

## Newcastle – An Exercise in Early English Country Dance Reconstruction

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*Newcastle* was first published in John Playford's *The English Dancing Master* of 1651<sup>1</sup> and continued to appear in subsequent editions until 1690. There is also a version in an undated manuscript source<sup>2</sup>. Today the dance is firmly established in the Playford-style country dance repertory, not least because Cecil Sharp included it in his selection of Playford interpretations<sup>3</sup>. When *Newcastle* appears in later collections, it is invariably as a Sharp version and this continues to elicit comment and modification both published and unpublished<sup>4</sup>. Collections such as those by Kate Van Winkle Keller<sup>5</sup> and Cécile Laye<sup>6</sup> may include one of the Playford texts (as did Sharp himself) and some additional comment on interpretation but there are few alternative reconstructions. One is by Colin Hume who follows his discussion of Sharp's reading and the Playford original with his own version of the dance<sup>7</sup>. Incidentally, he had also intended to use *Newcastle* as the example in his talk at the third On Common Ground conference which was held here at Cecil Sharp House in 2001 to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The English Dancing Master*. In the event he selected another example because the dance was also the subject of a conference workshop presented by Michael Barraclough. That a single English country dance should be the focus of contributions at not just one but two conferences is surely unique and indicative of the way *Newcastle* continues to fascinate and challenge interpreters. Clearly the instructions, at least to us, are neither as 'Plaine' nor as 'easie' as John Playford's subtitle promised and this dance continues to tantalise and elude with the suggestion that here lurks a masterpiece if only we could find a way through the words to unmask it.

For my part, some of you may be very glad to hear, I do not propose to offer here any discussion of others' interpretations or, indeed, of the various intervening permutations considered and discarded in arriving at my own version. Rather I propose to take us through a process of reconstruction and by focusing on one particular dance hope thereby to illustrate both some of the general problems of Country Dance interpretation and their possible solutions. This process may also elucidate any underlying principles which should inform our approach as we proceed from printed text to dance performance.

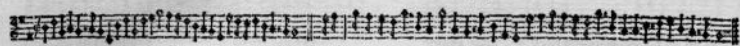
So, a first look reveals that *Newcastle* is a Round for eight, one of only five in the 1651 edition. The tune is in two parts of equal length, A and B. The dance is laid out in six parts, of which three are to the A music and refer to the characteristic 'meet', 'sides' and 'arms' which I call the formulaic sequences. The other three parts, set to the B music, are what I tend to call the fancy figures, which in this case are obviously all different. It is clear from the musical repeat signs in the choreography that each part of the dance requires a repeat of the accompanying part of the music. The first formulaic sequence, for example, is taking the usual four doubles plus four more doubles for 'That againe' to the repeat of the A music. We know we have the equivalent of four doubles repeated to complete each part of the dance.

That first sequence is straightforward enough if a little unusual in that the more common set and turn single is here replaced by 'set to your own, and to the next'.

The first fancy figure, to the B music, is a combination of arming followed by what must be hands across for four, although that more familiar term is not used, while the others go

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Newcastle      Round for eight



<p>Meer all, back againe, set to your owne, and to the next. That againe.</p>	<p>Armes all with your owne by the right, men all fall with your left hands into the middle, We go round them to your places. Armes againe with your owne, and We left hands in, men goe about them towards the left to your places.</p>
<p>Sides all with your owne, and change places with them. Sides with the next, and change places with them.</p>	<p>The first man and 3. Wo. take hands and meer, the first Wo. and 3. man, lead out againe then holding up your hands, the other foure cast off and come under your armes to their places. The other foure the like.</p>
<p>Arms all with your We. and change places. Armes with the next and change places. Now every man is with his owne Wo. in the Co. place.</p>	<p>Fall back from each other, foure and foure a breft to each wall, turn and change places with your opposites. Fall back from each other foure and foure along the roome, turne S. change places with your oppasite. So each falls into his place as at first.</p>

round the outside. The instructions are specific as to directions which seems helpful until we realise fairly quickly that if the repeat has the women going round left hands across, then everyone is going to finish improper which is most unlikely. Perhaps the words right and left got put in the wrong way round, or we just need to reverse the order, providing, of course, this doesn't give rise to more problems than it solves. With regard to timing it is not stated that this is anything other than all the way, which means that those going round the outside in particular will have to get a bit of a move on to make it in what is the equivalent of four doubles including the turn with partner before setting out – and so we encounter common problem number 1: too far to go in too short a time.

