Cornish Folk Dance Tradition

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Abstract

Folk dance is more than just a collection of steps movement and music; it is a form of human expression and its essence lies within its community role and social context rather than purely commercial or artistic interests. The story of folk dance in Cornwall, from medieval roots, through narratives of the nineteenth Century folklorists, the activity of the Celtic revivalists and on to the present day, is a fascinating one that reflects the distinct cultural profile of Cornwall.

There are a number of different threads that can be followed in Cornish folk dance. This talk will explore the ubiquitous Furry dance, the arcane world of the Cornish Guise dancer, the intricate steps of “Scoot Dancing” and social dance with its Serpent and the intriguing named “Snail Creep”. We will look at the social context of folk dance from the Methodist Tea Treat and the rather less sober “troyls” of the fish cellars and how these relate to folk dance in Cornwall today.

Folk Tradition: Process, Identity and Location

For the media industry "folk tradition" is a genre of popular music, for the ethnologist it is a social phenomenon with complex features but for many of us it is simply a fascinating music and dance culture. It is helpful to have a common understanding when exploring traditions like Cornish dance and two features stand out: tradition is a process rather than something static and unchanging; and folk tradition is something that exists in different social contexts.

Folk tradition has continuity with the past and is transmitted from person to person but is a living process where change takes place. This change is influenced by both the wider social milieu and the attitudes and experiences of the people involved. Folk traditions do not necessarily have a single point of origin or invention, they might coalesce from a variety of story lines and musical or choreographic ideas. Some of these ideas might have their origins in the medieval world but they might also be more recent. Although oral transmission is the obvious way in which traditions are passed from person to person they can be conveyed via written text or audio and visual recording, especially in modern social media. The issue is not what form transmission takes but whether that form results in a definitive static version or contributes to the process of change in folk tradition.[1]

Folk dance traditions exist in many different social contexts, but it is useful to distil these into two "existences". The first existence is where the tradition is an integral part of community life and marks time. Here the dance tradition is learned by participation, often from an early age and change is a reflexive, spontaneous response to external influences. In a second existence dance tradition is still be owned by a community but it is practiced by a smaller group of interested people as an occupation of leisure, hobby or sport. In a second existence traditional dance is formally taught by recognised teachers or through dance clubs. Change is subject to careful reflection on whether this is consistent with the continuity and understanding of that dance tradition. [2]

A sense of identity is an integral part of folk tradition and before we move on to the dances themselves it is useful to briefly consider Cornish identity. Cornish identity is born of the landscape, the history, and the people of Cornwall together with their culture and traditions. It is rooted in early middle ages when the Brythonic Language divided into Breton, Welsh and Cornish and the borders between England, Cornwall and Wales were set out. The Cornish language flowered in the late medieval period and provided the written texts preserved it for posterity. Nineteenth century Cornwall was defined by its leading part in the industrial revolution. Engine houses and mine workings joined a landscape already defined by hill forts and standing stones. In the early 20th century Cornish people turned once again to their roots and links with the other Celtic communities along the Atlantic seaboard in what is sometimes termed the Celtic Revival.

In the 21st Century Cornish was recognised and protected as one of a Europe's minority languages and the Cornish people were recognised by the U.K. Government as a national minority alongside of the Scottish and Welsh under the Framework Convention of the Council for Europe.[3] The Council of Europe was set up by Churchill after the Second World War and has no connection with the European Union!

There are four streams of folk-dance tradition in Cornwall which reflect different aspects of Cornwall's history and identity: Furry Dances, Guize Dances, Scoot Dances and Social Dance.

The Furry Dance Tradition

Furry Dance Newquay circa 1950s

Furry dances are essentially processional dances for couples travelling around the town or village to celebrate a feast day or special event. Indeed, the word "furry" derives for the Cornish "fer" and Latin "feria" for fair. The step is a one, two, three hop and a given number of bars are used to travel forward followed by performing a figure. Many towns and villages have their own Furry Dance. A description of Helston's Furry dance on 8th May appears in the Gentleman's Magazine of 1790 and there several early 19th century records of others taking place around West Cornwall in early May.

