

THE EARSDON SWORD DANCE

This notation was written by Cecil Sharp and originally published in 1911¹.

The Earsdon guizards perform in public on Christmas Eve, and they hold the reputation of being the best sword dancers in Northumberland.

Mr Armstrong, the Captain, danced with them for forty years before he retired and took his present position. He told me that old-fashioned people always call them "Morris dancers." He explained the derivation as being that the dance was originally brought to the Border country by bands of outlaws and sheep-stealers, called "Morris (Moss) troopers" who came from the North and settled down as miners in Northumbria.

Mr Armstrong's memory goes back a long way, he was able to give me a good deal of information respecting the changes that have taken place in the dance during the last fifty years. The Bessy, for instance, used to wear a hairy cap, and when the Nut was about to be tied, the dancers would sometimes call out "We'll hang the Betty"; whereupon, Betty would step into the centre of the ring and the swords would be locked tightly around his throat, while the dancers "stepped" in the way described in the text. Mr Armstrong also sang to me an older version of the Captain's song and gave me the words of a dramatic interlude which used to follow it. As these are of great interest, they will be printed together with the version at present used.

The performers are a Captain, a Bessy, and five dancers. They are accompanied by a musician, who plays a fiddle.

COSTUME

The costume which the dancers at present wear is a very elaborate one: crimson plush breeches, white linen shirts, a Zouave jacket of crimson plush edged with gold braid, and a broad Toreador sash. The Captain's dress is the same as those of the dancers with the addition of a cocked hat lavishly trimmed with gold lace.

This elaborate and gorgeous costume is quite a recent innovation and was adopted only a few years ago when the dancers were invited to Alnwick Castle to perform before the late King.

The older and traditional dress is shown in the frontispiece, which is a reproduction of a picture painted about thirty years ago by Mr Ralph Hedley. At that time, Mr Hedley assures me, the dancers wore white shirts decorated with bows and rosettes of coloured ribbons, black breeches of alpaca or satinet, knee-ribbons and striped stockings and shoes tied with ribbons. The Captain wore a wide-awake hat with peacock's feathers, and old-fashioned tail-coat, breeches, and striped stockings. The Bessy was dressed in woman's clothes.

The Earsdon dancers carry rappers similar to, but more neatly made and better finished than those used by the Swalwell men. The blades measure twenty-four inches in length, by one and one eighth in width.

THE MUSIC

The music is supplied by a fiddler who is dressed in his ordinary clothes. As there is no special traditional tune to the dance, any jig in 6/8 time is used that can be played at the required speed (M.M. 160 bpm). When they were good enough to dance for me the fiddler played "The Threepenny Bit" for the first half of the dance and "The Black-thorn Stick" during the later figures. Their most popular tunes appear to be "The Laird o' Cockpen," "The Irish Washerwoman," "Haste to the Wedding," "The Delight," "Paddy O'Rafferty" and "Kitty's Ramble."

THE STEPS

The steps are exactly the same as those used in the Swalwell dance².

THE DANCE

The performance, as is usual with sword dances, opens with the Captain's song, followed by a few introductory movements leading up to the dance proper, which begins with figure 1. This introduction, as has already been explained, has undergone some alteration in the course of the last few years. Both versions, old and modern, will therefore be given.

INTRODUCTION (OLD VERSION)

The dancers stand in line, facing the audience, while the Captain walks round in a circle counter-clockwise in front of the line.

In the course of the following song, the dancers, as they are introduced, leave the line, one by one, and fall in and walk behind the Captain.

