

Local history links for schools

During the Taking Steps Project, we have led dozens of workshops for all ages and abilities. Every workshop is a little different, but covers a lot of the same ground, so we thought it would be helpful to jot down some of those thoughts here. You might want to use them as a follow-on from a workshop, or as a starter for your own discovery of the tradition. Either way, we hope you find it useful and, more importantly, get stepping!

This photograph is one of the earliest images we have of Dartmoor Stepdancing (or stepping) in action at a village sports event in Whiddon Down. It was taken in 1932, and shows Albert Crocker dancing, accompanied by George Cann on the concertina. Tunes were often referred to by the name of the person who played and/or taught them, and you can listen to “Uncle George’s Hornpipe” as it was passed down through the generations at <http://www.dartmoorstepdance.org.uk/music/stepdance-tunes/uncle-georges-hornpipe/>.



This picture is a great starter for discussion! Firstly, you will notice that people are looking very smart, probably wearing their “Sunday best” for a special occasion. However, the rest of the week they would be dressed for work on the moors, probably in the mines, the quarries or on the farm. Wages were low, hours were long, and a lot of time was spent outside in the elements. Hats were commonplace – they kept your head warm! Cars were few and far between, so people walked. A lot! Comparative to wages, shoes were very expensive, and most people could only afford one pair, perhaps a second for Sunday best if they were lucky. That meant that shoes had to be very sturdy and were often taken to the cobblers for repair. Leather soles

were often reinforced with Segs and Blakeys to reduce wear at the heel and toe. Working boots had hobnails on the sole, and a horseshoe at the heel to give better grip and make them last longer. In the days before television, entertainment was homemade, and playing music was a big part of life. Since the advent of mass-produced musical instruments in the Victorian era, more and more people could play for entertainment. Harmonicas (mouth-organs) were a cheap, simple instrument – “music in your pocket” – which could be played at work, at home, at the pub, at a party. Concertinas and melodeons (harmonicas with bellows and buttons attached!) were also fairly common, and people enjoyed sitting down for a good set of tunes. And what happens when someone plays music? People want to dance (or drum on the nearest available surface)! Combine that with a good sturdy pair of shoes, and you have stepdancing or, to put it another way, drumming with your feet.

The context

So let's explore more. We can see a dancer and a musician playing, in this case, a concertina. It could equally well be a harmonica or melodeon. And they could be anywhere – a house, a pub, or in their lunchbreak at work. But this is a bit different. It's a special event and people are watching. In fact, it's a competition and there's a cash prize at stake, not to mention the prestige of being the local stepdance champion! The dancer is on a portable stage, otherwise known as a farm wagon, which means that people can see and hear much better. On top of the wagon is a small stepboard, which you will see is raised up slightly to create a small gap, or resonating cavity, underneath which amplifies the sound of the steps. The origins of the stepboard aren't fully known. Some say it was better to dance on than hard flagstones, others say it was to protect the floor from the hobnail boots. But whatever the reason, a stepboard is a useful, portable, surface to dance on, and became an important part of the competition. It has been said that the better the dancer, the smaller the space they can dance on. In Dartmoor stepdance competitions this has certainly been put to the test! In this picture, the board is thought to have been around 18" square (that's about 46cm), not a great deal bigger than the dancer's feet!

The musician

You will notice that in this picture the musician has his back to the dancer and does not, therefore, know who is dancing. This stops him showing favouritism to one dancer, and sabotaging another by playing the tune at different speeds according to the dancers' preference!

The competition dance

The dance has inevitably evolved over time, and in social settings people almost certainly did all sorts of different variations to whatever tune was being played. In a competition, however, there would be a structure and a set of rules. Sadly, although we have records of past winners and runners-up from various competitions, the exact rules of each contest have been hard to pin down. However, in the last remaining competition, held each year at the Dartmoor Folk Festival in South Zeal, there are 3 rounds during which dancers are gradually knocked out. Points are given for rhythm, style and the complexity of steps. Simple steps danced accurately will always trump complicated steps danced out of time, as being in time with the music is the most important aim for any step dancer, as it should be for a drummer! Stepping off the board equals disqualification! The basic structure of steps is as follows:

The musician plays once through the tune for each dancer in turn. The tune falls into 4 distinct sections, the first and third of which are repeated giving an A A B B structure. Each section has 8 bars. The first two sections, A1 and A2, are known as the "setting",

where the dancer beats time to the music using very simple steps. This is the easiest section to get started on, with a basic *step tap step tap* pattern. The setting may end with a “break”, which is basically a way of ending the phrase, a bit like a full stop at the end of a sentence. The second half, (B1 and B2) works much the same, but here the dancer performs some slightly showier steps, ending again with a break. This section is called the “stepping”. A dancer will perform once through the tune per round, with the idea that they should dance different steps or variations in each subsequent round.

Each dancer has his/her own style and preferred steps. Take time to watch the clips on the website and think about some of these questions:

- Are they dancing any steps you recognise?
- What rhythms are they playing with their feet? Can you clap/tap/speak any of the rhythms?
- Can you copy any of the steps?
- Why does the musician play an introduction before the dancer begins?
- Which parts of the feet make the sounds?
- Can you compare the styles of different dancers?
- Which steps do you prefer and why?
- If you could describe Dartmoor stepdancing in one sentence, what would it be?
- What questions would you like to ask the dancer?