and on dirt surfaces.

Phil Heaton's book "Rapper" says "*the only consistent thing in the older films seems to be the step left on beats 1 and, then step right on beats 3 and 4, and so on. The toe and heel taps are extremely varied. Variations include toe/heel, heel/heel, heel/toe and even just flat foot on one of the beats and nothing on the other.*" He shows the stepping as:

Beat 1: step(l), toe/heel(r)

Beat 2: step(l), toe

Beat 3: step(r), toe/heel(r)

Beat 4: step(r), toe(l)

He describes it as "*a rolling toe-heel step, accompanied by a whole body swing*", which was very effective. He also states "*the Old Winlaton White Stars seem never to have mastered stepping altogether*" - which is borne out by the early film footage. However, the Blue Star team of the 1930s and the youth team of the 1950s footage did a single shuffle step, which is how Sallyport have chosen to perform in this version.

Characters

Sharp refers to only one character, a Betty, *"Holding her sword horizontally above her head, harlequin-fashion, she dances up and down outside the dancers, throughout the performance, encouraging them from time to time with wild and uncouth cries"*.

The film footage shows variously a Betty (James Morton) and Tommy (William Prudhoe), either individually or as a pair, suggesting the choice of character was very much down to who was available at the time. Both perform in a similar manner to that related by Sharp but with no evidence of either the calling on song or uncouth cries. Neither do they appear to either provide a running commentary or crack jokes, as is now the custom. This would align with other dances from the area, such as nearby High Spenn.

Both characters step on the spot at the rear of the set during the figures but moving forwards, backwards and from side to side when the dancers spin, to accentuate the spinning movement. At times, the White Stars' Betty waves his hand forward and back above his head or wafts his skirt; he does not carry a sword. The Blue Stars' Betty simply positions himself to the side of the set, just to the rear, and steps (single step) throughout.

Sallyport's performance will reflect the characters as shown in the White Stars film footage.

Music

Sharp associates no special air with the dance, various jigs being played at the musician's discretion. Sharp is specific about what part of the music should be used at various points (eg *"Step 8 bars, B music"*) with the expectation of extra stepping being added between figures to make the dance fit the music. However the film footage shows an evolution away from this style to a more condensed set of timings which is the style we have chosen to follow. Whilst Sharp says the musician plays a tin whistle, the footage shows a selection of instruments.

The Figures

Figure 1 – Ring-Clash-and-Step

The dancers stand in a ring, facing centre, each holding his rapier erect in front of him in his right hand, hilt at breast level. Sharp does not describe how the dancers transition from facing the centre of the ring into their walk-round but the film clearly shows them turn left immediately before beginning the walk-round; we have therefore adopted this movement, left hands on the shoulder of the next dancer. Sharp says the pace is regulated to end with 1 & 5 at the front. Here they clash, place them over their left shoulders, take the sword in front and step, as notated in SDoNE.

Figure 2 – Nut, Rose and Ring

We perform this chorus figure to Sharp's notation.

Nos. 1 and 5 make an arch with the sword between them (No. 5's). No. 1 makes rather more than a whole turn counter-clockwise; while, simultaneously, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 move forward together under the arch, face centre by turning counter-clockwise, separate their hands and lock the swords together, hilts under points. This must be executed very smartly, and should be completed in two bars of the music or even less.

The dancers immediately raise the Nut above their heads, horizontally, and “step” to the end of the phrase. They lower the nut to waist-level and move rapidly round in a ring, clockwise (8 bars, B music) to the following step, executed sideways, the legs alternately opening and closing scissor-fashion, ending with Nos. 1 and 5 facing the audience (ie at the back). Sharp says this is an extraordinarily effective movement, when properly executed. The dancers should incline outward a little, keep their feet fairly close together, take short steps, and move, or whirl, round rapidly and rhythmically.

The original spins shown in the film are poorly executed – possibly because by that time the White Star dancers were old men and no longer capable of spinning as they once had.

Figure 3 – The Needle

The dancers bring their hands together and loosen the swords. Whereupon, No. 1 moves forward (ie, up through the middle) and, followed by Nos. 2 and 3, turns to his left and moves round in a small circle counter-clockwise. Simultaneously, No. 5 moves forward and, followed by No. 4 (who turns out to his right, clockwise), moves round in a small circle, clockwise.

This initiates the Needle, which, from this point, is danced in precisely the same way as in the Swalwell dance, No. 3 changing from one circle to the other in alternate circuits. This movement is continued until No. 1 calls “Nut,” when the dancers at once repeat Figure 2. No. 1 must be careful to make the call when he and No. 5 are at the top, facing the audience, and when No. 3 is in his circle.

Figure 4 – The Fiddler

Nos. 1 and 5, who are now facing the audience, raise the sword between them (No. 5's). No. 1 then makes a whole turn clockwise, while, simultaneously, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 move down together, pass under the arch, turn clockwise, face up (2 bars) and stand.

No. 3, standing in the centre, holds his hands at breast-level with No. 2's sword over his left shoulder and his own sword over his right shoulder; while No. 1 rests his own sword, and No. 5 that of No. 4, on inside shoulders.



(Audience)

Standing thus all “step” to the end of the phrase (8 bars). No. 5 now lowers his sword, over which No. 3 leaps, and all “step” (8 bars). No. 5 again lowering his sword, No. 3 leaps over it backward, returning to his place, and all “step” (8 bars). Whereupon the dancers repeat Figure 2. Sallyport will perform it in this manner.

