

# THE SWALWELL SWORD DANCE

*This notation was written by Cecil Sharp and originally published in 1911<sup>1</sup>*

Swalwell is a populous mining village within a few miles of Newcastle, situated on the Durham bank of the Tyne. The Swalwell sword dancers, or guizards as they are often called, perform annually on Christmas Eve and on the following days. Their performance differs from Earsdon and every other village I investigated, in that it consists of the dance only, without any acting or singing. I have been told, however, that at one time the performance included the usual introductory song by the Captain with its short mummer-like sequel, both of which were very similar to those presently to be described in the Earsdon dance. But this must have been some time ago, for Mr J E Taylor, a resident in the neighbourhood, assures me that the form of the dance has not materially changed within his recollection, and his memory goes back a great many years.

The dancers are five in number, and are accompanied by a Captain and a man dressed in woman's clothes, called the Bessy, Betty, or dirty Bet, who carries a box and collects the money.

## COSTUME

The dancers wear white shirts, decorated with red, white and blue rosettes; a red tie, and a sash or belt of the same colour round the waist; dark trousers, or, sometimes, white overalls with a red stripe down each leg. They wear nothing upon their heads. I am told that about fifty years ago, instead of trousers they wore breeches and white stockings, with ribbons tied round the knees.

Each dancer carries a sword, twenty-eight inches in length, called a rapper. The blade, which is without a point, is made of thin, finely tempered steel, and is twenty-two inches long by one and three quarters wide. At one end a round wooden handle, six inches long, is loosely fitted so as to allow the metal haft, attached to the blade, to revolve freely within it; upon each side of the other end two thin blocks of wood, two inches long and of the same width as the blade, are firmly riveted or bound with cord. The rapper is as flexible as a harlequin's wand, to which in shape it bears some resemblance.

The musician, who is dressed in his ordinary clothes, plays a fiddle.

## THE MUSIC

There is no special or traditional air associated with this dance; any jig tune in 6/8 time will serve, the dancers told me, so long as it is played at the proper speed (160 bpm).

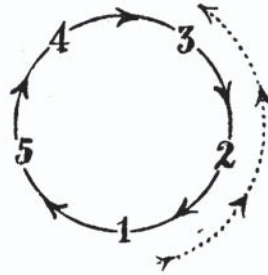
## THE STEPS

Throughout the dance the performers stand very close to each other and step, or tramp, in time with the music, taking two short, decided, steps to each bar. At the end of every "Nut," as each section of the dance is called, the performers stand still and "step" as in the Grenoside dance<sup>2</sup>.

## THE DANCE

The performers stand in a ring, facing centre, while the fiddler plays through the first strain of the music. On the last beat of the last bar, they clash their swords together (as in the Kirkby Malzeard dance<sup>3</sup>), and then, taking a quarter turn to the left, each man throws his rapper over his left shoulder and grasps the tip of the sword in front of him. In this position they march round in a ring, clockwise (eight bars) and then, without pause, break out into the following figure:-

**FIGURE 1 - ONE-TURN-OFF**



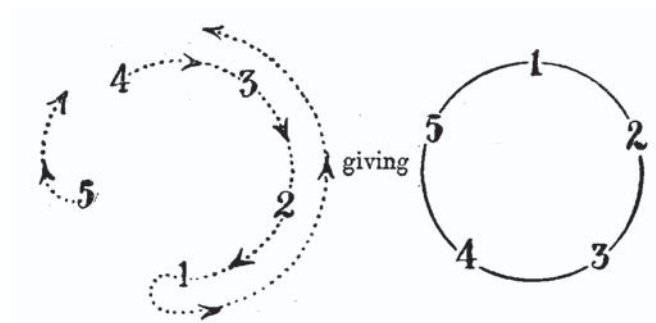
Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 continue to move round, clockwise, while No. 1, the leader, raises both arms, turns outward to his left and dances round and outside the ring counter-clockwise, until he comes to his own place, when he turns in and resumes his original position behind No. 5.

The same movement is then repeated four times, Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5, in turn, dancing round and outside the ring in the same way.

**FIGURE 2 - THE NUT**

No. 1 raises his left arm, turns outward to his left and moves round a half-circle counter-clockwise, followed by Nos. 2, 3 and 4, all of whom pass under No. 5's sword. Simultaneously, No. 5, raising his right arm and keeping his face towards the centre, moves around the ring, clockwise, until he meets No. 1.

A new ring is thus formed, in which the dancers are standing in reversed order, as shown in the following diagram:-



The dancers, keeping their wrists raised to chin level, press their hands apart, each man passing his left hand *under* the left wrist of the dancer on his right, and his left hand *over* the right wrist of the dancer on his left. In this way, the swords are locked together in the form of a pentacle or five-pointed star. This is called the "Nut" or "Knot."

The leader then raises the Nut in his right hand and holds it high above his head, while all five dancers walk round in a ring clockwise, two steps to the bar, each one placing his left arm upon the left shoulder of the man in front of him (8 bars).

