

On Common Ground 3: John Playford and the English Dancing Master, 1651

DHDS March 2001

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PLAYFORD INTERPRETATION TODAY

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Playford published his books as aides memoires for the dancing masters of the day; they were never intended for people trying to learn the dances from scratch. Cecil Sharp did a wonderful job of interpreting these often confusing instructions and bringing them to life for dancers of the twentieth century, but for a long time his followers took his versions as gospel and would not allow any other opinions.

If you've looked at Playford's original notation, you'll know how sketchy, confusing and just plain wrong many of the dances are. But most dancers haven't, and people get very dogmatic about things, especially when they don't have a leg to stand on. Here's one example. When I started calling, virtually everybody did "Cecil Sharp" siding. I've known cries of "rubbish" when I called a dance using into-line siding and said that I believed this was what siding really was. When they said "rubbish", what they meant was that they'd been doing siding the Sharp way for forty years, and how dare a young whippersnapper suggest that they'd been doing it wrong! But Sharp himself wasn't dogmatic – it was his followers who put him on a pedestal. How many of the people who thought they knew it all had actually *read* what Sharp said in the Country Dance Book in 1911?

"Although I have consulted all the sources of inspiration at my disposal, I have been unable to find any authoritative definition of this figure... Some solution had, therefore to be made." (Part 2, page 19.) In other words – I made this up, and it seems to work. And in Part 6 – his final thoughts on the matter, published in 1922:

"Now if, instead of turning, the dancers were to "fall back to places" along their own tracks, the Side would then be identical with the Morris figure of Half-hands, or Half-gip. And this, I suspect, may prove to be the correct interpretation..." (Part 6, pages 10–11.)

Tom Cook told me that he is sure Maud Karpeles was mainly responsible for part 6 of the Country Dance Book, and she introduced many rigidities in the 1920's; Sharp actually wanted to replace his own version of siding by siding into-line, but she and other followers would not allow it.

Pat Shaw was one of the first to look anew at the original Playford texts and suggest other possibilities. But my understanding is that although Pat Shaw was in favour of into-line siding he never actually said that Sharp had got it wrong and this is what siding should be; he just used the figure in the dances he composed. Since then people have been more up-front, and now there are many people producing their own interpretations. Some have been concerned with accurate reconstruction of the original; some have not. Surely it's time we asked some questions. What are the guidelines in interpreting these dances? How much is it permissible to alter dances or add movements to make them more acceptable to the dancers of today? What is the best solution when it seems impossible to make sense of the original wording?

I've come up with four Rules for interpreters:

1. The dance must fit the music.

You must know how long the standard figures take. A common mistake is to squash too much dance into a phrase of music. For instance, assume that a cast is 8 steps, not 4. It helps if you can read music.

2. Be aware of the different groups of standard figures.

Keep in the style – there’s a lot of difference between early Playford and the Apted book (Fandango, Bishop, Shrewsbury Lasses).

The three Playford introductions for set dances automatically give the dance a shape. If the third figure starts “arm left” (as it does in one modern dance in the Playford style), something is badly wrong!

In a duple minor dance you often have the first corners do something: set, turn single, two-hand turn – then the second corners do the same. Another standard is corners cross, circle half, ones cast. But you can also get these in triple minors (which I assume developed from duple minors). I can’t think of any movement you would get in a duple minor but not in a triple minor. Four changes of a circular hey is more common in triple minor; in duple minor it’s more likely to be three changes to progress, as in Indian Queen.

There are some figures typical of a triple minor dance, because all three couples are needed. Hey contrary sides, hey own side. Cross and cast, cross and cast, lead up, cast. Lead down the middle and back, cast (and this carried on into early American contras and English traditional dances). All three couples promenade. Turn contra corners (now thought Scottish or American, but see Fandango or Devon Bonny Breast Knot).

3. Be aware that instructions are usually given to the first man.

In a triple minor the twos and (particularly) the threes sometimes do very little. We have a different attitude now: “Why shouldn’t the twos do the two-hand turn as well?” They would have said: “Why should they – the ones don’t need them to.” But they did a longways all the way there and back – everyone had the same number of turns as a one.

4. Follow the spirit rather than the letter of the original wording

This is the controversial one – a licence to do virtually anything. But I really think this is what makes a good interpretation. Sharp *didn’t* do this – he stuck to the letter whenever possible – and as a result he made many mistakes.

