

# Performing Gresley Dances: the View from the Floor

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## Introduction

On 13 March 1999 the Bedford Waits and the Capriol Dancers took part in a re-enactment of five of the dances from John Banys' pocketbook, recently discovered amongst the Gresley family papers in the Derbyshire Record Office.<sup>1,2</sup> This was presumably the first performance of these dances for something like 500 years. The event was organized by Derbyshire Record Office and was attended by a very select audience composed partly of senior national figures in the world of manuscripts and archives and partly of those who had worked in conserving and publishing the document both in conventional and in electronic media. The latter group included Professor David Fallows and Dr Jennifer Nevile.

The venue was Haddon Hall (Derbyshire), where the Banqueting Hall remains essentially in its late-fifteenth-century form and provides a setting that is only too authentic. The flagged floor goes back to the fourteenth century and its surface is so worn and uneven that, for the safety of the public, it is normally covered by a large area of matting. Out of concern for the safety of the dancers also, we chose to leave this matting in place as the lesser of two evils and were glad of a long on-site rehearsal to adjust our technique accordingly. (Footwork needed to be neat and precise, but fortunately involved nothing intricate.)

One of the charms of Haddon is the intimate scale of its rooms, with the magnificent exception of the Long Gallery. Even after some editing, certain dances took up virtually the whole of the main floor area of the Banqueting Hall, leaving the audience to stand in a narrow aisle on the north side, while the Bedford Waits were relegated to an appropriate position in the Minstrels' Gallery. The acoustics were found to be excellent, with the sloping ceiling of the restored roof acting as a perfect sounding board; but visual communication between the dancers and a group of seated musicians was found to be problematical.

The five dances performed were these:

<i>Prenes a gard</i>	for three
<i>Talbott</i>	for two
<i>Esperans</i>	for three
<i>Li beaus desconus</i>	for two
<i>Northumberland</i>	for three.

Banys' descriptions of these dances can be found in Nevile's paper in this issue of *Historical Dance*.<sup>2</sup> Banys gave the name of the fourth one in three different forms: *Lubeus discuneus*, *Lebeus desineus* and *Ly beus distonys*. These are all versions of the title of a well-known fourteenth-century verse romance attributed to Thomas Chestre and usually known as *Li beaus desconus*; it seems reasonable to restore that form of the name.

We performed the dances in versions prepared by Dr Nevile in accordance with the procedures she has outlined in the paper cited. The purpose of the present note is to describe what remained to be done before the dances could be given a public presentation and what insights were gained in rehearsal and actual performance.

## Preparing the dances for performance

What we received from Dr Nevile was a proposed sequence of steps fitted to an arrangement of the relevant music together with a sketch of the assumed floor patterns. We still had to decide how certain steps and manoeuvres were to be ex-

ecuted; in what general style the dancers were going to move; whether to use any female dancers (none being specified by Banys himself); and what were the dynamics of each dance as it took shape on the floor.

First, however, came a critical comparison of the Nevile versions with Banys' original descriptions. Only at one place did our interpretation differ: in *Talbott* we understood 'trett and retrett togeder' to mean that the dancers moved not only at the same time but also in the same direction side by side, so that is what we did. That apart, we accepted what we had been given and followed Dr Nevile's lead.

## Steps

Banys' dance-descriptions are written in English, but that does not mean that we can always readily determine what he is trying to say. In particular, there are terms used that we do not properly understand.

One of these is *rake*. This is used both as a noun and as a verb in contexts which often seem to imply sideways movement. If a *rake* is to be made as a sideways step, how long should it take? It seemed to us to be begging too many questions to perform it in the manner of an Italian *ripresa*, even when the context seemed to be suitable, so we opted for a sideways single.

This decision had interesting consequences. Nevile had allotted 1 breve (the time of a double) to each *rake* or act of raking, but we were doing each step in half this time. When, as in *Prenes a gard*, an act of raking was called for that clearly took the time of a breve, we made two of the steps in succession. The men at the sides made both their *rakes* towards their own side wall, but the one in the middle made them alternately to right and left, thereby maintaining his central position. We may contrast the situation in *Talbott* where the dance ends with '2 doblis, 2 rakis and a turne'. Here two steps are specified, and Nevile accordingly wished to allot them the equivalent of 2 breves. The only way to achieve this was to insert some extra notes into the music, but the Bedford Waits found this made them stumble. On the other hand, if the *rakis* are done as singles, the problem goes away, as the extra notes are no longer needed. These results are too limited to be regarded as conclusive, but they certainly encouraged us to continue making the steps in this way.