They now halt, face centre, and "step" while they hold up the Nut, in a horizontal position, well above their heads (eight bars). The Nut is supported by all the dancers, each of whom grasps the hilt of his own sword in his right hand, and the point of his right neighbour's sword in the other.

The Nut is then untied by reversing the movement by which the swords were interlaced. That is to say, No. 1 raises both arms, turns outward to his right and moves around clockwise to his place, followed by Nos. 2, 3 and 4, all of whom pass under No. 5's sword; while No. 5 raises his right arm, moves around counter-clockwise, facing centre, and meets No. 1.

The dances are now standing in a ring, facing centre, and linked together, hilt and point, as in the Yorkshire long-sword dances. This is the normal position in which the dancers should stand at the beginning and end of each of the figures in this and the following dance. To this rule there is but one exception, viz., in One-Turn-Off, which, as already explained, the dancers begin and end holding their rappers over their left shoulders. This position, moreover, is maintained at the end of this figure only when it is followed by the tying of the Nut; and that occurs once only in the course of the dance. On all other occasions the dancers at the conclusion of Fig. 1 pass their rappers over their heads, make a quarter-turn clockwise and face centre.

This completes the first of the four sections into which this dance is divided. The first section, or Nut, as it is usually called, consists, as we have seen, of One-Turn-Off and the Nut. Each of the succeeding Nuts begins with Fig. 1 and ends with Fig. 2, and contains, in addition, a third figure interposed between them.

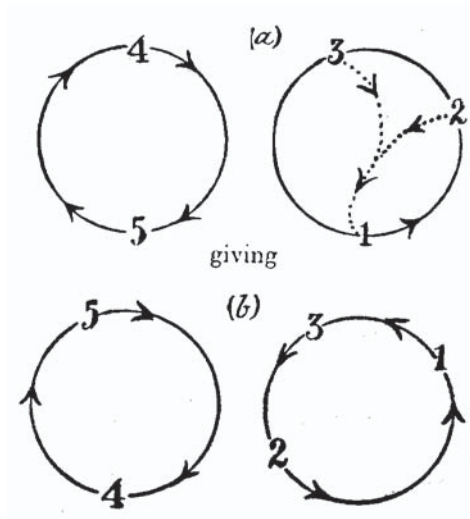
The division of this dance into sections is purely arbitrary, and is done for the sake of convenience and clearness. The movements of the performers throughout the dance are continuous, no pause being made between the successive Nuts, or between the figures of which they are composed. Immediately, therefore, one Nut is finished, the dancers break, without hesitation, into One-Turn-Off, which is always the first figure of the next section.

When a figure, as is usually the case, consists of several repetitions of a movement, the number of such repetitions is determined by the leader, whose privilege it is to call "Nut" and to break into Fig. 2 whenever he thinks fit. He must, however, be careful to time his call so that the tying of the Nut shall coincide with the end of one strain of the tune. As the two following movements take exactly sixteen bars to perform, each section of the dance will thus begin and end with the first and last bars of one or other of the strains of the music.

In the third and fourth figures of this dance (and in many of those in the Earsdon dance) the Nut is tied in a different way from that described in Fig. 2. In such cases, the special method will always be explained at the end of the figure in which it occurs.

The distinctive figures of the remaining three Nuts will now be described in their proper order.

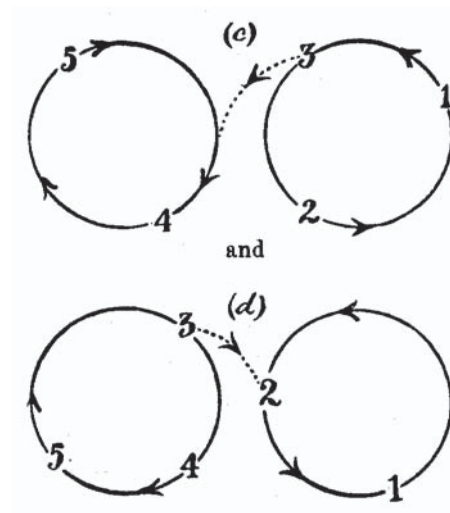
**FIGURE 3 - THE NEEDLE**



No. 1 raises his left arm, turns outward to his left and, followed by Nos. 2 and 3, moves round in a circle counter-clockwise. Simultaneously, No. 5 raises his right arm, turns outward to his right and, followed by No. 4, moves round in a circle clockwise.

The dancers are now moving round in two circles, like cog-wheels, at the same rate, but in opposite directions, Nos. 1, 2 and 3 counter-clockwise, and Nos. 5 and 4 clockwise.

