

Tower Ravens: Westerhope Traditional Competition 2019

Tower Ravens will be dancing a traditional rapper dance collected from the team “Westerhope” (sometimes referred to as the “Northumbrian Traditional Sword Dancers” (Heaton, 2012)), who took their name from a mining area west of central Newcastle. Little has been written about the Westerhope dance, and the only source of notation available is that printed in the article *Westerhope Traditional Prize Sword Dancers* by Les Williamson, published in Folk Music Journal in 1973, and more recently made available through the Rapper Online website (www.rapper.org.uk).

Westerhope was the junior team of North Walbottle, from whom both Cecil Sharp and George Butterworth collected between 1906 and 1912. Therefore, the dances from Westerhope and North Walbottle share some similarities, for example both feature a knot-rose (referred to as “nut and rose” by Sharp) and single guard chorus, and both have a number of figures in common. However, there are some figures unique to each team, such as Westerhope’s jigging guard, chain, double crammer, gymnac and crown. For this reason, Tower Ravens have referred, on the whole, to the notation provided by Williamson as recorded on the Rapper Online website. This notation has been included in Appendix A.

Timings

The Williamson notation describes the shape of each figure but does not specify timings or beats on which the different moves should be performed. To standardise and allow every member of the set to feel confident with the dance, we have designated timings for several of the figures. We feel that this fits within the published notation whilst allowing for a smarter and more enjoyable performance.

Stepping

According to Williamson, the original step was “in single jigging phrases of 8 with a stamp break”, although it is unclear in the text whether he is describing the stepping of Westerhope or North Walbottle. He also says that the North Walbottle team were taught to step by Tom Soulsby, the Westerhope clog dancer, so it is likely that the two teams had a similar stepping style.

Heaton says “Sharp’s account of stepping at Swalwell, Beadnell, Winlaton and North Walbottle simply states that the performers “stand still and ‘step’ as in the Grenoside dance””. It’s not clear whether Sharp means that the step was identical to that used by the Grenoside dancers, or whether it was the action of stepping in position that was similar. The traditional Grenoside step was a double shuffle, which according to Williamson’s article was

only occasionally done. Contemporary records of the Grenoside dance, however, show single shuffles with a tap break.

As it is not clear exactly what the Westerhope dancers would have done, Tower Ravens have chosen to perform single shuffles, in line with the phrase “single jigging phrases of 8”. We finish these phrases of 8 with a stamp break, in accordance with Williamson’s “stamp break”. This also aligns with the contemporary Grenoside dance.

The Tower Ravens interpretation of the step is as follows:

	LEFT	RIGHT		LEFT	RIGHT
1	step		5	step	
& a		shuffle	& a		shuffle
2		step	6		step
& a	shuffle		& a	shuffle	
3	step		7	step	
& a		shuffle	&		tap
4		step	8		step
& a	shuffle				

Choice of Figures

Williamson’s notation lists 13 figures, which are as follows: Single Guard; Curly; Right and Left; Jigging Guard; Tipping Guard; Fourth Corner; Fast Knot; Chain; Cramper; Double Cramper; Back-over-knot; Gymnac; and Crown. The original Westerhope team did not perform the figures in any particularly order, but “merely as remembered”. This flexibility in choosing and ordering the figures has allowed Tower Ravens to construct a dance which we feel best showcases the different shapes. The figures danced by Tower Ravens are detailed in order below.

The formula followed by the Westerhope men was “usually five figures for 5 men, three for 6 men”, although they often performed more figures for more auspicious stands. Tower

Ravens have chosen to follow this formula, and will perform eight figures in total, with the sixth dancer joining the set for the last three figures.

According to Williamson, the inclusion of a sixth dancer was “the notable point of the dance” and that they “joined in the last three or four figures”. It is in line with this, therefore, that our sixth dancer joins the set for the last three figures of the dance. Williamson and Sharp are both clear that this sixth dancer is not the Tommy or Betty, as the characters “never danced”, and Tower Ravens have followed this practice.