Another term requiring some definition was *lepe*. This was prominently featured in *Prenes a gard* and also occurred in *Northumberland*. In the former context each *lepe* can easily be shown to take a breve, so we have some kind of a jump made in the time of a double and apparently without any change of position. The three dancers are in line abreast and they *lepe* in turn in a complex succession. The context strongly suggests that they are in friendly competition, showing off what they can each do. The time available for each *lepe* presumably encompasses both the preparation for take-off and the subsequent recovery; whatever happens in between is a matter of personal agility and imagination. Similar timing, but less exuberant leaping, is appropriate also in *Northumberland*.

## Flourdelice

In *Prenes a gard* and *Northumberland* there is a manoeuvre for three dancers arranged in a triangle, called a *flourdelice*. Ideally, one would suppose that the three dancers should trace out the conventional shape of a fleur-de-lys by their move-

ment on the floor. At the end of *Prenes a gard* we were able to do this, using the *flourdelice* to move from a triangular formation into a line at the rear for the closing reverence.

In *Northumberland*, however, it is reasonably clear that the dancers have to return to the same positions they started from, and in rehearsal it became essential to ensure that they did. Our solution was for each at the same time to trace a circle forwards within the triangle and back to place. This is not very like a fleur-de-lys and could perhaps be improved by having the man at the apex go in and out of the triangle on a straight line, while the others turn as before. The more nearly the three men can meet, the more purposeful the manoeuvre will be seen to be.

I have described above two variants of the *flourdelice* as actually performed at Haddon Hall. It nevertheless does not take extensive research into the Gresley dances to show that both of these were misconceived! *Floursdelice* are called for in six other dances that are for two people only, and in some of these they are clearly made by one person at a time. So when Banys writes 'All at onys a flourdelice', he means that all three dancers are to do it (each in his own place) at the same time. Furthermore, in *Prenes a gard* the *flourdelice* should be made first and the three dancers should come together afterwards. This would require extra music, and this is in fact available, as the two final strains of the music are marked to be repeated 'ut supra'. There would then be the equivalent of six extra doubles for the coming together, which may seem excessive, yet typifies the sort of problem any reconstructor has to deal with.

It is evident that there is much work yet to be done on the form of the *flourdelice*.

### Trace

Each dance opens with a *trace*, and *Esperans* apparently has a further *trace* separating its first and second parts. We treated these as *saltarello / pas de brabant* and used them to get into an appropriate position on the floor for the main part of the dance.

### Style of movement

It was important not to imply that these dances had originally been performed either in a French or in an Italian manner, but a basic decision had to be made at the outset: to step onto the toe or onto the flat foot? We were especially glad we had chosen the second option when we encountered the practicalities of performance at Haddon; no one could have danced on the toe on that floor with any confidence. So it was an understated Italian style that we settled for, avoiding exaggerated shoulder-shading and anything that would have spoken too strongly of an Italian connection. But, in practice, when advancing in file on a sequence of six single steps, as required at the beginning of *Esperans*, it is vital that these steps are made firm and strong, and that in itself reintroduced a significant amount of swagger. This is only one of the places where the figures making up the dance imposed their own logic on the manner in which they came to be performed.

### Use of female dancers

Nowhere does John Banys refer to female dancers. When he is specific, he refers to a man, but much of the time he refers simply to 'the first', 'the second' (or 'middle') and 'the third' (or 'last'). In public performance for a general audience the

participation of women adds welcome variety and interest, as well as reducing the burden on the three male dancers who would otherwise have carried the whole performance.

The two dances for two both seemed natural couple dances, *i.e.* for a man and woman, and this is how we did them, despite Banys' reference to the 'last man' in *Libeaus desconus*. Out of the three dances for three that we performed, *Prenes a gard* and *Northumberland* both contained *lepes* for all three participants, which made them unsuited to female performance. There seemed no good reason, however, not to deploy a woman in the middle place in *Esperans*; it just so happens that this is the only one of the three dancers not to be specifically described as a man. It also happens that this configuration gives a particular emphasis to the ending of the dance. After various changes of place the three dancers have reassembled in single file, but with the middle one now transferred to the rear position. They all make a sequence of steps backwards, then the front two spin round on a double (while the third simply stands in place), before they all readvance in file for their final reverence. In this sequence the two front dancers have made their turn in front of someone with whom their eyes can momentarily interlock in passing. When that person is a woman, this dynamic is enhanced, even if this may not have been the original intention.