So let’s bite the bullet – how permissible is it for an interpreter to put in moves which he *knows* are wrong? I think it depends why you’re interpreting the dance and who it’s for. If it’s for a DHDS workshop, where people expect historical accuracy, it’s barely permissible. If it’s for an EFDSS evening dance, probably the great majority of dancers won’t care how accurate it is, or even whether it’s 17th century Playford, 18th century Thompson, 20th century Pat Shaw or 21st century Colin Hume; the only question is “Do I like the dance?”. But this attitude bothers me.

And I think it makes a difference how big and how disruptive your changes are. We dance most triple minors by converting them to three couple set dances – many dancers wouldn’t know that Fandango and Shrewsbury Lasses were originally triple minor. And in Fandango the final lead to the bottom for the ones flows perfectly out of the rest of the dance. On the other hand, I’ve danced The Bishop as a three-couple dance and it was awful, because it finishes with a circle six half-way, the ones in middle place have no time to cast to the bottom before the new first man is casting to middle place and the original third man suddenly discovers he needs to be at the top! The smallest change isn’t necessarily the best. To convert Shrewsbury Lasses to triple minor they added an entire **B2** section, starting with

the threes casting up. That's a major change, but it's much less disruptive than having the ones cast to the bottom after the final half-turn and the threes moving up rapidly so that the lady is there ready to be honoured.

So let's go through the four points and see how different interpreters have adhered to them – or not.

1. The dance must fit the music.

I would say that Sharp's version of Nonesuch is an example of a dance which doesn't fit the music. It finishes half-way through the tune! See Mike Barraclough's version for one which does fit a whole number of times through the tune.

I would say that Sharp's version of Chelsea Reach doesn't fit the way he directs the music to be played, which is **A, B, A, B** etc. This is because the first figure is longer than the other two, and maybe he didn't think the musicians would cope with 4 **B**'s in the first figure and only two **B**'s in the second and third figure, but it seems pretty clear from the original wording (and from the shape of the dance itself) that this is what's intended.

And I would say the Kennedys' version of Cottey House doesn't fit the music – the final part is usually a mad scramble, unless people have practiced it for ages.

All three of these are published in my book *“Playford with a Difference, Volume 1”* (Colin Hume, 1995), along with my explanation of why Sharp and the Kennedys got things wrong.

2. Be aware of the different groups of standard figures.

The usual version of The Russian Dance from the Ashover Book has just one lot of siding – over and back. It doesn't belong there. Just because it's a “Playford” figure doesn't mean you can slap it into an 18th century country dance. The original says “Half right and left”, which may have meant different things at different times, but it surely never meant “Side with your partner”.

3. Be aware that instructions are usually given to first man, and the twos and threes are often just posts for the ones to dance round.

Some interpreters choose to put in extra moves for the twos and threes – Tom Cook frequently does, and so do Ken Sheffield, Charles Bolton and Andrew Shaw. Charles's approach is that the ones' track is sacrosanct, but it's fine to add moves to keep the others interested. This was a revelation to Anne Daye when he gave a talk at Southam Festival – the historical approach is that if the dance is boring for the twos and threes you just don't do it. So, you may accept Charles' view or not. But what about cases where all three couples are clearly doing moves which are not in the original? To me it's the difference between restoring an old piece of furniture, and creating a completely new piece of furniture using some of the original wood.

I feel that Tom Cook and particularly Ken Sheffield go too far in inventing things for no good reason. I know that Ken puts things in his forewords such as *“There is no suggestion that the versions in this book are the correct ones”* or *“The dances as set down here are interpretations or modifications of the original instructions”*, and Tom explains that times have changed and today's dancers don't want to stand around for most of the dance – but most dancers don't read the books. They go to a dance and the caller says “This is from

Walsh, 1718”, and they assume that’s how they did the dance in 1718. For instance, one of Ken’s versions (triple minor) finishes with a morris hey. You look at the original and it says “Right and Left”. I think that’s carrying licence too far.

4. Follow the spirit rather than the letter of the original wording.

I know that one sounds a bit vague, but potentially it’s the most important of the four.