The team dancing in 1955 replaced the second jump with a backwards somersault, whilst in the 1937 footage, the dancers merely move into the “Fiddler” position and omit the jumps, before tying the Nut, presumably because of age and difficulty in bending down.

Figure 5 – Mary Anne

The beginning of this Figure is executed in the same way as that of the preceding Figure, the dancers falling into the formation shown in the diagram above.

No. 1, raising his left arm, then turns out to his left and, followed by No. 2, dances completely round No. 3, counter-clockwise, and returns to his place, while, simultaneously No. 5, raising his right arm, turns out to his right and, followed by No. 4, dances completely round No. 3, clockwise, and returns to his place. When the two couples meet, behind and in front of No. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 pass inside Nos. 5 and 4.

Upon reaching his place, No. 1, followed by No. 2, makes a complete turn (or loop) counter-clockwise, and again dances round No. 3, counter-clockwise; while, upon reaching his place, No. 5, followed by No. 4, makes a complete turn (or loop) clockwise, and again dances round No. 3, clockwise. When the two couples meet in the second circuit, Nos. 1 and 2 pass outside Nos. 5 and 4.

Upon the completion of the second circuit, Nos. 1 and 5, followed respectively by Nos. 2 and 4, make a complete turn (or loop) as before, No. 1 counter-clockwise, No. 5 clockwise, and face the audience. Whereupon, without pause, Figure 2 is repeated.

The notation does not say whether or not the dancers step while in the Fiddler position so we have chosen to omit this. We also interpret that No3 steps while the other dancers are executing the figure – again SDoNE has no mention of what he does, although the Blue Stars (taught by the White Stars) film does show No3 stepping here.

The sword handling between 1-2 & 4-5 is not explicitly stated in SDoNE, however the film footage shows significant variations and inconsistencies even within the same dance. For this reason we have followed the modern figure’s sword handling (swords up – hands together).

Figure 6 – The Roll

All, except No. 5 (who stands in his place throughout the figure), face counter-clockwise and raise their hands. No. 1, followed by Nos. 2, 3, and 4, then moves down in front of No. 5 (ie, between No. 5 and the centre of the circle), turns to his left and moves round in a circle, counter-clockwise, twice.

At the beginning of each circuit, No. 5, as No. 1 passes him, raises both hands and makes a whole turn clockwise. On the completion of the second circuit, No. 5 moves forward to his place in the ring, all face centre, separate hands, lock the swords together and then dance the Rose and the Rinf of Figure 2.

Sallyport will dance as in the Sharp notation, with just two circuits and No.5 turning on the spot, then a lock (note: we also perform a version where No.5 rolls around the whole set back into place).

Figure 7 – Straight Line:

No. 1 makes a whole turn, clockwise, and faces the audience, while Nos. 2, 3, and 4 move forward under No. 5's sword and stand in line facing the audience, No. 2 turning to his right, making a whole turn clockwise and standing on No. 1's left, No. 4 turning to his left and standing on No. 5's right, No. 3 making a half-turn, clockwise, and standing between Nos. 5 and 1 (2 bars), thus:

4 5 3 1 2

v v v v v

(Audience)

It will be found that, when the hands are lowered to hip level, Nos. 4 and 1 have their hands crossed right over left, and Nos. 5 and 2 have theirs crossed left over right, while No. 3 has his hands wide apart. Standing in this position all "step" to the end of the strain (8 bars). No. 3 now moves forward and makes a half-turn counter-clockwise, No. 2 turns out to his left, makes a whole turn counter-clockwise, passes behind No. 1, and stands between Nos. 1 and 3, while No. 4 turns out to his right, passes behind No. 5 and moves up between Nos. 5 and 3. Simultaneously, No. 1 makes a whole turn counter-clockwise (2 bars). This ties the Nut. Whereupon the remaining movements of Figure 2, the Rose and the Ring, are again repeated.

At the conclusion of the Ring, No. 1 raises the Nut in his right hand, arm erect, and all stand in line, facing the audience, thus:

4 5 1 2 3

v v v v v

(Audience)

and "step" to the end of the tune.

Sallyport perform this figure as notated; however film footage shows a variety of interpretations of getting into this figure, mostly involving the set turning on itself which is not found in the notation.

From here we are following the presentation of the lock as shown in the early film footage which chooses to skip the final Rose & Ring.



Above: Winlaton Sword Dancers dancing outside the Waterloo Hotel and County Court, Old Elvet, at the Durham Miners' Gala on 23 July 1938. Both buildings were demolished to make way for the new Elvet Bridge in the 1970s. Immediately to the left of the photographer, the Half Moon pub still stands; the County Hotel, where the VIPs gather (and where Jeremy Corbyn gave Sallyport the thumbs up when we danced at this very spot in 2017) is to the right of the Waterloo. Note the Betty, left of picture, working the crowd – presumably for money.



This may possibly be the same occasion at the 1938 Durham Miners' Gala as above, but further along Old Elvet at the Racecourse. The whistle player seems to have the same bulging coat pocket! Note the great age of the dancers and the very loose composition of the set.



Above and below: Winlaton White Stars (above) and Blue Stars (below) on 1st July 1937 at the rear of Newcastle City Hall. The Blue Stars famously cadged their figures out of the old men at a cost of numerous alcoholic drinks.

