

BACCAPIPES

A solo dance or "jig" that exhibits personal skills that is performed over two crossed churchwarden clay pipes. The dance is related to that done over crossed swords, versions of which are known from the Highlands of Scotland, to Cumberland, the Forest of Dean and the Isle of Wight. Of course it could also be done over a pair of any suitable agricultural implement such as flails and once it was seen danced in a pub over a pair of prize winning parsnips!

The idea of clay pipes for smoking tobacco was introduced from America about 1560. The first pipes with long stems, called "Alderman" or "Straws", were made from 1750 and were 18 to 24 inches long. The very long ones, called "Yards of Clay", about 36 inches long were not made till 1850. The name "Churchwarden" was not used till late in the 19th century.

Being readily available the pipes quickly led to competition, in smoking and in other uses. Typically the ground or floor under the crossed pipes would be dusted with flour or sand and the dancers judged by how close they could mark into the vertices of the crossing without touching or disturbing the pipes. Of course touching usually broke the pipe to the cost of the performer!

The usual tune was "Greensleeves" - not the waltz rhythm version now associated with Henry VIII but in a livelier jig or hornpipe rhythm. As dancers could not always find a musician for practice or performance there grew the habit of singing simple rhymes.

Some say the devil's dead, the devil's dead, the devil's dead,

Some say the devil's dead and buried in Cold Harbour.

Some say he's up again, some say he's up again,

Some say he's up again, apprenticed to a barber.

Or,

Greensleeves and yellow lace, get up you bitch and work a pace,

Your father lies in a hell of a place, all for want of money.

The step was either a step-hop on alternate feet or a "heel-and-toe" cross rhythm step. The weight would change from foot to foot on the strong beats in a bar of music and the free foot would be tapped on the weak beat between.

The dance is structured to have a passage of music dancing around the pipes and alternate passages dancing over the pipes. Usually each time the dancer goes into the pipes they would dance a different pattern of taps across the pipes both over the stems and into the vertices, sometimes from one position throughout the passage or progressing around the pipes.