So let’s look at a dance in detail and see what interpreters have made of it. I was planning to do my version of Newcastle, but a couple of weeks before the conference I discovered Mike Barraclough was doing Newcastle, so I’m switching to Irish Lamentation – which isn’t Playford. I know someone did a session on this at the Amherst Assembly in the States a few years ago, but I wasn’t there and haven’t read anything about the session so I don’t know whether I’ll reach the same conclusions or not.

Here’s what Wright published, and the identical wording appears in Walsh in the 3rd Book of The Complete Dancing Master in 1735.



Irish Lamentation. Longways for as many as will. ³

First Man dances the Minuet Step to the 2d Wo. & turns her to the 2d Man the same to the 1st Wo. the 1st Cu. cast down & up again then crosses over and half Figure then right hand and left quite round and turn your Partner.

The underlined dots show the end of **A1**, **A2** (8 bars each) and **B1** (16 bars); presumably there should be a final one for the end of **B2**. Of course, it's possible there are mistakes.

I heard this on Bare Necessities "Take a Dance" album and loved it. To me it's such a wonderful tune that I would feel obliged to try the dance even if there were bits I wasn't completely happy with. The album notes didn't say where the modern interpretations were found, so I went to the Library at Cecil Sharp House, studied the original wording and produced my version. *Then* I discovered Tom Cook had a version in "Again Let's Be Merry" (1979). Here's his wording.

- A1 Take hands four. All "step-set" (left foot to the left, cross right foot over and beyond left foot, transfer weight back onto left foot – same to right) twice, then first man and second woman turn, returning to places.
- A2 Again take hands four and "step-set" as in A1, then the other two dancers turn.
- B1 1–4 All move up the set and face their own wall (that is, half turn single, men to left, women to right). Neighbours take inside hand and first couple move round outside second couple in an "assisted" cast, all to progressed places.
- 5–8 All move down the set and face their own wall. Neighbours again take inside hand and first couple move round outside second couple in an "assisted" cast up, all to original places.
- 9–16 First couple cross and cast down, then go half figure eight up through second couple (who lead up) to progressed places.
- B2 1–8 First and second couples, partners facing, circular hey taking hands, four changes.
- 9–16 First and second couples dance round each other, returning to progressed places (ballroom hold is suggested).

Tom is at pains to point out that the dance isn't a waltz, and that the basic rhythm should be six beats long not three, but I defy anyone to take ballroom hold and dance round the other couple to this music without waltzing.

So, two questions:

- Is it a good dance (or more personally: Do you like it)?
- Is it a good interpretation?

The first is really a matter of opinion. I don't like the "assisted" cast business at all; it's fussy and I don't see the point. And I don't like the anachronistic "waltz round". To answer the second, we look at the original wording.

Most English Folk dancers couldn't do a minuet step (and wouldn't want to), so Tom has replaced it with his "step-setting". Yes, but surely that loses the point that it should be just the first corners involved; the second corners have their chance in **A2**. I agree with avoiding the minuet step, but what could the first corners do in four bars before their two-hand turn? To me the obvious choice is set and turn single – in fact the setting in 3-time turns out to be similar to Tom's step-setting, though I wouldn't want to start it on the left foot, because dancers here and in other countries are used to setting to the right first. You could say that my way is just as "wrong" as Tom's, but I think it's more in keeping with the original. That's what I'm getting at when I say "follow the spirit rather than the letter".

You could also argue that if you replace the minuet step by a set and turn single, it should be the first man doing it and the second lady admiring – which is what they did in those days, and what we still do in Shrewsbury Lasses. I certainly keep it that way in The Bishop, but the fashion in England these days is for both people to set. In this case I felt that since I had changed the step completely I might as well go the whole way and allow the second woman to join in as well.

B1 starts “the 1st Cu. cast down & up again” – just as you would in the English traditional dance “Soldiers’ Joy” or the American contra “Chorus Jig”. Not quite the same, because there are three steps to the bar so you get further. It’s a good strong positive movement. I suppose Tom thought this was boring for the twos, so he’s got the twos turning out and helping the ones along – and I think it destroys the flow of the movement. Ken Sheffield does the same in “Guardian Angels” where the ones cross and cast, cross and cast – I don’t like that either.