John Knill Ceremony St Ives 1921

The Furry Dance was clearly seen as a long-established Cornish tradition in 1801 when adopted for the first John Knill ceremony in St Ives. This ceremony takes place every five years on 25th July and commemorates the eccentric John Knill, erstwhile mayor and customs officer in St Ives.

Although early 19th century histories and newspaper reports locate Furry Dances largely in the West this probably reflects media interest and reporting practice and it is likely that it was always a Cornwall wide tradition. It was certainly widespread in the early twentieth century and despite expectation that it would lose popularity in the "modern" forward looking periods after the first and second World Wars seemed to have gone from strength to strength. A number of new dances have been written within the tradition since the 1960s, notably the Newquay Heva Dance which is danced to a song that captures some of the town's nineteenth century history.

The Furry Dance has remained within what we have described above as a "first existence" tradition owned by and identified with local communities. There is an interesting story of change around the name in that it was originally called the Faddy Dance.

The term "The Faddy Dance" is an enigma. There are no Anglo Saxon or Old Cornish words like faddy except possibly "fadic" found in an 11th Century Cornish / Latin Vocabulary, with the meaning "to flee". [4] But had it remained part of spoken Cornish then the "D" would have softened to "S" as the language evolved during the medieval period. A stronger candidate for origin of the word is the Irish "Fada" as in "Rinnce Fada" (Rinnce- Dance, Fada -Long) and there is processional dance of this name in Kilkenny.[5] Relative ease of travel by sea meant that there were strong links between Ireland and Cornwall during the medieval period.

It became the Furry Dance in the mid nineteenth century because it took place on a fair day and following antiquarian insistence that it must have originated pagan times and the Roman "Floralia", the term "Flora Dance" started to be used. In 1911 popular singer, Katie Moss witnessed the Furry Dance in Helston and was inspired to write a song about it which she called it the "Floral Dance". Despite Katie Moss's tune being undanceable, "Floral" also entered the arena as a name for these dances. This was reinforced some 60 years later by the chart success of recordings by the Brighouse and Rastrick Band and Terry Wogan.

Cornish Guize (Geeze) Dance

St Ives Guizers in 1970s (Dave Lobb Archive)

There is a sense in which the Guize Dance is Cornwall's equivalent to the English Morris; both have their roots in the pan European medieval melting pot of folk traditions, and both evolved to take on their own distinctive form in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Cornwall this medieval melting pot was represented by the Cornish Language Mystery Plays which contain many elements that later appear in Guize Dance tradition: beasts, dragons, hobby horses, wassails, dancing, apocryphal stories and merriment at the expense of the ruling elite.

Geeze is a dialect term derived from the Cornish language word "Geys" meaning a jest and "Geysor" a jester or fool. The last line of the last play to be transcribed in 1611 is almost a portend of the Guize Dance tradition that was to evolve;

> *Minstrels growgh theny peba*
> *May hallan warbarthe downssya*
> *Del* ew *an vaner han* ***geys***[6]

(Minstrels pipe for us that we may dance together as is the manner and the guise / custom)

Guize Dance centres around a procession, song or dramatic custom where the players disguise themselves with veils, masks or blackened faces and attire themselves in mock posh costume or cross dress. The costume serves to instil a sense of carnival and anarchy as the participants are protected by their anonymity. There are sometimes specific songs, tunes or dances associated with them for example The Madron Guize Dance rounds off with the delightfully named "Turkey Rhubarb" and shows how Cornwall's maritime heritage can be reflected in folk tradition. The dance is a kind of Mazurka which started out in Eastern Europe and ended up in Brittany before hopping across the Celtic sea to Cornwall and then to Ireland. The Irish version of the dance is called Father Murphy's topcoat" and is similar to the Cornish one.