This is not necessarily a problem for today's dancers – with our liberated body movement and unencumbered by layers of silks and velvets, not to mention all the associated underpinnings, we can make it, just, and may well use some sort of sprung travelling step to do so. Already this raises the question of the use of steps in Playford dances. The English Country Dance has a long history and changed over time as it reflected the dance fashion of the day. Later evidence certainly suggests the use of a variety of steps (and I'm sure Anne Daye's workshop will provide the opportunity to try out some of these). However, I am not yet convinced of the use of such steps in early, especially pre-1651, Playford. This is not just because of the absence of internal references to steps other than single, double, and slip, but also because the execution of steps was subject to a greater degree of technique in execution than is considered necessary for English country dancing now. Although we can use a sprung step to give greater impetus and so travel further than with a walked step, I'm not sure that technically it should cover a greater distance. If hops are executed in place, even a coranto double step would involve only three paces forward, and anything akin to today's travelling step only two. My current practice is to use an open double when moving in a continuous line of travel, taking another pace forward instead of the closure. This gives four paces to each double apart from the last in a sequence which I do close to mark the end of the figure and musical strain. If a figure requires something of an unseemly scramble to achieve then it almost certainly needs a rethink.

Moving on to the second formulaic sequence, 'sides', it is immediately apparent – 'Sides with the next' – that this, most unusually is progressive. *Newcastle* is one of only three examples of this in the first edition, the other two being *Dargason* and *Row well ye Marriners*. Since the next person, if that's who it is, is encountered one eighth of the way round the set, the whole sequence progresses only one quarter round but there are two doubles for each

change. So we come to common problem number 2, the opposite of common problem number 1 – not very far to go and plenty of time to get there. The most usual solution to this today is to add sundry honours, flourishes and whatnot to take up the slack. It is always possible that an instruction or part of an instruction is missing – we’ve only got to look at the third fancy figure of this dance to find an example. Here, it is clear that the ‘S.’ of turn single has been omitted from the equivalent place in the first time through and there is every justification therefore, for adding it there too. When there is no such obvious clue, omission should be considered a solution of last, not first, resort. *Newcastle* seems to be getting more interesting and more problematical as we proceed, but if a solution is not immediately apparent, it is worth pressing on to subsequent parts in the hope that they may yield some answers.

Coming, then, to the second fancy figure, we notice that numbered individuals are specified for the first time: ‘The first man and 3. Wo. . . . . the first Wo. and 3. Man . . . .’. However, the commas, particularly the one after ‘meet,’ , make the movement instructions seem rather jumbled. Maybe at this point we should reach for the peg dollies or the chess pieces or hijack a group of real people to help us to see what is happening. And, yes, if the siding sequence finishes one quarter of the way round the set, then 1st man and 3rd woman, 1st woman and 3rd man are standing next to each other in which case the only way to make any sense of the figure, to cut a long story short, is for the dancers to start and finish in the same place – trying to get them back to original places seems impossible from here, and where else should they be going?. Anyway, if they are apparently not progressing anywhere then the other two couples aren’t going anywhere either. Interestingly, they don’t just go round but must ‘cast off’ to go under the arches. Maybe this is to put them in single file and keep them with their current partners like the others. Casting away from each other individually would have the couples heading out of the set, or, if they turn a little further, colliding with each other. A small quarter turn to separate would scarcely warrant the use of the term ‘cast off’. As for the timing, neither of the two movements takes four doubles so, to use up the music, they must be executed consecutively. At the end of all this the dancers are still stuck one quarter of the way round the set with somebody else’s partner, so that is where the arming sequence would have to start – curiouser and curiouser.