THE CAPTAIN'S SONG

- | | |
|---|--|
| i. A-rambling here I've comed, Good people for to see; Five actors I have brought, As brave as brave can be. | vi. He is a tailor fine, And a good one to his trade; He never closed one hole But two for one he made. |
| ii. It's Earsdon on the hill, Where the water washes clear, To Earsdon habitation we belong, And merry we'll appear. | vii. The next that I'll call on, Is jack upon the deck; He cooks for our ship's crew And he sells all the fat. |
| iii. The first that I'll call on, He is a pitman bold; He walks on underground To keep him from the cold. | viii. The next that I'll call on, It is a big walloping Tom; He's courted two fair women And durst not marry one. |
| iv. The next that I'll call on, It is his heart's desire He hews and puts the coals, The old woman makes the fire. | ix. For if he married one, The other he would slight; And the best that he can do Is treat them both alike. |
| v. The next that I'll call on, He is a tailor fine. What think you of his work? He made this coat of mine. | x. Now I'm going to kill a bullock, Of that I'll make you sure; We'll kill it in Earsdon Town And divide it amongst the poor. |

Directly this song is finished, two of the dancers, Nos. 1 and 2, feigning a quarrel, fight with their swords until one of them is wounded and falls to the ground. Whereupon there is a great commotion and Bessy sings:-

An actor he is dead,
And on the ground he's laid;
We'll have to suffer for it,
Brave boys, I'm sore afraid.

No. 3 then sings:-

I'm sure it's none of me,
And never in my time;
It's he that followed I,
That did this bloody crime.

Then No. 4 interposes:-

O, now that he is dead
And his body it is cold,
We'll take him to the Church yard
And bury him in the mould.

The following dialogue then takes place:-

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>No. 5.</i> | Doctor! doctor! O, for a ten-pound doctor! |
| <i>Doctor (enters).</i> | Here am I! |
| <i>No. 5.</i> | How came you to be a doctor? |
| <i>Doctor.</i> | By my travels. |
| <i>No. 5</i> | How far have you travelled? |
| <i>Doctor.</i> | Through Italy, France and Spain; and now I've come back to cure the diseases in England again. Jack! take a drop of my little bottle, that'll go down your thrittle throttle. Rise up! and fight for old England again |

The wounded man then stands up and shakes his sword; whereupon Bessy sings:-

Dance on, my bonny lads,
I heard the landlord say
He would stand a gallon of beer
Before we go away.

The dancers then form in line, facing audience, and the dance proceeds in the way described below.

INTRODUCTION (MODERN VERSION)

The dancers stand in line, facing the audience, each with his sword resting upon his right shoulder, the hilt level with his waist. The Captain and Betty stand at either end of the line, thus:-

Captain. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1. Betty.

The song, which follows, should be sung by the Captain; nowadays, however, Bessie, being the younger man, usually sings it in his stead.

THE CAPTAIN'S SONG

Good people, give ear to my story, we have called for to see you by chance;
Five heroes I've brought blithe and bonny, intending to give you a dance.
For Earsdon is our habitation, the place we were all born and bred.
There are not finer boys in the nation, and none shall be more gallantly led.
'Tis not for your gold or your silver, nor yet for the gain of your gear,
But we come just to take a week's pleasure, to welcome the incoming year.
My lads, they are all fit for action, with spirits and courage so bold;
They are born of a noble extraction, their fathers were heroes of old.
Now this is the son of brave Elliott, the first youth that enters my ring;
So proudly rejoice I to tell it, he fought for his country and king.
When the Spaniards besieged Gibraltar, bold Elliott defended the place,
Soon caused them their plans to alter; some died - others fell in disgrace.
Now my next handsome youth that does enter is a boy, there are very few such;
His father beat the great De Winter, and defeated the fleet of the Dutch.
His father was the great Lord Duncan, who played the Dutch ne'er such a prank,
That they fled from their harbours, ran funkin', and they fled to the great Dogger Bank.
This one is the son of Lord Nelson, that hero that fought at the Nile;
Few men with such courage and talent, the Frenchmen he did them beguile.
The Frenchmen they nearly decoyed him, but the battle he managed so well,
In their fortress he wholly destroyed them, scarce one got home for to tell.
Now my next handsome youth that does enter is a boy of ability bright;
Five thousand gold guineas I'd venture that he like his father would fight.
At Waterloo and Tarryvary, Lord Wellington made the French fly;
You scarcely can find such another, he'd conquer or else he would die.
Now my last handsome youth that does enter is a boy that is both straight and tall;
He is the son of the great Buonaparte, the hero that cracked the whole all.
He went over the Lowlands like thunder, made nations to quiver and quake;
Many thousands stood gazing in wonder at the havoc he always did make.
Now you see all my five noble heroes, my five noble heroes by birth,
And they each bear as good a character as any five heroes on earth;
If they be as good as their fathers, their deeds are deserving records;
It is all the whole company desires to see how they handle their swords.

