

THE BEDLINGTON SWORD DANCE

There are two published notations of the Bedlington sword dance. The first was by Bill Cassie in 1966¹, and a more detailed notation by Brian Hayden in 1979². Both notations were collected in 1961 from dancers who had last performed in 1926. Pending permission to reproduce Brian Hayden's notation, only Bill Cassie's is reproduced here.

The search for the Bedlington knots was started in February 1961 by Brian Hayden meeting Peter Muldoon. The suggestion came from the famous clog dancer Johnson Ellwood who had heard about the sword team when teaching clog dancing in Bedlington. The collection of knots was slow and required about ten visits to Bedlington, which is 11 miles north of Newcastle and about 7 miles from Earsdon. Once again, the tradition there had been upheld by one family – the Muldoons, although there was some evidence that there had been at least one other team in Bedlington. It was 30 years since the dance had been performed, and Peter Muldoon and his brother Luke had difficulty in remembering the knots. There was also a third brother Jimmy who was concerned with the family tradition. They had been taught to dance by their father at home and used handkerchiefs if swords were not available.

Like the Amble dancers they used the Fiddler position or a Straight Line formation as the processional, from which they broke straight out into the first knot at the next pitch. In the processional, either one man held up the Star, or they all held the linked swords – it was optional. They were very insistent that knots could and should be invented by the team. They performed the knots called by No. 1 and in any order so that each dance looked different. Peter stressed the importance of all the dancers wearing the same clothes so that the audience could not elucidate the patterns of the knots.

The step used was a “lazy shuffle” and the step for processing was the usual half-running sword dance step. A melodeon was much preferred for the music as it could be heard better than a fiddle. Jigs were used, and “The Washerwoman” was mentioned again. The calling on song was as for Winlaton. The swords were painted or marked with ribbon to help the dancers to seize the right ones when pulling them out of the Star.

THE KNOTS

The Bedlington men had few names for the knots, but said that they had, at one time, known nearly 30. This is in accordance with the tradition of most rapper teams who always seem to have a large repertoire. Several of the knots shown were exactly as in other traditions – the Needle of Winlaton, and the Figure Eight of North Walbottle were two to which names seem to have been attached. They were called “Round-and-Round” and “Crossing-Over”. One or two unusual features, however, make this collection of knots interesting. The addition of these to a performance will give variety to a rapper dance.

THE OPENING

This was similar to that of Amble, apparently without a clash – something which should not be omitted. The swords are held up vertically in the centre of the set for a phrase and then dropped on to the left shoulders and the Star is made. The Star was usually shown, and always by No. 1, and then lowered to the men standing in the Ring.

FIRST KNOT

This knot, and all others collected, started from the Star position, but with all the swords opened into a ring. This necessitates the grasping of the rappers when lowered by No. 1, and the pulling of them out into an open ring. To do this, the hands must be crossed in the opposite sense to that used in tying the Star. Each sword is held bent between two dancers and held higher than the head.

No. 5 turns out right and runs anti-clockwise round to his place, followed by 4, 3, 2 and 1 (numbered clockwise when in position). This is a type of Single Guard.

SECOND KNOT

This is similar to the First Knot but two dancers run round together.

THIRD KNOT

This is a very odd knot but probably effective if the swords “spark” as they are supposed to do. The dancers step in the open ring with the swords bent above the level of their heads and break out, individually or in pairs, and run round in *any* direction until the swords are tangled. They then return in the reverse order to their places! There is no attempt to tie a Star. Peter Muldoon was cross-examined on this knot, but it seems quite definitely to be a separate knot and as they used to do it. It is probably a bowdlerised version of a complex knot such as Bulldog.

FOURTH KNOT

This one is reminiscent of some of the continental sword dances, for No. 3 lies back on a bed of swords and is then thrown into the air, turning a back somersault and landing on his feet. The Newcastle team found this surprisingly easy to do!

The numbers given above are merely for the sake of reference. The men had few names and numbers for the knots which they were able to remember, but the idea of starting from an open ring in the Star order (but without the swords being interlocked), and the interest of the last two knots, above, makes this a useful addition to a rapper repertoire.

References

1. Bill Cassie, *Rapper Knots from Amble and Bedlington*. Folk Music Journal 1966, vol. 1, issue 2, pp. 92-101.
2. Brian Hayden, *The Bedlington Sword Dance*. English Dance and Song, 1979 vol. 41, issue 1, pp. 5-7.

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