Guize Dances are associated with feast days and customs throughout the year in Cornwall but are particularly popular during Midwinter. In the nineteenth century contributions were invited in kind or money in support of the festivities. Today this custom has largely died out or evolved as a collection for charity. Much of our knowledge of the nineteenth and early twentieth century tradition comes from newspaper reports and sometimes middle-class criticism provides unwitting testimony to its popularity:

> *I learn with greatest satisfaction that the worthy Mayor of St Ives, Mr Edward Hain has prohibited Gees Dancing for the year 1900.......people parade the principle streets many being "dressed up", shouting, singing, dancing, ...men dressed as women and women dressed as men, girls as boys and boys as girls, some of whom under the influence of drink, perform sundry antics which, for vulgarity, would be hard to beat.*
> (S. T. Rowe, St Ives Weekly Summary, January 6, 1900)

The St Ives worthies failed to discourage the tradition completely as it was embraced by Celtic Revivalists in the 1920s and the town's Guize Dance tradition has continued in various forms to the present day. Cycles of popularity, decline and revival are part of the very nature of the traditional process and well-established traditions like the St Ives Guizers, Padstow's Obby Oss and midwinter Mummers and Helston's Hal An Tow have been joined by revivals such as the Raggadazio of Bodmin and the Guize Dancers that hit Penzance's streets in midsummer and midwinter. To a large extent these are traditions which have remained within their original social and geographic location. Our next Cornish dance tradition is one that has a clear continuity with the past but now takes place in quite a different setting.

Cornish Guize Dancers captured on mobile by Richard Broadbank at the Boscastle Wassail 6th Jan 2019

Dancing – The Cornish Step Dance Tradition

Carrie Circa 1900

In the early nineteenth century step dancers in Cornwall were called lapyors. The term appears in the 11th century Vocabularium Cornicum and by the 17th Century the term had been incorporated into Cornish dialect as we see in a slightly dark reference to child labour:

The very first task which boys were given when they went to the mines at about the age of eight to nine years old) was picking or washing the ore… to aide separation the boys agitated the mixture with a heather broom or, in the early days, by standing ankle deep in the water and using their feet. Because of this, in the 17th century they were called lappiors (dancers).[7]

Step dancers took full advantage of the satisfying sound of hard soled footwear needed for the mining and quarrying industries. This sound was enhanced further when metal plates were added to the toes and heels to increase the life span of the foot wear. In Cornish dialect these metal plates were called "scoots" and this term eventually transferred itself to the dance tradition itself so that the distinctive style of Cornish step dancing is called "scoot dancing". Scoot dancing is a conversation between the dancer and the musician .

Audio Clip: Scoot dance is a conversation between dancer and musician

The atmosphere of Cornish scoot dancing is captured in this description of a nineteenth century wedding:

> *Presently the fiddle struck up with a jig 'Les have the double shuffle, Uncle Will,' said the young people. Up he jumped as lively as a kid, though he was near eighty, and footed it out to the delight of all. Young Jan followed, making the fire fly from the heels of his boots, like flashes of lightning.* [8]

The very nature of scoot dancing meant that it played a low public profile, although there is occasional mention in the press. In 1808 there is a description of an event at Illogan where several thousand people attended to watch wrestling tournaments and step dancing competitions.[9] It remained a living tradition, especially amongst families in North Cornwall until the latter part of the 20th century when it was gradually adopted by groups looking for dances to choreograph for displays for the emerging Celtic festival scene.

One group, Cam Kernewek, were fortunate in having an interest taken in them by bandsman and accordionist, Arthur Biddick who had played for, and taught, step dancing in the Boscastle area. For several years in the 1980s he attended their club nights and acted as a coach for their step dancing. This provided a remarkable continuity between Cornish Scoot dance tradition in its original community setting in the villages and farms of North Cornwall and a “second existence” for Cornish dance displays. [10]

Kemysk Choreograph traditional steps

Ten or so dances with a range of different steps were originally identified such as the “Three Hand Reel”, The “Four Hand Reel”, the harvest dance “Cock in Britches”, Boscastle Breakdown and Broom / Broom stick dances. Since then new dances have been written using the traditional steps to provide the 21st Century Cornish Scoot dancer with a wide repertoire. In August 2016 Cornish Scoot dancing featured in a display in the mainstage of the Festival Interceltique in Lorient, Brittany with an audience of several thousand.