At the end of each stanza, the singer pauses for a moment while the dancers clash their swords together, Nos. 5 and 4 and Nos. 1 and 2 moving towards each other so as to get within reach.

At the beginning of the third stanza, No. 1 moves forward two paces and remains there until the end of the song. In the four following stanzas Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5, respectively, follow suit.

Directly the song is finished, the fiddler strikes up, the dancers form a ring, one behind the other, hold their swords points up, hilts breast high, and place their left arms over the left shoulders of those in front of them. Standing in this position they "step" (eight bars).

On the last beat of the last bar they clash their swords together and place them on their left shoulders, each man grasping in his left hand the tip of the sword in front of him. In this position they forthwith break into the following figure without pause.

FIGURE 1 - SINGLE-GUARD

This danced in exactly the same way as One-Turn-Off in the Swalwell dance².

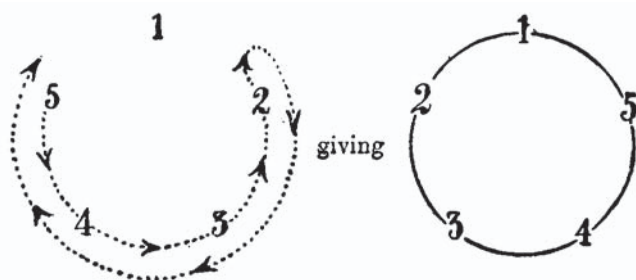
FIGURE 2 - THE NUT

This figure begins with the tying of the Nut, which is done in precisely the same way as in the Swalwell dance².

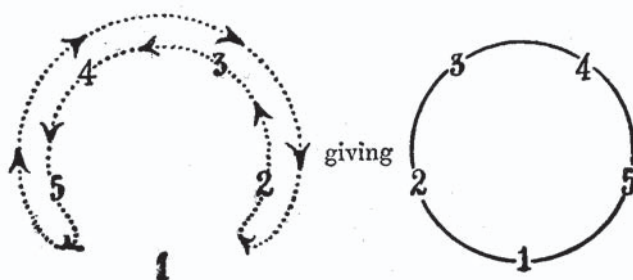
The dancers then form ring, facing centre, and raise the Nut above their heads, in a horizontal position, each man holding the hilt of his own sword in his right hand, and the tip of his neighbour's sword in the other. In this position they "step" (eight bars).

On the last beat of the last bar they lower the Nut and "break away," that is, they loosen the swords with a sharp jerk of the wrists downwards and towards each other, and then proceed to untie the Nut in the following way.

No. 1 stands still and raises his right arm. No. 2, followed by Nos. 3, 4 and 5, then turns outward to his right and, passing under No. 1's sword, moves round in a circle, counter-clockwise, until he meets No. 1, when all stand still, make a quarter turn to the right and face centre, thus:-



This movement, it will be noticed, differs from that described in the Swalwell dance². The latter is, of course, the more logical way because, in principle, it accords with the method in which the Nut is tied. The Earsdon men told me that they acquired their present habit some years ago when they had a leader who was an old man and it was necessary to do all that they could to spare him trouble. It is curious that, this being their object, they did not lighten his labour still further by tying the nut on the same principle, thus:-



This brings the first Nut to a conclusion. The construction of the rest of the dance is the same as that of the Swalwell dance², and consists of a series of Nuts, each of which begins and ends, respectively, with the two figures above described, and contains, interposed between them, a new and additional figure. The order in which these figures are presented is not prescribed, but is determined by the leader, who calls out the name of the next figure during the performance of Single-Guard. As in the Swalwell dance², whenever the Nut is tied

in any other than the normal way, this will be specifically mentioned and described at the end of each figure in which it occurs.

