

THE WESTERHOPE SWORD DANCE

This notation was written by Les Williamson and originally published in 1973.

WESTERHOPE IS A SMALL MINING COMMUNITY engulfed by the creep of the Tyneside conurbation, and now part of Greater Newcastle, the old village having been considerably enlarged by post-war and modern housing development. Originally the village's only employment was the pit at North Walbottle, a short distance away. This fact accounts for the misleading "North Walbottle" name applied to the team Sharp saw and collected from, although all the team lived in Westerhope. North Walbottle Pit was, of course, the common factor among the men; all the adult dancers worked at the pit.

A lucky combination of circumstances has allowed the Westerhope team to be re-formed. Since first hearing of the tradition, while with the Durham team (at college), I had been sifting pubs and clubs for old dancers without great success. However, Mr Tony Wilson, a musician and librarian at Newburn Central Library launched a new library magazine with a leading story on the sword dancers. The article, in which I explained rapper and what little I knew of the old team, was sufficient to bring forward two dancers. (Meanwhile I was appointed to a school in Westerhope and a spirited Newbiggin rapper by the Sallyport men at the school concert was sufficient to interest the 3rd and 4th forms, thus completing the circle.)

Both dancers were from the second generation of dancers who preferred to call themselves "Westerhope." Frank Lee remembers the old team dancing from the beginning i.e., 1906 and remembered Billy Raine from Bedlington, who Sharp states founded the team. As early as 1914 the Juniors (Westerhope) were considered proficient enough to allow the older Walbottle men to retire and join the Army. The Juniors were taught by one of the original team, Dick Davison elder brother of Joe, who was killed in the war. Another Sharp original was Billy Clark (acknowledged by Sharp as leader in his *Sword Dances of Northern England*) who moved to Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and was responsible for the formation of the team there c. 1920. Therefore, Newbiggin and Westerhope have several common figures e.g. Fast Knot, 4th Corner and Cramper, both dances being variations on the same common old-Walbottle dance. It is also interesting that both teams met at the Music Tournament in 1923.

The old team wore dark purple velvet "hoggers" (not in the strictest sense, as hoggers are shorts) i.e. open knee-length trousers, while Westerhope varied between dark blue and purple depending upon the material available. A thin gold stripe was added with three gold buttons on each knee. White shirts with collars, black ties and thick white wool stockings were worn. Both teams wore an old-gold sash tied in a bow on the left. Shoes were heavy leather brogues for dancing outside and black patent-leather pumps for stage work. The latter had a clamp added to the instep to carry small cymbals. The next team, from Callerton, discarded the ties and collars ca. 1924 as uncomfortable.

Both men remember the old team performing with long stiff rappers, which were very difficult to bend. However, Westerhope were bought Society rappers by rich benefactors like Lady Brown of Benwell. The team became a great favourite with the local gentry and danced at all the big houses around Tyneside at Christmas time for a £10 Christmas Box.

The original Walbottle men did not tap-step, they merely lazy-shuffled in time to the music. The Walbottle men added the conventional jigging after being taught by Tom Soulsby, the Westerhope clog-dancer. Stepping was in single jigging phrases of 8 with a stamp break. They did occasionally double-step, although it tended to slow down the dance...

"Earsdon danced too slow" . . . Joe Davison (No. 1).

Joe Davison played *Father O'Flynn* and the *Irish Washerwoman*, but stated no special tunes were used and any 6/8 jig would do. He heard a tape of Forster Charlton fiddling for the boys and recognized *The Blackthorn Stick* and *Tenpenny Bit* as having been used.

The Westerhope dance is obviously an extension of the Sharp-Walbottle dance, amended for stage performances. The notable point of the dance is the inclusion of a sixth dancer. Photographs of the Westerhope Traditional Prize Sword Dancers always show a six-sword knot and six dancers. The sixth man joined in the last three or four figures. In lighter moments the sixth man was beheaded, long-sword fashion, though only for pub performances. Sharp noted the extinct Walbottle practice of "hanging the Betty" in the same way. Both men insisted that the Tommy and Betty never danced but merely acted as the collectors and provided the humour. Billy Clark's team at Newbiggin also omitted the Tommy and Betty figures. As for the song, Joe remembered the old men singing a calling-on song and sang the following, which he admitted was *not* traditional.

"We are the boys from Whorlton,¹ we can dance and sing,
And in the sword-dancing line we know everything.
We do the curly, the crammer and the old gymnac,
And we're doing our best to bring the old dance back.

¹Wharlton is a pub and church between Westerhope and North Walbottle.

Both Walbottle and Westerhope had used the "Jingling Gate" pub's smithy to practice in, after moving the anvil! Later Westerhope and Callerton used the church hall of St John's also at Whorlton. Callerton referred to themselves as Whorlton for the Tournaments held from 1919 to 1923. Later they split away from the older Westerhope men to become the Callerton side. Callerton being a row of pit-houses adjacent to the pit.

WESTERHOPE DANCE CA. 1910

(ref. Sharp *Sword Dances* Vol. 3, pp. 103-115)

Start: Straight line, swords on shoulders, step 8, No. 1 moves to grip No. 5 rapper, completing a circle. This is a further stage amendment, more convenient than the in-facing ring, which was retained for outside performances.