Scoot dancing is a good example of a tradition in a second existence located away from the villages and families where it evolved and with choreography and performance that is carefully considered and rehearsed.

Lattapouch: captured on mobile at Hotel Bristol Newquay

Social Dance

Social Dances: Newlyn Reel - danced by Asteveryn. This dance was described to Esme Francis, Harpists for Gorsedh Kernow in 1971 by a neighbour called John Williams of Boscreggan Farm. He recalled it being danced in Newlyn in the early 1900s.

An interesting aspect of Cornwall's social history is reflected in the dance traditions associated with the Cornish Tea Treat. In parallel with the industrial revolution, and perhaps partly in response to the negative social impact of unbridled capitalism, Cornwall embraced radical non-conformist religion with great enthusiasm in the nineteenth century. One of the devices used to counter less temperate social activities was the encouragement of the village feast days and Tea Treats. Older customs such as holy well pilgrimages and saint's days were firmly connected with the Cornish cuisine of cream teas, pasties, saffron cake and a range of other delights. Two particularly striking dance customs were associated with the Tea Treats, the Serpent Dance and the Snail Creep.

The Serpent Dance is a direct descendant of the Medieval Farandole with a long line of dancers led through various traditional patterns by a lead dancer. The Cornish Tea Treats took this dance to a new level by engaging several hundred people into one long line and placing a full brass band in the lead. The Snail Creep is a dance for couples who form a long procession, again of several hundred people following the band. The procession is led by two people holding out branches like the tentacles of a snail and follows various spirals and convolutions to represent a snail shell. The Snail Creep of the Cornish Tea Treat may be a salute to the snail lore of Cornish folklore, but the meaning has long been lost.

As well as what were described as the "old Cornish dances" like the Serpent and the scoot dances the nineteenth social dance adapted dances from the country houses of the gentry. The manuscript of John Old, dancing master for the established gentry and newly rich industrialists of Par, dates from 1808 and provides a window into this world with music and choreographic notes for the dances.[11] He combines local tunes with borrowings from country dances across Britain, particularly the popular Scottish Country Dances. One of the dances recorded by the Playford family that seems to have enjoyed popularity in Cornwall is "The Cushion

Dance" or "Joan Sanderson". It was mentioned by Davies Gilbert in 1823 and noted as still popular in the early twentieth century in the Old Cornwall Journal published in 1929. Other popular dances in the early twentieth century were the Triumph, the Miller's Dance and the Newlyn Reel.

Nineteenth century Cornwall coined its own dialect term for a social dance, "Troyl". It was derived from the Cornish for a whirl, spiral or reel and is an apt description for social dances like the serpent. A description of a Troyl in the fish cellars at Newquay following a successful pilchard season in 1885 captures the atmosphere:

> *It was a jolly evening arranged by the master seiner ………… held in the long room of the Unity Cellars. I went with my mother, Aunt Blanche and Uncle Ed Murrish. Mother and Ed played concertinas and a man for Truro played fiddle. There was great merriment and the fun went on until the early hours of the morning. It was amusing for me a boy of five watching them dancing the lancers and many old dances including the lattapouch. [a competitive scoot dance where people go down on their haunches]. The fun was, when those trying fell on their backs*.[12]

Social dance in Cornwall is a good example of new dance ideas being incorporated into tradition and merged with the old. In the nineteenth century this could clearly be understood as taking place in an original social location, learned from an early age responsive to external influences. By the latter part of the twentieth century social dance was swept up with the Celtic Revival and strongly influenced by the dance culture of the Celtic festival scene. Greater consideration was given to the dances used and whether they reflected Cornish Celtic identity with dances specially written to capture Scoot and Furry dance traditions. The terms "Troyl" and "Tea Treat" were joined and to some extent replaced by borrowings such as Ceilidh and Nos Lowen which reflect Cornwall's Celtic affinities. Ceilidh is a Gaelic word for a gathering and Nos Lowen derives from Nos Lawen / Fest Noz, the Welsh and Breton respectively for a night time party. The process of Folk tradition does have its ironies in that the term "Troyl" is clearly of Celtic origin and arguably predates popular use of Ceilidh and Fest Noz.