The distinctive figures will now be described in their proper order.

FIGURE 3 - THREE-AND-TWO

This is the same figure as the Needle².

FIGURE 4 - TURN-IN

This is a variant of Single-Guard.

Raising both arms, the dancers make a three-quarter turn, clockwise, and then proceed to move round in a circle in the same direction, one behind the other.

No. 1 then raises both arms, moves a step outside the ring, revolves twice on his axis counter-clockwise, and then dances round and outside the circle counter-clockwise until he comes to his place, when he turns in, as in Single-Guard.

This evolution is then executed, successively, by Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5. Immediately No. 5 has resumed his place, No. 1 turns outward and the Nut is tied in the usual manner.

FIGURE 5 - FOLLOW-WE

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

At the end of the first circuit, No. 2 leaves the right-hand circle and follows behind No. 5.

At the end of the second and third circuits, Nos. 3 and 4, respectively, join No. 5's circle.

This evolution is now executed in the reverse way, Nos. 2, 3 and 4, successively leaving the left for the right-hand circle.

The figure may be repeated as often as the leader wishes. The Nut, however, can only be tied when No. 2 is entering the right-hand circle.

FIGURE 6 - CHANGY

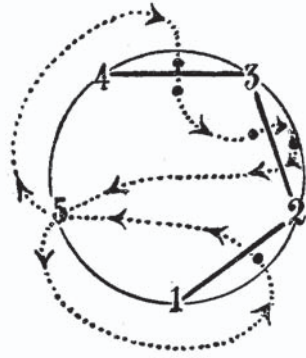
This is a variant of Three-and-Two.

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, goes round in a circle counter-clockwise.

At the end of every circuit, Nos. 1 and 5 change places, No. 5 always passing *in front* of No. 1.

The Nut can be tied in the usual way whenever No. 1 is entering the right-hand circle. No. 5, however, must be careful to face centre by turning counter-clockwise.

FIGURE 7 - TUMBLE



No. 5 raises his left arm, turns outward, moves round to his left outside No. 1 and stands between Nos. 1 and 2, resting his back upon No. 1's sword. He then turns a back somersault over No. 1's rapper and returns backwards to his place.

Raising his right arm, he then moves round to his right, outside No. 4, and stands between Nos. 4 and 3, where he repeats the same performance.

Making a quarter turn clockwise and moving a step to his right, he now stands between Nos. 2 and 3, places his feet together and jumps over No. 2's sword, Nos. 2 and 3 lowering the sword under his feet as he does so.

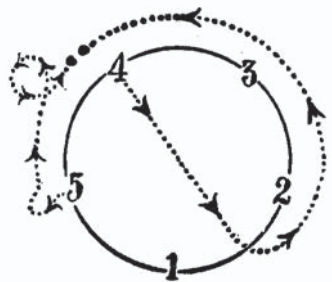
He then rests his back upon No. 2's sword, turns a back somersault over it and returns to his place.

The Nut is then tied in the usual way.

FIGURE 8 - FIGURE-OF-EIGHT

This is the same figure as Right-and-Left².

FIGURE 9 - RAFFALLY



No. 4 moves forward, passes under No. 1's sword, turns to his left and dances round and outside the circle counter-clockwise, passing outside Nos. 2 and 3. Simultaneously, No. 5 raises his right arm, makes a three-quarter revolution on his own axis clockwise, moves a step or two forward, and meets No. 4 face to face. No. 5 now makes a complete revolution on his axis counter-clockwise, and then, followed by No. 4, proceeds to move round in a circle counter-clockwise. When No. 5 has completed three quarters of his first circuit and is facing the audience, No. 1, raising his right arm, turns outward to his right and, followed by Nos. 2 and 3, moves round in a circle clockwise.

The Nut can only be tied when Nos. 1 and 5 are just entering upon a new circuit. Nos. 1, 5 and 4 then stand still; while Nos. 2 and 3 move round counter-clockwise, outside Nos. 1, 5 and 4, pass under No. 4's sword, make each a half-turn counter-clockwise and face centre.