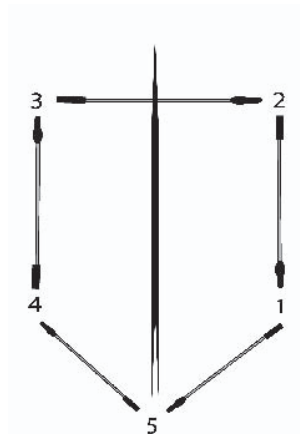
1. **Single Guard.** Each dancer in turn lifts his rapper turning left out of the set, dances around the set and back into place.

2. **Curly** from circle guard: Nos. 1 and 5 face up, and turn away from each other to the bottom of the set and followed by 2 and 4; No. 3 follows Nos. 1 and 2. Nos. 1 and 5 face each other, dance up the set and repeat the movement. Figure is usually repeated three times.

3. **Right and left;** begins as curly, three times through. At bottom of the set Nos. 1 and 5 cross to "wrong side" of set followed by 2, 4 and 3. Order of crossing 1, 5, 2, 4, 3. Almost immediately the men cross back to own side of set in same order. Figure performed three times.

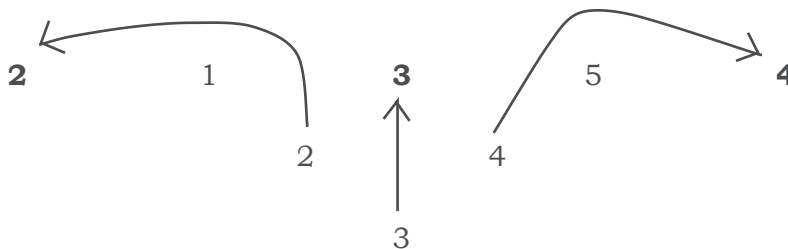
4. **Jigging Guard** starts in the guard position (fiddler or coach and horses), stepping. Nos. 1 and 5 turn away from each other and stand behind No. 3, jig to end of bar, Nos. 2 and 4 turn away from each other and stand behind Nos. 1 and 5, leaving No. 3 jiggling at front of set. No. 3 moves to right or left and all tie-up.

5. **Tipping Guard** jiggling in the guard position, No. 3 jumps over 5 rapper and tips (somersaults); all tie-up. If No. 3 can not tip then the team can stand in the guard in a different order with tipper in 3 position. In boys' team No. 5 tips; from circle guard team falls into guard in following order:



No. 5 then acts as No. 3 in tying up.

6. **Fourth Corner** stepping in the guard. Nos. 1 and 5 lift 5's rapper allowing Nos. 2 and 4 to slip through and to sides, leaving No. 3 in the middle of the line.



No. 3 then lowers both his rappers allowing Nos. 1 and 5 to jump over them; almost immediately Nos. 1 and 5 lower the rapper between them (5 rapper) to allow No. 3 to jump over tie-up.

7. **Fast Knot** (fast meaning tight) figure begins as curly (X2) and "right and left" (X3). After third circuit of right and left No. 1 stays on the wrong side of the set (with No. 2), Nos. 5 and 4 also stay on wrong side (No. 3 can stay on either side). Team then executes a "curly". Dancers then cross back to own side (like right and left) Nos. 1, 5, 2, 4 and 3; once through "curly" to untie rappers tie-up.

8. **Chain** from guard position, Nos. 1 and 5 turn out as for "curly", stand facing down, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 turn on spot to face down; No. 3 crosses rappers behind head. Nos. 1 and 5 sweep 5 rapper under Nos. 2, 3 and 4 who jump over it simultaneously. Nos. 1 and 5 execute fast turns and all tie-up.

9. **Cramper** from guard position, No. 3 walks forward under a lifted rapper turning left around set and back to place. Nos. 2 and 4 move forward around Nos. 1 and 5 respectively; all tie-up.

10. **Double Cramper** starts as "Cramper" with No. 3 moving forward and to left back to place, then moves forward again to right and back to place. Nos. 2 and 4 untie rappers by moving around Nos. 1 and 5 TWICE; all tie-up.

11. **Back-over-knot**. In circle guard all dancers turn half-left, i.e. facing outwards, raising rappers above head, tie an upside-down lock. Dancers fall into display and back into back-to-back position, knot untied by half turn to right.

12. **Gymnac** as for fourth corner. As set moves into a straight line, Nos. 1 and 5 turn down and tip. Both men insisted that the rappers should not be laid across the tippers backs. Tip should be an unassisted somersault, i.e. No. 3 holds rappers forward at arm's length. As with tipping guard, any two dancers in set can tip as long as they are paired in the guard, i.e. 1/2, 2/3, 3/4, 4/5 or 5/1; team merely alters order of standing in the guard. No. 3 jumps over No. 1 rapper ... tie-up by turning half left.

13. **Crown** added by third generation ... Callerton. Walking clockwise in an open ring

Dancers close up and No.	1	tips between Nos	5 and 2.
	2	„	1 „ 3.
	3	„	2 „ 4.
	4	„	3 „ 5.
	5	„	1 „ 4.