Chorus

The Westerhope dance is closely connected to that of North Walbottle. According to Williamson, the North Walbottle men used “a knot-rose and single-guard chorus between each figure”. However, the Westerhope team “preferred to omit the single guard”. As a result, Tower Ravens have chosen to use a knot-rose only chorus, tying the lock and then stepping for 8 in the locked position between each figure. The lock is held “high, about eye height” and untied “by sharply cracking down”, as per the notation. The lock is held flat whilst stepping and “never bent into a tight basket”. When breaking out from the lock we follow the notation by having number 2 lead the breakout.

The Figures

Start

The dance begins with the five dancers walking on without music to stand, as per Williamson’s notation, in a “straight line, swords on shoulders”. When the music starts, we step for 8 and fall into a circle, as per the description: “step 8, No. 1 moves to grip No. 5 rappers, completing a circle”. This is the traditional beginning for stage performances of Westerhope according to Williamson’s notation.

Single Guard

As described in Williamson’s notation, each dancer in turn casts out and around the set, returning to place. As we are using this as one of our figures and not part of the chorus, we will follow the figure with tying up the swords in the knot-rose chorus.

Fast Knot

This figure is performed exactly as described in the Williamson notation (see Appendix A).

Fourth Corner

The figure begins with “stepping in the guard”, which we have interpreted as an 8 beat step in the coach and horses position. The movements are performed as per Williamson’s notation. There are three parts to this figure: getting into the line; the sweeps; moving into position to tie up. When we danced the figure, we found that each part naturally took 4 steps. This gives a total of 12 steps, and in order to start the chorus at the beginning of the phrase, a multiple of 8 is needed. As there are no indications about timing in the notation, it

is unclear what the original team would have done. We considered several options, including trying to slow down one of the parts, or having a 4 beat pause in the dance, but eventually found that including a 4 beat step felt the most natural to us, allowing the fluidity of the figure to be maintained. Although it is necessary to step in 4s for part of this figure in order to accommodate the jumps we maintain the “tap break” at the end of the phrase in order to keep consistency of stepping throughout the dance.

Double Cramper

This figure is performed exactly as described in the Williamson notation (see Appendix A).

Tipping Guard

Similarly to Fourth Corner, the figure begins with “jigging in the guard position”, which we have interpreted as an 8 beat step in the coach and horses position. The movements then follow as per the Williamson notation, with number 3 tumbling. Although not explicitly mentioned in the Williamson notation, we have included a step for 8 before the tumble to allow number 3 time to prepare.

Curly

The curlys are performed as per Williamson’s notation, with 3 curlys being executed in total. We have interpreted the description “from circle guard” as meaning that the figure commences from the walk-round which follows the breaking of the lock and there is no stepping prior to executing the figure. As discussed earlier, the sixth dancer is introduced in the last three or four figures, and it is during this figure that we have introduced them into our dance, in order to remain in line with Williamson’s notation. The sixth dancer joins the set during the first curly and remains in the set until the end of the dance.

Jigging Guard

As with Fourth Corner and Tipping Guard, we have interpreted “starts in the guard position... stepping” to mean that the figure is preceded by a step for 8 in the coach and horses position. Since a sixth dancer will be part of the set, number 3 moves left and the number 6 dancer moves right when casting out of the set. The notation says that when numbers 2 and 4 cast out, number 3 is left “jigging at front of set”. We have therefore chosen to include stepping throughout the figure for those dancers not casting. Similarly, the casting dancers at each stage join in with the stepping after they have cast - or, as the notation says: “jig to end of bar”.

Back-over-knot

Tower Ravens form and display the lock as described in Williamson’s notation. Because this is the final figure in our dance, we have chosen not to untie the knot, but to finish the dance with the display.