Nos. 1 and 5 the move forward and face centre, each making a half turn, No. 1 clockwise, and No. 5 counter-clockwise.

This, it will be found, ties the Nut.

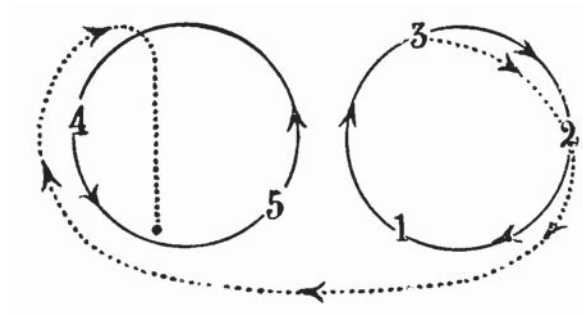
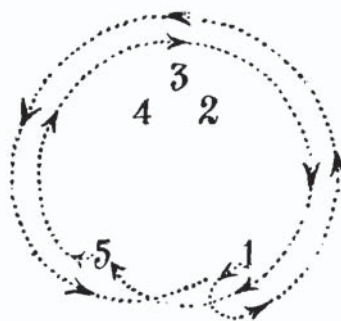


FIGURE 10 - THE PRINCE OF WALES

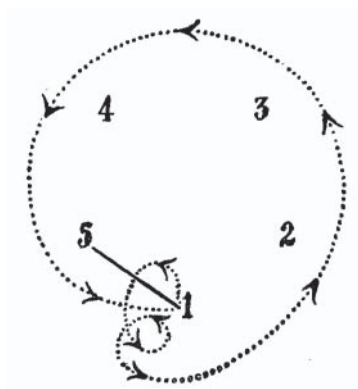


Nos. 2 and 4 close up and stand beside No. 3 in the position shown in the diagram. No. 1 then raises his left arm, turns outward to his left, passes round and outside them, counter-clockwise, and returns to his place; while No. 5 raises his right arm, turns outward to his right, passes round and outside the three stationary dancers, clockwise, and resumes his place. No. 1 passes outside No. 5 on first meeting him, and inside when he meets him for the second time.

Nos. 1 and 5 now stand close beside No. 3, while Nos. 2 and 4 move around and outside them - No. 2 counter-clockwise, and No. 4 clockwise. No. 2 then passes No. 4 first on the outside and then on the inside. No. 3 remains stationary throughout the figure.

The Nut is tied in the usual way directly Nos. 2 and 4 have resumed their place.

FIGURE 11 - DOCTOR COOK



No. 1 leaps over No. 5's sword, raises both arms, revolves once on his axis counter-clockwise, and then, turning to his left, moves outside and round the circle counter-clockwise and returns to his place. Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 then do the likewise, each in turn jumping over the rapper belonging to the dancer on his left, and performing the evolutions above described.

The Nut is tied in the usual way directly No. 5 has resumed his place.

FIGURE 12 - FIXY



All move round clockwise until No. 3 faces audience.

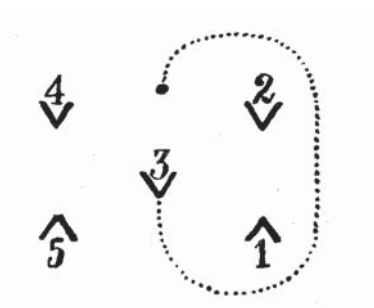
No. 1, raising his left arm, then turns outward to his left, passes outside No. 2, moves forward between Nos. 2 and 3 (under No. 2's sword), makes a half-turn clockwise and stands with his back to the audience on No. 3's left front.

Simultaneously, No. 5, keeping his face to the centre, passes behind No. 4, advances between Nos. 3 and 4 (under No. 3's sword), and, making a half-turn counter-clockwise, stands with his back to the audience on No. 3's right front.