### The Italian connection reconsidered

In a paper in *Early Music*,<sup>3</sup> Dr Nevile tentatively suggested an Italian connection for the Gresley dances. This was inevitably a paper-based assessment, and it is fair to ask if it was reinforced or contradicted by our experience on the floor. The reader should, however, remember that this experience was limited to only five dances, while the writer must not forget that his experience was of a composite product in which Banys' original text was skilfully amplified by Nevile.

It is certainly with the Italian repertoire that the Gresley dances have to be compared, for there is no other contemporary body of figured dances of which we yet know. In France and Spain (like England until 1996) the only dances of which we have detailed knowledge are Basse Dances in their hundreds, with a few other dances that are not Basse Dances but are nevertheless in a related style. Italian sources add a few 'French' dances composed in *piva*, but these do not furnish developed floor patterns. When dealing with the Gresley dances, we are bound to think of their Italian counterparts because there is nothing else with which to compare them and because such thoughts are also prompted by observable similarities in the music.

We need not be surprised at general similarities of floor pattern. Both repertoires are at a parallel stage of development in the elaboration of floor pattern, and there are only so many alternatives that offer themselves. In a dance for two, the two dancers can proceed together; they can part by going in opposite directions and then come together again; and they can go round one another. Such moves are common to both traditions. Similarly, with three dancers, they may start in single file or line abreast. From the latter position it is simple to create a triangle by having the dancers on the sides and the one in the middle go up and down the room in opposite directions. The triangle can be inverted by reversing the direction of movement, and the dancers on the sides can exchange positions. Again, all these moves are common to England and Italy.

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It is more instructive to consider differences. There are a number of figures typical of Italian dances that are totally absent from the Gresley material.

A common pattern in Italian dances for two is for the man to leave his partner and take a particular sequence of steps; when he halts, she comes forward with the same steps to rejoin him. This is often repeated one or more times, varying the step-sequence. In the Gresley dances it is not uncommon for two or three dancers to make the same short step-sequence in turn, but the scenario of one dancer repeatedly going to join the other does not occur. No dancer is identified as a woman, and gender-based scenarios, including role reversal, are therefore absent.

In Italian dances for three a common feature is for the middle person to turn each of those on the sides one after the other; this manoeuvre may be replaced, or even followed, by a reel of three. In the Gresley dances a modest amount of turning does take place, but not of both fellow-dancers in succession, nor in a reel of three.

The various patterns considered in the two preceding paragraphs are so typical of Italian dances that their absence from the Gresley must be regarded as significant.

When we turn to actual steps and step-sequences, we are hampered by lack of information for large parts of the Gresley dances. Where steps are not specified, they may have used doubles, but this is far from certain. We can nevertheless consider the sequences of steps that *are* described.

In Italian dances singles occur most often in pairs, especially near the beginning of dances or of sections of dances. In the Gresley dances singles tend to be found in threes and sixes, usually in phrases where we can be sure that they are not triplets but maintain their normal value of half a breve each. A sequence of six singles is unheard of in the Italian repertoire, but in the Gresley dances it is relatively common.

Another distinctive sequence in the Gresley dances is 'three singlis with a stop', *i.e.* three singlis followed by a firm close of the foot in place of a fourth single. This is in its effect like a distinctive slow double, taking twice the normal time, in an even instead of dotted rhythm, and with a definite close at the end. In performance there is a striking contrast both of pace and rhythm when this sequence is juxtaposed to normal doubles. Other common distinctive steps or sequences in the

Gresley dances are the *lepes* and *floursdelice* (however these are truly done). None of the above are to be found in Italian dances.

More fundamentally, the Gresley dances cannot be equated either with Bassadanza or Ballo. Both our dancers and our musicians were agreed that a *bassadanza* tempo was too slow for the five dances we performed; and steps like *lepes* could have no place in a normal Italian Bassadanza. The tempo used in performance approximated to *saltarello*. The three dances for three were clearly arranged in several separate sections, somewhat like an Italian Ballo, but nowhere was there any sign of the changes of rhythm and tempo from one section to another that characterize the Ballo.

In general, then, there is a resemblance between the Gresley dances and the contemporary repertoire in Italy; but it is only a very general resemblance. As soon as we look at the structure and component elements of the two sets of dances in any detail, we see differences and discrepancies that deny any closer relationship. The model that seems to fit is essentially the one that I put forward in *On Common Ground 2: Continuity and Change*,<sup>4</sup> namely that both are parallel developments from the common European stock of vernacular figured dance whose other branches are still unknown to us. One day perhaps we may encounter evidence for the corresponding repertoire in France, Germany and Spain (using these names in a general rather than fifteenth-century sense), and our comparisons will become more subtle.

## References

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