Finish

In Williamson’s article under *Notes on the Dance*, he states that “On displaying the knot the team falls into a straight line facing up, No. 1 holding the knot in the middle of the line”.

Tower Ravens therefore step and display the 6 sword lock in a straight line facing up, with number 1 in the centre holding the lock. We conclude the dance in this position. There is no guidance in the notation regarding how the original team would have left the performance area. Therefore, when the music resumes, we stamp on 8 and jog off in the Tower Ravens style.

Sword handling

Williamson's article makes no special mention of the sword handling style of the Westerhope team. However, a photograph printed in *The Illustrated Chronicle* in 1921 (see Appendix B), shows that when in the coach and horses position, numbers 1 and 5 held a straight sword. As a result, Tower Ravens have chosen to maintain their usual style of sword handling throughout the dance, with the amendment of numbers 1 and 5 holding a straight sword in the coach and horses position in the Westerhope style. Once the sixth dancer has joined the set, numbers 3 and 6 also hold the sword between them flat, mirroring this position at the back.

Music

Our musician will be playing *Blackthorn Stick*, *Tenpenny Bit*, *Father O'Flynn*, *Cliffs of Moher* and *Coffee Bridge*. The Westerhope musician, Joe Davidson, stated that "no special tunes were used" in performance and "any 6/8 jig would do". The tunes that Tower Ravens have chosen to use in performance reflect this. The first three have very strong, cited associations with the original team; both *Blackthorn Stick* and *Tenpenny Bit* are tunes that Davidson recognised as having been used by Forster Charlton when he played for the team, and *Father O'Flynn* was one of the tunes played by Joe Davidson for the Westerhope team. The final two tunes are similar in style, and so add variation that would have undoubtedly been heard in the original performances. In particular, *Coffee Bridge* is a tune written by Northumbrian Pipes player Billy Pigg, who listened to traditional Irish music on the wireless. He would have been heavily influenced by the previous tunes in the set, both in his playing and his composition. *Coffee Bridge* is one of only a small handful of jigs that he wrote, and its rhythm complements the Irish double-jig rhythm of the rest of the set, giving a driving, upbeat finale to the dance.

Kit

As this performance is not required to recreate the costume worn by the original Westerhope team, Tower Ravens have chosen to wear their team colours of blue and black. We will maintain our skirts and tights, but lose the petticoat, extend our sleeves and don a blue neckerchief with a badge, as a nod to the original dancers who wore long sleeves, ties and badges in a similar fashion. See Appendix B for picture.

Character

Evidence of characters in the Westerhope performance is mixed. Sharp's notation for the Walbottle dance states that they had both Tommy and Betty, and both Williamson and Sharp are clear that the Tommy and Betty "never danced but merely acted as the collectors and provided the humour" - implying that they were part of the performance. However, a formal photograph of the 1921 Westerhope team who performed at the London Palladium (Heaton, p150-151) features only six dancers and a musician, and the contemporary press reports of the Palladium performance never mentioned the characters (*The Stage*, 11 Aug 1921, as referenced by Heaton).

As it is unclear whether the original Westerhope team would have been supported by characters in their formal performances we do not feel the inclusion of a character in our performance is in conflict with the tradition. We feel that our Tommy enhances our performance whilst staying true to the original spirit of the dance. As our usual Beefeater Tommy did not seem appropriate, we have developed a new character to accompany this dance. We are comfortable in our choice to include a character in this performance, despite the historical uncertainty, as the performance is not required to match the original in this respect.

Conclusion

Tower Ravens believe that we are dancing the Westerhope dance in line with Williamson's notation. Where there have been gaps or areas of uncertainty in the notation (as highlighted above), we believe we have resolved them in the spirit of the original dance, and likewise that those timings added fit well within the scope of the notation. We feel that the resulting dance is an authentic reflection of the original traditional dance but also an enjoyable and entertaining performance for a modern audience.