No. 2 now makes a one and a quarter turn counter-clockwise, moves backward and stands behind No. 3, facing No. 1; while No. 4 makes a one and a quarter turn clockwise, backs behind No. 3 and faces No. 5 (see photograph above).

The dancers, standing in this position, "step" (eight bars).

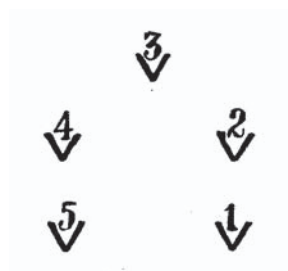
The Nut is then tied in the following way. No. 3 moves forward, passes under No. 5's sword, turns to his left and dances round and outside Nos. 1 and 2, halts between Nos. 2 and 4 and faces centre.



No. 1 then raises his left arm, turns outward and ties the Nut in the usual manner.

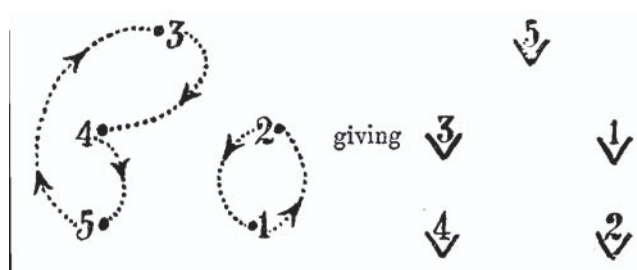
FIGURE 13 - THE OLD FIDDLER

All move round clockwise until No. 3 is facing the audience. The rest also face audience, Nos. 1, 2 and 5 turning counter-clockwise and No. 4 clockwise, and stand thus:-

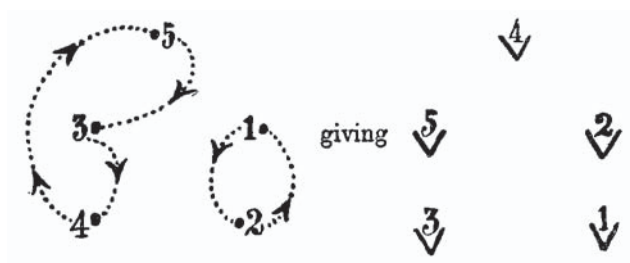


In this position they step until the end of the strain of the music (eight bars).

No. 5 now turns outwards to his right and moves into No. 3's position; No. 1 turns outwards to his left and takes No. 2's place; Nos. 4 and 2 move forwards to the front rank; and No. 3 takes No. 4's position, thus:-

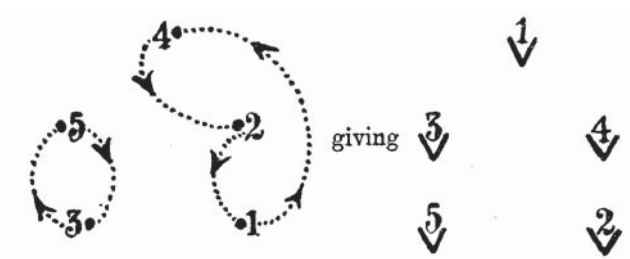


Standing in this position, all "step" until the end of the strain (eight bars). Whereupon, a similar change is again made, thus:-

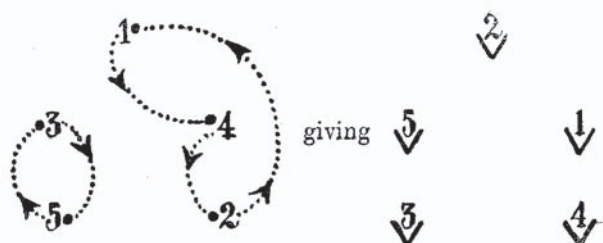


In this position, they all "step" as before.

