

DUMMER'S FIVE HAND REEL

At the turn of the century many young people learnt the elementary skills of social dancing at classes. The series of lessons would often end with a ball or even a series of subscription dances. It was obligatory to wear evening dress, white gloves and patent leather shoes and to use a dance programme so that one could be booked for every dance. The programme would include the new sequence dances then being composed as well as the older waltz, polka and gallop and the Set Dances such as the Lancers and Quadrilles. There would be party dances for fun. To show the teachers skills the pupils would often have learnt special dances for display. One such was a Five Hand Reel, that is a dance for 5 people, learnt at a class covering the Overton, North Waltham, Dummer area.

The reels and step dances were the old social dances of the labouring people of the south. Thomas Hardy as a youth remembered the arrival of the longways dance in Dorset as a dance for ordinary people even though such had been done for a century at the Assembly Rooms by the better classes. Accounts of such polite events as by Jane Austen showed why it had not appealed to a more rambustious clientele.

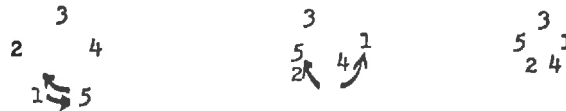
New dance forms brought new ideas that influenced all that followed later. For example the popularity of the waltz and polka steps ensured they became incorporated into the Quadrilles and Longways dances and the "new" movements possible in the Quadrille formation became used in later composed dances in older formations. The Five Hand Reel included a "basket" - a linked arms circular figure from the Lancers that suggests that it is not a particularly old dance.

The music for the dance was the Brighton Camp or similar well known polka played to fit the "stepping".

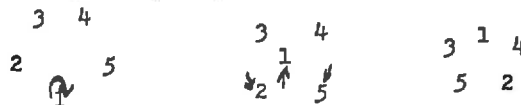
The dance is for five persons and as it does not require partners it can be with any mix of the sexes. They start in a ring with hands joined and dance once round to the left using the usual polka step for travelling in a social dance. Then they drop hands and one of the five turns back to face the other way and weaves in and out the other four, who continue to move clockwise round the circle. The same dancer then goes into the centre of the ring and the others stop and stand facing the centre. The leader faces one of the four and the two of them "step" for 4 bars of music using either a simple step-hop backstep or a polka with the first beat's step behind rather than in front of the supporting foot. The leader turns to face the other way and steps to the opposite dancer. Then these three do a reel of three or figure eight as in Dashing White Sargeant. The leader then falls out into their starting position in the ring and they all join hands and form a five person basket without letting go of their hands. Doing this is the fun part of the dance and needs a little practice, otherwise the music for the movement will be past before the dancers have formed up!

There are two ways of forming the basket. At least they seem different when explained but topologically they are identical.

- a) The leader pulls the right hand person across in front of them while they go two places to their right and duck under the arms so that all the bodies are on the inside and the arms interwoven behind to form the basket. It will be noted that the arm crossing is different for different dancers, sometimes right over or left over or both or neither. This is correct.



- b) The leader raises their right hand, turns to right under it to face out of the ring, and then moves backwards across the ring to stand between the two dancers opposite. The leader's hands are crossed so they pull them apart which makes the leader's original neighbours change places. They duck under the arms to form the basket. With practice this way to form the basket can be done in only two or three beats of the music.



After the basket the dancers either untie by doing the reverse of the above or just let go. Returning to the initial order is not very significant in this dance.

The leader then goes back into the centre of the ring and steps to one of the other two dancers and then the last one. They do another reel of three and a basket to complete the sequence. The next dancer becomes the leader and the sequence starts with the ring and weaving. The dance continues till each has had a turn as leader. It ends on a basket or a ring.

When this dance was first explained it seemed to be a cut-down version of a bigger set dance and as I had never heard of five hand reels it was not taken very seriously. Then I was told of the Flett's work in the north of England which showed that such dances were common, so I started to use it at workshops. Eventually the Reading Cloggies taught it to a WI team from Dummer and they danced it in the village. They were told that they had missed out a key element. The leader of each turn carried a "Jack" which was a small modelled head of a Punch or Jester mounted on a short handle and which was passed on to the next dancer at the end of the sequence. The leader flourished the Jack while stepping in the centre. However the fancy way of forming the basket was not recalled!

The Five Hand Reel has been learnt by several southern display teams because of the lack of other southern dances and because of the needs of displays the dance is often shortened or other ways of forming the basket included. It will even be seen danced in clogs with northern English steps!