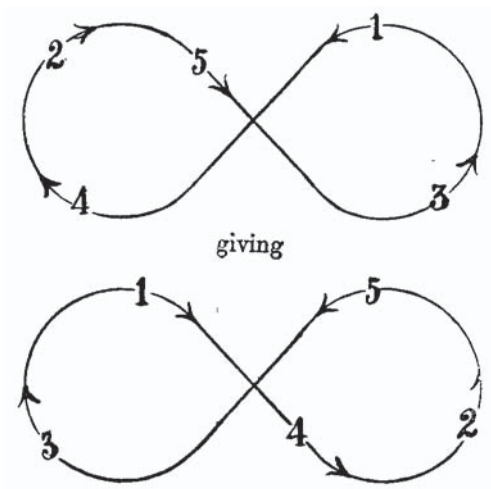
At the beginning of every fresh circuit No. 3 crosses over from one circle to the other, and dances, therefore, in successive circuits, alternately behind Nos. 2 and 4, as shown in the following diagrams:-



The leader must be careful to call "Nut" only when No. 3 is just entering the right-hand circle and is about to follow behind No. 2. No. 1 then continues moving round, counter-clockwise, followed by Nos. 2, 3 and 4; while No. 5 moves forward a step or two, makes a three-quarter turn counter-clockwise and faces centre.

In this and in all figures in which the performers are moving round in adjacent circles, it will be necessary for the dancers to keep their hands well above their heads.

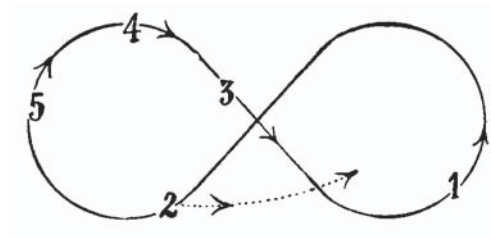
**FIGURE 4 - RIGHT-AND-LEFT**



No. 1 raises his left hand, turns outward to his left and, followed by No. 3, moves round in a circle counter-clockwise; while No. 5, raising his right arm, turns outward to his right and, followed by Nos. 2 and 4, moves round in a circle clockwise.

At the end of every circuit, each group of dancers crosses over from one circle to the other and moves round in the reverse direction. The track, therefore, described by the dancers is, roughly, the figure 8, by which name the figure is sometimes called.

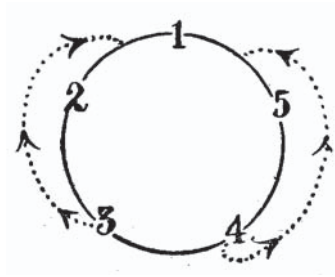
The critical moment is when the two groups meet, face to face, in at the junction between the loops. The crossing at this point is executed in the following order, Nos. 5, 1, 2, 3, 4.



The Nut can only be tied when No. 1 is in the right-hand circle and No. 2 has just crossed over into the left-hand circle. No. 2 then crosses over between Nos. 1 and 3; whereupon No. 1, followed by Nos. 2, 3 and 4, moves round counter-clockwise and ties the Nut in the usual manner, No. 5 making a three-quarter turn counter-clockwise and facing centre.

## FIGURE 5 - THE RANK

All face centre and move round clockwise until No. 1 is facing the audience, thus:-



No. 3 raises both hands and, facing centre, moves to his left; he passes behind No. 2, stands between Nos. 1 and 2, and faces the audience. Simultaneously, No. 4, raising his left arm, turns outward to his left, passes behind No. 5 and stands between Nos. 1 and 5, and faces the audience.

The dancers are now standing in line, facing the audience, in the following order:-

2 3 1 4 5

At the beginning of the next strain of the music, Nos. 1 and 2, and Nos. 1 and 5 lower the swords between them (No. 1's and No. 5's), over which Nos. 3 and 4, respectively, jump. In this position all "step" to the end of the strain (eight bars).

The same swords are again lowered, and Nos. 3 and 4 jump backwards over them into their places in the line; after which all "step" till the end of the strain (eight bars).

Nos. 3 and 4 now lower the sword between them (No. 3's) and No. 1 leaps over it. Then all "step" till the end of the strain, when No. 1 jumps backward over it into his place (eight bars).

The Nut is then tied in the normal way: No. 1, raising both arms, moves forward, passes under No. 3's sword and makes a half-turn counter-clockwise; while No. 5 turns completely round on his axis counter-clockwise.

On completing the last Nut, the dancers form up in line, facing audience. No. 1 stands in the middle and holds up the Nut high above his head in his right hand. This brings the dance to a conclusion.

## NOTATION

Clash swords and move around in a ring

Fig. 1 One-Turn-Off

Fig. 2 The Nut

Fig. 1 One-Turn-Off

Fig. 3 The Needle

Fig. 2 The Nut

Fig. 1 One-Turn-Off

Fig. 4 Right-and-Left

Fig. 2 The Nut

Fig. 1 One-Turn-Off

Fig. 5 The Rank

Fig. 2 The Nut

Form up in line and exhibit Nut

### References:

1. Cecil Sharp, *The Sword Dances of Northern England*, London: Novello, 1911; volume 1, pp. 72-81
2. *ibid*, 1911, volume 1, pp. 54-67
3. *ibid*, 1911, volume 1, pp. 37-53

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