

News From Canada—True North Music and Dance Takes Its Final Bow

by Sheila Scott, Chair, TNMD

March 31st, 2019 marked a sad day for the dance community in London, Ontario, when we held our last True North Music and Dance event of the era. We dancers have come full circle after nearly 40 years encompassing morris, long sword, rapper, northwest clog, contra, historical, “Playford” demos, Christmas Wassail performances, ECD annual workshops with high calibre leaders and musicians – and a lot of fun! It was bold Englishman John Gillett, who danced with the Shakespeare Morris Men in Stratford (UK), who started the ball rolling in the mid 1970’s and Forest City Morris and Sword was born with three sides, men, women and mixed.

Our first connection to CDSS was through English Week at Pinewoods in 1980 when the “Three Canadian/Scottish Musketeers”, Alistair Brown, Sheila Scott (Duncan at that time) and Janice Mark attended to absorb all the morris and ritual classes available and they discovered “this English dance stuff” going on in the evening and were hooked. They came back to London “speaking in tongues” and immediately started a country dance series with various bands and various musicians—Fat Boys, The Waits, New Rigged Ship—and novice callers Alistair Brown, Janice Mark, Sheila Scott, Cathy Stephens, and Pat Taylor. Cathy Stephens branched out to lead historical, vintage, and Victorian dance in the ten-year series of Victorian Echoes and Ragtime Rendezvous annual weekends. Many Londoners regularly attended Pinewoods over the years, including recipients of scholarships provided by the proceeds of the annual silent auctions (overseen by Margot Kearney), as well as matching scholarships from CDSS. The Pinewoods “All Camp Canada Parties” hosted by Tom and Anne Siess and Margot Kearney are legendary.

The morris teams increased to six: Forest City Morris and Sword (the original London team which still exists today as a women’s side), Malt Mill, Thames Valley International (still going strong), Harlequin (a youth team), Goatshead Northwest and Stonetown Northwest.

The annual London Morris Ale was a popular fixture on the morris circuit calendar, and London teams were often invited to the Marlboro Ale. Over the years, Forest City and Thames Valley enjoyed tours to England, while Goatshead received an invitation to tour spectacular Bermuda.

ECD also flourished with the formation of the London Playford Dancers (under the direction of Elizabeth Taylor and later Sheila Scott) and the annual London Playford Ball Weekends which ran for 25 years! These events attracted dancers from a wide area of Canada and the US. Thanks to several grants over the years from CDSS we were able to engage superb dance leaders and bands who were all at the top of their game. The famous lively “after parties” at the home of Tom and Anne Siess were also a highlight. Sunday morning saw shape note singing at the Siess home for those willing and able.

True North Music and Dance ran the dance area at Home County Folk Festival, and performed at it for twenty years, and one year hosted the Berea Dancers. “Home County in the Schools” operated an outreach program for several years in local elementary schools. Sheila Scott and musician Bill Stephens, on buttonbox, were invited to teach morris, the Maypole Dance and community dances in various settings.

Our last dance on March 31st, with local band Celtic Shift, was a celebration of all that has been accomplished,





Above: *London Playford Dancers. Photo courtesy of London Free Press .* **Opposite page:** *Forest City Morris and Sword. Photo by Wendy Palmer.*

new dance groups forming and recognition of the many dancers' and musicians' contributions over the years. In memory of Tom Siess we danced several of his compositions—Scotch on the Rocks (for Tracey McDonald and Gerry Rucchin's wedding), Hands Across the Border (for Barbara Broerman and John Patcai's wedding) and Dancing in the Springtime (for our annual Playford Ball weekend which was always held in March, sometimes in a blizzard!). The "newlyweds," now happily married couples, were in attendance.

So, why are we disbanding after all of the above achievements? Unfortunately, our numbers have been gradually dwindling and our regular dance series has been reduced to four Sunday afternoon dances from September–April. This has worked well for a while, but our numbers were often on the edge. We have been dealt a blow this past year with the loss of six of our regular/key dancers, due to the ravages of death, injuries, moving away etc., and we have been unable to attract enough new people. We are no longer sustainable and the regulars are running out of steam. We are delighted, however, to celebrate the development of the new groups that have sprung up since we started all those years ago.

And what of the morris? We dancers have come full circle indeed. Forest City Morris and Sword is still active as a women's side. Thames Valley International no longer has its base in London—hence the "International", but they are still dancing.

Gratitude

All of the successes of True North Music and Dance over the years were accomplished by the efforts and contributions of a dedicated core executive of volunteers. These are the people who spent many hours planning events, making arrangements for venues and bands, organizing activities, and of course the callers who help make the dances happen. We would like to recognize the contributions of these dedicated volunteers: Sheila Scott, Tom and Anne Siess, Janice Mark, Gary and Heather Struckett, Laura Brown, Tracey McDonald, Bruce Curtis and Patricia Ferries.