Folk Dance in Cornwall today

The "Old Hand in Hand Dance"

In one form or another the dance traditions described here have all evolved to become part of the Cornish Folk Dance scene in the 21st century. New furry dances continue to be written for social dances as well as for community events like the St Piran's Day celebrations (St Piran is Cornwall's patron Saint). The serpent dance is used by the Guizer Dances in Penzance for the celebration of Golowan in Midsummer and Montol in the midwinter. It is danced around the Harbour at Boscastle during their Twelfth Night Wassail and takes pride of place as part of the closing ceremony for the Pagan Federation conference held every year in Cornwall! The Serpent adapts well as a social dance for smaller numbers of people and sometimes acquires steps from the Scoot Dance tradition.

There are currently 7 Cornish dance groups who regularly meet as a club or class in Cornwall with a total membership of some 160 people. They work together as the Cornish Dance Society to promote Cornish folk dance and organise classes and events. The Cornish Dance Society undertakes annual survey of members activities and in 2017 recorded 23 social dance events and 21 schools' workshops as well as displays at major festivals across Cornwall and beyond. There are also Cornish folk dance bands that are not associated with display groups or the society, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they have plenty of work, especially for weddings.

Using the model discussed in the introduction, Cornish dance displays and social dance events have been encouraged by the Celtic Revival and are located in a new social setting where what is to be performed is carefully considered. The current popularity for weddings is interesting as this is a very traditional community setting and there is a sense there in which Cornish dance has completed the cycle and returned to its roots.

Village Wedding Scene- Newlyn Reel - Poldark series 1

Cornish dance display groups are regularly invited to major events like the Festival Interceltique in Lorient, Brittany and in recent years have travelled as far as the Caribbean and Australia. It is not only the dancers that travel, sometimes the dances do as well. There will be Cornish dances at the Kernewek Lowender Festival in South Australia this year with a Furry dance through Kadina led by the mayor. At the time of writing there are folk dance teams in Brazil and Russia liaising with the Cornish Dance Society to learn Cornish dances.

Visit www.an-daras.com for further information and Cornish Dance publications
Also www.cornishdance.com for information about Cornish dance groups.

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[1] Merv Davey “As is the manner and the custom”, (Doctoral Thesis, Institute of Cornish Studies, Exeter University, 2011), chapter1 for full discussion and p37-38 for a summary definition of Folk Tradition.

[2]Andriy Nahachewsky, A. (2001). "Once Again: On the Concept of ‘Second Existence Folk Dance" Article MT053’." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33: 17-28. A development of original ideas by Felix Hoerburger, “Once Again: On the Concept of Folk Dance" *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* " (1968: 30-I)

[3] HM Treasury, Department for Communities and Local Government, The Rt Hon Danny Alexander MP and Stephen Williams MP, Press release*, Cornish granted minority status within the UK*, First published: 24th April 2014

[4] Vocabularium Cornicum, British Library Cotton Vespasian A.xvi ff. 7a-10a.

[5] John Fry, and Alan J. Fletcher. "The Kilkenny Morries, 1610." *Folk Music Journal* 6.3 (1992), pp 381-83.

[6] Whitley Stokes, *The Creation of the World*, London, Williams and Norgate,1864, line 2548

[7] William Pryce. Minerologia Cornubensis (1778) (Truro Bradford Barton, 1972, reprint), p.136

[8] William Bottrell,Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall 1873

[9] *Royal Cornwall Gazette,* 11 June 1808,

[10] Jowdy Davey, Editor, *Catch up your Heels: Step Dancing From Cornwall* , An Daras Folk Arts Project, 2005.

[11]Mike O’Connor and Alison Davey, *Dancing Above Par,* An Daras Folk Arts Project, 2003

[12] Edward Veale, personal notebook, Newquay Old Cornwall Society Museum.