Bibliography

- Williamson, L., 1973. "Westerhope Traditional Prize Sword Dancers", *Folk Music Journal*, 2(4), pp. 297-304.
Republished [online] available at www.rapper.org.uk as "The Westerhope Sword Dance" [accessed February 2018]
- Heaton, P., 2012. *Rapper: the miners' sword dance of North-East England*. London: EFDSS.
- Sharp, C.J., 1912. *The sword dances of Northern England, part II*. London: Novello.
- Sharp, C.J., 1913. *The sword dances of Northern England, part III*. London: Novello.
- Anon, 1921. "Westerhope 'The Guard'". *The Illustrated Chronicle*
Found in: Wallace, G., 1986. *'Fit to jump ower the moon...': The rapper sword dance of Northumberland and Durham*. Gateshead: Metropolitan Borough Council.
- Youtube video, 2006. Grenoside Sword Dancers. [online] available at: youtu.be/_4IToCtXC8E [accessed February 2018]

Appendix A

An extract from Les Williamson's notation as reproduced online at www.rapper.org.uk, titled *The Westerhope Sword Dance*.

WESTERHOPE DANCE CA. 1910

(ref. Sharp Sword Dances Vol. 3, pp. 103-115)

Start: Straight line, swords on shoulders, step 8, No. 1 moves to grip No. 5 rapper, completing a circle. This is a further stage amendment, more convenient than the in-facing ring, which was retained for outside performances.

1. **Single Guard.** Each dancer in turn lifts his rapper turning left out of the set, dances around the set and back into place.

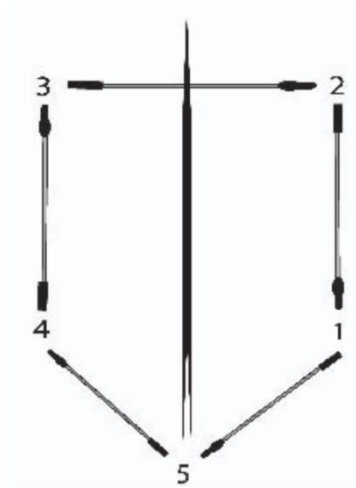
2. **Curly** from circle guard: Nos. 1 and 5 face up, and turn away from each other to the bottom of the set and followed by 2 and 4; No. 3 follows Nos. 1 and 2. Nos. 1 and 5 face each other, dance up the set and repeat the movement. Figure is usually repeated three Times.

3. **Right and left**, begins as curly, three times through. At bottom of the set Nos. 1 and 5 cross to "wrong side" of set followed by 2, 4 and 3. Order of crossing 1, 5, 2, 4, 3. Almost immediately the men cross back to own side of set in same order. Figure performed three times.

4. **Jigging Guard** starts in the guard position (fiddler or coach and horses), stepping. Nos. 1 and 5 turn away from each other and stand behind No. 3, jig to end of bar, Nos. 2 and 4 turn away from each other and stand behind Nos. 1 and 5, leaving No. 3 jigging at front of set. No. 3 moves to right or left and all tie-up.

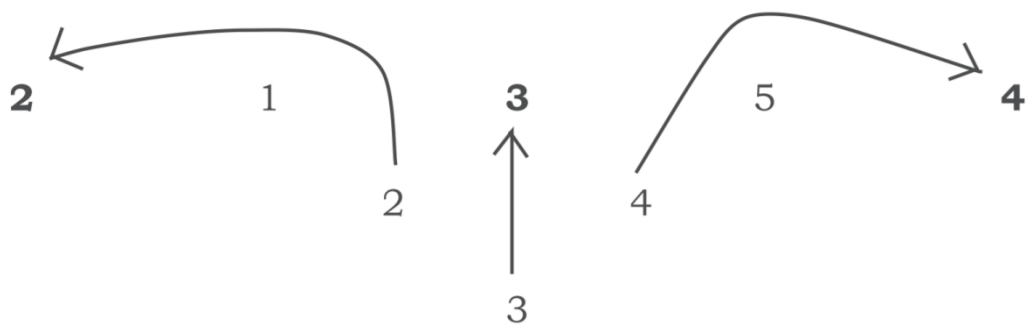
5. **Tipping Guard** jigging in the guard position, No. 3 jumps over 5 rapper and tips

(somersaults); all tie-up. If No. 3 can not tip then the team can stand in the guard in a different order with tipper in 3 position. In boys' team No. 5 tips; from circle guard team falls into guard in following order:



No. 5 then acts as No. 3 in tying up.

