

A word about Playford

by Cécile LAYE

The words “country dancing” first appeared in « THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY » in 1579. Country dancing is first alluded to in a 1560 play, MISOGONUS. We know from their writings that travellers witnessed it at the court of Elisabeth I, that of Charles I and in all circles of society. However the official existence of country dancing begins in 1651.

In that year John Playford, a London music publisher, brought out a collection of 104 country dances under the title “THE ENGLISH DANCING MASTER”, a travesty of a then fashionable comic play that made fun of a French dancing master.

PLAYFORD’s « ENGLISH DANCING MASTER » is as important to English country dancing as THOINOT ARBEAU’s « ORCHESOGRAPHIE » is for Renaissance dances. However while the ORCHESOGRAPHIE is a teaching method for fashionable steps addressing a fictional pupil, THE DANCING MASTER is both a catalogue and a reminder for dancers already familiar with such dances. As a consequence, many questions on style and steps are left unanswered.

In the first pages PLAYFORD provides some cursory definitions of steps used to describe the dances - doubles and singles; a short list of abbreviations and signs follows. He and his helpers brought to their work a care and precision unusual at the time: for each dance we are given

- the title and tune
- a diagram of starting positions
- a description of the different parts of the dance

Obviously John PLAYFORD didn’t make up all those dances. He only collected the choreographies that had been developing over a hundred years, getting increasingly sophisticated and already influenced by foreign dances, from France in particular. Some of the dances have a simple structure : an introduction and a repeated part, for instance UPON A SUMMER’S DAY; other more complicated ones were probably invented by one of the many dancing masters of the time, hired to make up masked dances, and whose names have been forgotten except a few: CONFESS, BEVERIDGE, ISAAC.

PLAYFORD’s book rather tends to freeze the relation between music and dance: the dances described in the book were probably linked from that point on to the provided tunes. Yet dancing masters would choose from a wide range of folk tunes that could just as easily be used to sing one of the BROADSIDE BALLADS sold in the streets. A dance was not systematically linked to a particular tune, unless the dancers repeatedly wished it so, starting a tradition.

Such as it was, the first edition was very successful, which encouraged PLAYFORD to publish several sequels up to 1728. PLAYFORD, then his son Henry, later his successor John YOUNG, published 17 ever thicker books. The last one, with 900 dances, could be called an encyclopaedia of country dancing. The PLAYFORDS held a monopoly on country dancing publishing up to 1711, when publications mushroomed, swamping the market.

The last works on the subject were published in 1830 (WILSON); country dancing then entered a decline while the first partner dances bloomed.

Two periods in the evolution of country dancing took place between the first and the seventeenth edition

1. The period covered by editions 1 to 7 could be called the household period of country dancing, when both private households and the Court appreciated it as fun and relaxing. Thanks to Samuel PEPYS, who wrote a diary from 1660 to 1670, we have interesting information about a ball given in Whitehall in 1662. After dancing a Branle and a Courante the king and courtiers started on “peasant dances” and the king asked for “CUCKOLDS ALL ARROW” (out of the first edition) as “the old English dance”. It thus seems that after dances held suitable for a royal ball, country dancing occurred at a more informal time, when one danced for one’s pleasure.

The dances of that period include a large number of DANCING MASTER formations; they answer the need of a very small gathering (four persons or more).

For instance :

Square for four	HEARTSEASE
Square for eight	FAIN I WOULD
Round for six	KEMP'S JIG
Round for eight	NEWCASTLE
Progressive circle	ROSE IS WHITE, ROSE IS RED
Longways for six	THE OLD MOLE
Longways for eight	LULL ME BEYOND ME
Longways for as many as will	THE GUN
Formation other than couples	CONFESS W M W W M W DARGASON W W W M M M
Country dances including an element of mime, rather like Renaissance « branles morgués »	SWEET KATE MUNDESSE HAVE AT THY COAT OLD WOMAN CATCHING OF QUAILS PAUL'S STEEPLE

2. This variety gradually decreases, replaced by the LONGWAYS FOR AS MANY AS WILL with two possibilities: DUPLE MINOR SET or TRIPLE MINOR SET. With the English middle class growing more influential, the Court was no longer the only place for major entertainment. All people of some importance would meet in “assemblies”, in particular in thermal resorts such as BATH and TUNBRIDGE, hoping to be seen at concerts, promenades and balls. Balls were a solemn affair, with a master of ceremony in charge.

Balls would start with a formal part, with each couple in its turn dancing the minuet. The second part was probably livelier and more enjoyable. A “LONGWAYS FOR AS

MANY AS WILL” would be just the thing, with all dancers in one set or, later, several sets; dancers facing each other on two lines, each couple with a number according to the part it is to dance, and all playing their part in a figure that has them progress up or down the set.

The same figure is repeated a number of times, much easier to remember than older forms. The fashion for longways was to sweep through Europe. In France, still under the reign of the Baroque “Belle Danse” with its fancy footwork, it won approval for being an easy-to-do collective dance. We thus see English country dancing as the outcome of a process amalgamating, over many years:

- **Folk dance characteristics also found in SWORD DANCING and MORRIS DANCING**
- **Existing society dances, in particular Measures, a kind of figure Pavan that already used the terms cast, set, turn single**
- **Important foreign influences, in particular from the Italian Balli described by Italian masters in the 15th and 16th century**
- **Last but not least, the influence of music that makes the dancing vivacious and light**

After 1840 country dancing fell into disuse until Cecil SHARP made it popular again early in the 20th century.