

LONG SWORD IN CLEVELAND

The most widely practiced long sword dance is North Skelton. The tradition in Cleveland was made famous between the wars by the North Skelton White Rose team and five figures of the dance described by Douglas Kennedy and published by the EFDSS in 1927. The dance exists on film in the EFDSS archives. The Cleveland dances are related to those at Sleights and Goathland of which the former was published by Sharp, Sword Dances of Northern England Part II (1912). Goathland Plough Stots are still active. Another Cleveland variant was published by Leta Douglas in Three More Dances of the Yorkshire Dales (1934). This dance is at present performed by schoolboys in Boosbeck. Contemporary with North Skelton and also still active is Lingdale Prinrose and finally Loftus represent a revival of the early 1950's of another dance in this general tradition. Over the years there have been other sides such as at Skelton Green of limited existence.

The limited historical information in the Kennedy booklet can be supplemented from "Loftus Urban District Council Souvenir Coronation Year Book 2nd June 1953" printed by J.E. Ford and Sons, Loftus, pp 26-29 "Sword Dancing in Loftus".

" In his records (Cecil Sharp) he tells how the organisers of these teams (at North Skelton) learnt their dancing from an old man at Loftus, but he was not able to continue his enquiries there.

It would appear that the sword dancer here referred to, was that encouraged and taught by Mr. John Featherstone of Hartington St. about 1890. He learnt the figures and three traditional tunes from an old Goathland Plough Stot called Ventress living near, who, it is said, was not much of a dancer himself. The latter was an ironstone miner but left here to become a publican at Egton.

In order to keep his children and their friends out of the public houses and off the streets at night, Mr. Featherstone and his wife encouraged them to play games like Fox and Geese and Merrils. The idea of sword dancing quickly caught their imagination and while John whistled the tunes, the younger men danced around the kitchen, using hazel sticks for swords. The dancers included the brothers George and Robert Featherstone (in 1953 living in Great Ayton), Joe Winspear, Charles Mayes, Tom Martin and William Martin. The last named later married John Featherstone's daughter who was still alive in 1953, and living in Loftus and is the source of much of this information.....

..... Later George Featherstone learnt to play the melodeon and became a most proficient performer, in constant demand for all kinds of folk dancing for teams in East Cleveland until his death. Joe Winspear also became a musician and played many years later with North Skelton, but in the early days the musician was John Watts from Skinningrove.

Some steel swords, a few of which are still in existence, were made for the team at Robinson's Foundry near the Railway Station at a cost of 2/8d each and for public occasions, some pink linen jackets were made by Mrs. I. Creswick, Joe Winspear's cousin of Liverton mines. These were later replaced by military uniforms which were apparently considered more appropriate.....

..... There were always 2 extra members of the team in addition to the 6 dancers, who dressed in clown's clothes and had their faces blackened with soot. Alternatively one of these was dressed as an old woman and took part, with her husband, in some ritual which was traditionally part of the dance. They also took up the collection from the onlookers attracted by the music and the dancing.

During the early 1890's much distress was caused in the district by a strike in the Durham coalfield and many miners, including all of the team, moved to Derbyshire, to a newly built town called Poolsbrook, nr. Chesterfield. The whole Featherstone family together with the Martins, Joe Winspear, Pat Seymour, John Watts and Charlie Mayes, settled here for the next few years and it was not long before the sword dance team was in action. Tom Martin, however, became interested in a girl and left the team, being replaced by George Darby, a Staffordshire miner.

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A photograph of the team taken at Chesterfield in 1892 (in EFDSS library) the only one of the team in existence apparently, shows the following: Matthew Seymour, William Martin, George Featherstone, George Darby, John Watts, Joe Winspear, Charlie Hayes, Robert Featherstone, with Tom Shaw and Tom Gilbert clowns. The last named was not a regular member. After a few years in Derbyshire where, according to Mrs Martin they never really felt at home, the Loftus people came back to Cleveland.

After the death of her husband, Mrs. Featherstone and her youngest son John took a smallholding at Moorsholt, where they were joined by George and Robert and their wives. Joe Winspear settled in North Skelton where he taught sword dancing to the team which became so famous, and William Martin obtained employment and a house at Lingdale. Later George Featherstone moved to Lingdale where he was responsible for forming the Lingdale Progressive Sword Dance Team which included 3 of his own boys. When Mr. Martin was asked to go to Ayton to open out the Rosberry mine he took Robert Featherstone and several others with him. The Martins stayed here for many years, apart from a fruitless trip to America where the anthracite mining did not suit his health, before returning to Loftus, and Mr. Martin worked as overman at the Loftus mine until his retirement.

Some time after 1900 another sword dance team was formed here and this team, with certain changes, continued in existence until after the 1914-18 war, its last performance being in about 1921. Many members of this team are still alive and include Joe Winspear, the musician, cousin to the same name mentioned previously Jack Legg, Jim Taylor, A. Henwood, Dick Lagor, Paddy Hodgson, R. Jackson and J. Garner. The swords used by this team were made from strips cut from old crosscut saws by the blacksmith at the mine.

Mr. Winspear tells how their team, supplemented by others including Charlie Dadd who played the bones and did a bit of clog dancing, gave "benefit" concerts in aid of unfortunate friends who because of illness or unemployment and in the absence of the kind of help that would be given today, found themselves in difficulties. On occasion as much as £14 was raised by these efforts. In wet weather, practices were held indoors, at one time in Mr. "Jumbo" Harrison's kitchen, but never in the luxury of a hall, and in fine weather the team went to a clearing in the woods below Loftus and performed there. When it was necessary to practice in the dark, the young men made miners' "widges" consisting of empty fruit tins with a hole cut in the side to hold a candle and hung these on the trees around the arena. During the strike of 1911 the team went out on a week's busking at Whitby, dancing and making collections at various farms and villages on the way. They slept for several nights on the benches and floor of a public house in Whitby and danced in the streets during the day. On several occasions they were pelted with dead fish by the fisherlads, but by the end of the week everyone was quite friendly to them. On other occasions the dancers would go to the outlying farms to dance, where they were given eggs, pieces of bacon and other welcome gifts in addition to money.

In the present revival of sword dancing (at Loftus) we have tried to recapture the spirit and enthusiasm of these pioneers. The figures of our dance have been decided upon after talks we have had with the survivors of the old dance teams, and if there is any similarity between our dance and the other named Cleveland dances this is natural in view of the history of these dances. The present Loftus Sword Dance Team was started at the County Modern School in 1950 and since the spring of 1951 we have been fortunate in having the advice and help as musician of Mr. Arthur Marshall of Charltons, who has a national reputation as a player of sword dance music. He first became interested in playing the melodeon with the North Skelton team in the early 1920's. The first public dancing done by the new Loftus team was in connection with the Festival of Britain ceremonies in the town in 1951. "