6. **Fourth Corner** stepping in the guard. Nos. 1 and 5 lift 5's rapper allowing Nos. 2 and 4 to slip through and to sides, leaving No. 3 in the middle of the line.



No. 3 then lowers both his rappers allowing Nos. 1 and 5 to jump over them; almost immediately Nos. 1 and 5 lower the rapper between them (5 rapper) to allow No. 3 to jump over tie-up.

7. **Fast Knot** (fast meaning tight) figure begins as curly (X2) and "right and left" (X3). After third circuit of right and left No. 1 stays on the wrong side of the set (with No. 2), Nos. 5 and 4 also stay on wrong side (No. 3 can stay on either side). Team then executes a

“curly”. Dancers then cross back to own side (like right and left) Nos. 1, 5, 2, 4 and 3; once through “curly” to untie rappers tie-up.

8. **Chain** from guard position, Nos. 1 and 5 turn out as for “curly”, stand facing down, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 turn on spot to face down; No. 3 crosses rappers behind head. Nos. 1 and 5 sweep 5 rapper under Nos. 2, 3 and 4 who jump over it simultaneously. Nos. 1 and 5 execute fast turns and all tie-up.

9. **Cramper** from guard position, No. 3 walks forward under a lifted rapper turning left around set and back to place. Nos. 2 and 4 move forward around Nos. 1 and 5 respectively; all tie-up.

10. **Double Cramper** starts as “Cramper” with No. 3 moving forward and to left back to place, then moves forward again to right and back to place. Nos. 2 and 4 untie rappers by moving around Nos. 1 and 5 TWICE; all tie-up.

11. **Back-over-knot**. In circle guard all dancers turn half-left, i.e. facing outwards, raising rappers above head, tie an upside-down lock. Dancers fall into display and back into back-to-back position, knot untied by half turn to right.

12. **Gymnac** as for fourth corner. As set moves into a straight line, Nos. 1 and 5 turn down and tip. Both men insisted that the rappers should not be laid across the tippers backs. Tip should be an unassisted somersault, i.e. No. 3 holds rappers forward at arm's length. As with tipping guard, any two dancers in set can tip as long as they are paired in the guard, i.e. 1/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5 or 5/1; team merely alters order of standing in the guard. No. 3 jumps over No. 1 rapper ... tie-up by turning half left.

13. **Crown** added by third generation ... Callerton. Walking clockwise in an open ring Dancers close up and No.

1 tips between Nos 5 and 2.

2	„	1	„	3.
3	„	2	„	4.
4	„	3	„	5.
5	„	1	„	4.

All tie-up with a half-curly.

This figure of course calls for five or six dancers who can somersault unassisted by rappers great care!!!

Tying the knot ... by passing through the guard position, No. 3 leads through and turns to left, Nos. 1 and 2 turn right, No. 5 slips allowing No. 4 to move in front and ties the knot by turning left.

Breaking the knot No. 1 stands and allows No. 2 to turn sharp right followed by Nos. 3, 4 and 5, No. 1 falls in, in front of No. 2 on completion of a circle again.

Appendix B

An image of the Westerhope team from *The Illustrated Chronicle* (1921), showing the handling of the sword between 1 and 5 and the ties with badges worn.



WESTERHOPE 'The Guard' (Coach and Horses). *The Illustrated Chronicle* (1921).