All tie-up with a half-curly.

This figure of course calls for five or six dancers who can somersault unassisted by rappers great care!!!

Tying the knot ... by passing through the guard position, No. 3 leads through and turns to left, Nos. 1 and 2 turn right, No. 5 slips allowing No. 4 to move in front and ties the knot by turning left.

Breaking the knot No. 1 stands and allows No. 2 to turn sharp right followed by Nos. 3, 4 and 5, No. 1 falls in, in front of No. 2 on completion of a circle again.

NOTES ON THE DANCE

The figures are in no special order. They were merely as remembered.

The North Walbottle men had used a knot-rose and single-guard chorus between each figure (like Earsdon). Westerhope preferred to omit the single guard and perform more figures for more important stands. However, on less auspicious occasions they reverted to the formula (usually five figures for 5 men, three for 6 men) with a single guard between each figure. On displaying the knot the team falls into a straight line facing up, No. 1 holding the knot in the middle of the line.

Joe stressed the importance of tying up each figure, merely to prove that the figure has been completed correctly in knot, and *never* performing two figures together. Also the knot should always be tied high, about eye height and untied by sharply cracking down the knot. The rose is never bent into a tight basket as some modern teams have performed.

HISTORY OF THE WALBOTTLE-WESTERHOPE TEAMS 1914-28

The team was invited to the EFDSS Summer School at Cheltenham College in 1921 to teach rapper, and were introduced to Cotswold Morris, but could not “get away with it.” They regularly performed in the back streets of Westerhope usually for charity. The Montagu Pit disaster of 1925 prompted the team to dance for the widows and orphans, as the “Monty” pit owned many stone-rows in Westerhope. Similarly, during the General Strike in 1926, the team collected for the Westerhope soup-kitchens. They gained valuable experience dancing in local clubs, pubs and “Go-as-you-pleases” (talent contests) for cash prizes before going professional for short periods of time during the period 1921-5. The co-operation of the pit manager allowed them always to return to a job in the pit, after dancing all over Britain, even at the London Palladium. The team finally baulked at an offer of an American tour, and returned home for good. A series of bad pit accidents incapacitated the team, allowing Joe's second team “Callerton” or “Whorlton” to take over until they eventually stopped dancing ca. 1928. A school team called the “Westerhope Chips off the Old Block” performed at the Music Tournament in

1925 and 1926, together with the Westerhope Council School team of 1926. In fact that year Westerhope fielded four rapper teams in the competition.

Both Junior and Senior Westerhope teams made several appearances at the North of England Music Tournament held in Newcastle in the 1920's. As well as the usual brass-bands, choral singing etc., there was a class for traditional sword. Traditional teams had wealthy patrons to support them, one such being Lady Jane Cowen who gave the sword-dancing cup bearing her name in 1919 (with silver and bronze medals for the first and second teams). Westerhope are shown after winning the cup in 1919 wearing the medals. There was also a Junior class (11 to 18 years). This was practically a rapper cup, although Grenoside and North Skelton did appear and a separate longsword class was instituted in 1926. The Winlaton White Stars won the cup outright in 1925, by winning three times although the medals were still awarded. Many experts have frowned on competitive morris and sword-dancing but it cannot be denied that the Tournament spawned many teams in the twilight of traditional dancing. Frank Lee could not understand why the Sallyport danced at all if not for competitions. Winning at competitions was the ultimate standard he recognized.

The Musical Tournament of the 1920's provides an interesting "Who's Who" of rapper and shows the attempts made by traditional teams to pass on the dance through school and Junior teams, in a very troubled period in Northern Social History.

1919	Westerhope Whorlton	
1921	Earsdon Earsdon-Royal Prudhoe (West Wylam) Westerhope	Westerhope Juniors in non-traditional class
1922	Backworth School Westerhope Winlaton White Stars Whorlton Excelsior	
1923	Callerton ("Whorlton") Earsdon-Royal Newbiggin Westerhope Senior Winlaton White Stars	Westerhope Juniors in Junior Class
1925	Winlaton White Stars North Skelton Westerhope Seniors Blaydon (High Spen) 1st Newbiggin Sea Scouts	Westerhope "Chips off the old Block" in the Junior Class
1926	Blaydon Westerhope Senior Earsdon-Royal Winlaton White Stars Seghill Colliery Welfare Northumbrian Westerhope ("Callerton")	Westerhope Council School and Westerhope Chips in Juniors

Since forming the "Bairns" Westerhope Boys, a tremendous upsurge of local interest in sword dancing has been apparent in the district. Both Westerhope and Sallyport have danced in the district to tremendous local reception. As the lads are not yet of drinking age, Sallyport visited the local clubs and pubs, meeting several members of the Westerhope School teams of the 1920's now in their 60's and a full circle was made when Westerhope was able to perform with Royal Earsdon and High Spen at the Sallyport's birthday Ale, a fitting tribute to Westerhope rappermen old and new who have kept the dance alive in spirit and persevered to give the village a team again after more than 40 years.