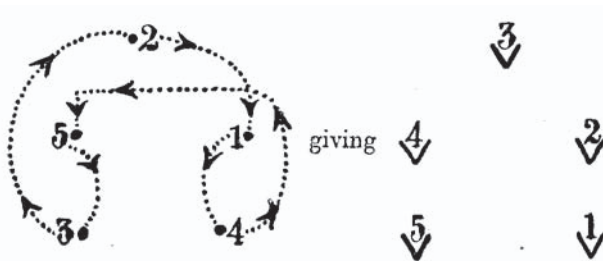
The next change is made a little differently. The front right (No. 1) now goes to the back and No. 3 moves one place back; while the rest move as before, thus:-



After "stepping" as before, No. 2 moves into the back place; No. 5 takes No. 3's place, and No. 1 takes No. 4's, while Nos. 4 and 3 move forwards to the front line, thus:-



After "stepping" as before, the next and last change is effected in the following way. No. 3 moves to the back place; No. 2 takes No. 1's place; Nos. 5 and 1 move into the two front places; while No. 4 turns outward to his left, passes between the second rank and the hindmost, and takes No. 5's place, thus:-



The dancers, once again in their original place, now "step" until the end of the strain (eight bars).

Immediately the "stepping" is finished, No. 5 makes a three-quarter turn clockwise, after which the Nut can be tied in the usual way.

FIGURE 14 - DOCTOR PARRY

No. 1 jumps over No. 3's sword (Nos. 3 and 4 lowering the sword as he does so, after the manner of a skipping rope), turns left, and returns to his place. Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5 then do the same, each, in turn, jumping over the sword belonging to the second dancer on his right and returning, counter-clockwise, to his place.

The Nut is then tied in the usual way.

FIGURE 15 - WAVES

This is the same as Changy, except that No. 1 always crosses over from one circle to the other *before*, instead of *behind* No. 5.

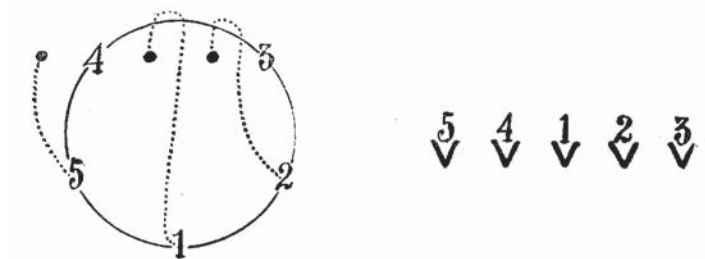
FIGURE 16 - DOUBLE-GUARD

This is a variant of The Prince of Wales, in which the two couples pass round simultaneously instead of in succession. Nos. 1 and 2 move round counter-clockwise, and Nos. 4 and 5 clockwise. Upon meeting, Nos. 1 and 2 pass outside the first time, and inside the second time.

The Nut is then tied in the usual way.

FIGURE 17 - FACE-UP

Nos. 1 and 2 move forward, pass between Nos. 3 and 4 (under No. 3's sword), make each half turn counter-clockwise, and stand beside No. 3 (No. 2 on No. 1's left) facing audience. No. 5 moves a step backward into line with the others, thus:-



In this position the dancers "step" (8 bars).

Nos. 1 and 2 now walk forward under No. 3's sword and No. 1 raises both arms, turns to his left, followed by Nos. 2, 3 and 4 and ties the Nut in the ordinary way.

The dancers then form into line and "step," the leader, in the middle, holding up the Nut in his right hand well above his head (8 bars).

This concludes the dance.

NOTATION

Introduction
Fig. 1 Single-Guard
Fig. 2 The Nut
Fig. 1 Single-Guard
Fig. 3 Three-and-Two
Figs. 2 and 1 The Nut and Single-Guard
Fig. 4 Turn-In
Figs. 2 and 1 The Nut and Single-Guard
Fig. 5 Follow-We
Figs. 2 and 1 The Nut and Single-Guard
Fig. 6 Changy
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Fig. 8 Figure Eight
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Fig. 9 Raffally
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Figs. 2 and 1 The Nut and Single-Guard
Fig. 16 Double-Guard
Figs. 2 and 1 The Nut and Single-Guard
Fig. 17 Face-Up
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. 82-103
2. *ibid*, pp. 72-81

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