“Cross over” practically always means “cross over and cast down a place”, and by implication we’re still talking to the ones, so a half figure eight up will bring them to their progressed place proper – no problems with that. The underlined dot says that this is once through the 16-bar B-music, which all fits fine. But what about the second **B**: “then right and left quite round and turn your Partner”? Four changes of a circular hey at three steps per change is four bars, and a turn is two or four bars (6 or 12 steps) – total 8 bars. We can slow down the four changes by allowing six steps per hand, but this still gives us 8 bars (24 steps) for “and turn your Partner”. This is where Tom puts in the waltz around (and admittedly you are “turning” with your partner) – but that’s so out of character! My suggestion is a right-hand turn and a left-hand turn. There’s still a fair amount of music to fill up – four bars (twelve steps) for each turn – but I think it works

- A1: First corners set and turn single. Two-hand turn.
- A2: Second corners the same.
- B1: Ones cast, go well down the outside. Cast back to place.
- C1: Ones cross; go below the twos who lead up. Ones half figure eight up.
- B2: Four changes of circular hey with hands (6 steps each).
- C2: Right-hand turn partner (12 steps). Left-hand turn.

I wrote to Tom and asked him what he thought of my version – that’s something I can’t do with Cecil Sharp. He said in his reply: “...*I have come to regret my 9–16 suggestion [that’s the dance around] ... and have experimented with a whole-poussette + quarter-turns... Your suggestion is much simpler, and of course is just as good.*” He preferred the fussy bit because he likes people to take hands when the music allows – which I agree with, but I don’t think the music *does* allow this, because the ones should be moving well down the hall. He didn’t object to the set and turn single as such, but felt you needed to be moving to the right immediately before the two-hand turn – that’s why he starts the step-setting to the left.

If you think the final bit is all too slow – in other words it breaks my first rule about the dance fitting the music – you might prefer Nic Broadbridge’s version with a single **B**. He says he looked at the original, found no indication that the **B** should be played twice, took account of the fact that the **A** is 8 bars and the **B** 16 bars, and felt the tune was finished after

16 bars of a **B** music, and was musically balanced at that and ready to return to the **A**, in much the same way as Mr Beveridge's Maggot cries out musically to return to the **A** at the end of the **B** Music. He also doesn't like the so-called "step setting", and he's come up with a slightly different option. Here's his version.

- A1: 1st corners set R & L on the spot, set R & L moving forward, and turn with 2 hands once round.
 A2: 2nd corners ditto.
 B: 1–8 1st Co cast and whole figure up through 2nd Co, (Man handing Wo across in front of him to start), 2nd Co moving up after 1st Co are through for the second time;
 9–12 Hey 4 changes with hands,
 13–16 All turn partners with two hands once round.

But can you *really* justify that when you look at the original? I know there are lots of errors in dance manuals of this period, but most of this looks so uncontroversial to me. It's possible that Walsh would leave out the word "half" in a half figure eight, but much less likely that he would put it in when it shouldn't be there.

So, three versions of one dance, none of them starting with a minuet step. I'm not saying that mine is right and the other two are wrong; I'm saying that you have to balance historical accuracy against what people want to dance now. We know we're not historically accurate in EFDSS. We don't do the steps they did then. We don't dance in the same style. We live in a different world, and it's no good pretending we don't. We have created a new tradition over the last century, sparked off by Cecil Sharp. The way they dance these dances in the States is different again, and I'm sure they would tell you theirs is an "English" style.

So two final questions:

- Should the author of a new version of a dance be expected to justify what he has produced?
- Is it possible or desirable to exercise any control over dance interpreters in the 21st century?

I think that people who publish dance interpretations ought to publish the original wording. I don't demand a facsimile, though academics may feel that's essential. And they should say what they have changed or added – either because they couldn't make sense of the original, or because they wanted to make the dance interesting or acceptable to today's dancers. Bernard Bentley, in the Fallibroome series, is very good at saying what he has added or left out. The Kennedys in the Country Dance Book New Series certainly aren't – they claim they are, and then you find that in "Abergenny" they've swapped the second part of the first figure with the first part of the second figure. I imagine many callers won't care one way or the other, but it might get some of them thinking about these issues, and that's all to the good.

As to exercising control, I can't see that happening. The RSCDS acts as a standardising body and publishes the definitive versions of dances, but English country dancing isn't like that, and I wouldn't want it to be. If I want the freedom to publish my interpretations of Playford dances, I can't really object to other people doing the same!

So where do I see dance interpretation headed in the next 350 years? I'm sorry, but my time is up!