If this arming sequence covers the same distance as the siding, which would be expected, then it would move the dancers a further quarter on, i.e. to halfway round. At this point the description continues with a further statement:

‘Now every man is with his owne Wo. In the Co. place’.

At last, exactly the sort of instruction we need – clear, unambiguous, surely admitting of only one possible interpretation, telling us precisely where the dancers should be when. What is more, that seems to be, so far, where we, too, think they should be. So that’s alright then. What a relief. At least we don’t have to query those positions any more.

So on to the last fancy figure which by definition starts halfway way round the set and takes the figure to get halfway back to where the dance started. The figure itself seems perfectly straightforward, tame even, although there would appear to be a little discrepancy in timing in that two of the couples have further to cross than the other two, but that probably only requires a modest tweak somewhere to put right.

So, we now have a draft reconstruction. There are several marked problems with timing, notably in the siding and arming sequences, and the first fancy figure. This appears to get in

a decided twist about directions as well as having the dancers scurrying round the set not once but twice. The second goes nowhere very much in a distinctly leisurely manner and is danced with a new partner throughout, and all three fancy figures start from different places round the set. This is a consequence of the way the distinctive siding and arming sequences are operating with a progression that goes part way round. As the reconstruction stands, this means that the siding and arming sequences also start from different places so that the last four parts follow on from each other which cuts right across the given structure of the dance. However, we do know that the last figure definitely starts from halfway way round the set and progresses halfway way back so that the dancers finish in original places. We know this because the arming sequence finishes halfway way round:

‘Now every man is with his owne Wo. in the Co. place’.

The meaning of these words is clear but perhaps we should also consider the function of the statement at this point in the text. It appears to be a reassuring confirmation of the way we already think the dance seems to be working out. But what if this statement is not a statement of the obvious but a clarification of that which is not obvious? What if it is actually providing additional information, a warning without which we may not finish this sequence halfway way round? What if this is the vital clue to the conundrum that is *Newcastle*?

What happens if we obey the structure of the dance and start both siding and arming sequences from original places, assume ‘the next’ means the dancer in the next place round the set, and take them both halfway way i.e. moving on a quarter each time? Something very odd is what happens because the dancer in the next place round the set is not the same person as the next dancer you meet – each person will pass not one but two dancers on the way with the first of whom they must not dilly-dally – or, more to the point, ‘sides’ or ‘arms’ with, – because if they do, they will not reach that halfway mark, and hence the need for that final vitally important description of where the dancers should be. Weaving past two dancers by alternate shoulders also solves the problem of the two spare doubles.

So now the middle fancy figure, the arches and casting one, must also, like the last, go halfway back. Are there any other clues which might suggest how this works?. Well, there is one feature of the last figure which might have passed unnoticed were we not searching for clues, and which may or may not be significant. Where there is a clear pattern in one figure, it is always worth checking to see if it might apply to other equivalent figures, especially if they are problematic. In the third fancy figure, as the dancers re-form the set after the first crossing, it so happens that they are all improper and so start the repeat of the figure improper. It will be remembered that according to this alternative interpretation, dancers will finish the siding, like the arming, halfway round the set with their partners bringing 1st man and 3rd woman, 1st woman and 3rd man opposite, not next to, each other. If they lead in with their partners and out to side positions with each other then they, too, will be improper, leaving the sides to cast halfway round, proceed under the arches and separate to fall out likewise improper. This would explain that very particular, but rather jumbled, juxtaposition of 1st man, 3rd woman, 1st woman, 3rd man, and the repeat will bring all dancers back once more to original places proper.

So back to that first fancy figure, and if that is also taken only halfway – halfway there and halfway back on the repeat – thus reflecting the patterning of the rest of the dance, then once again, the timing problem seems to resolve itself. However, according to the descrip-

tion as written, the only time the dancers finish improper is when we don't want them to, at the end of the figure. For the sake of consistency, we could try and finish improper to start the repeat, as in the second and third figures. What happens if the dancers pass by each other as they approach from opposite directions and curve into place improper, repeating the movement the second time to finish proper? What happens is that those seemingly confused but very precise directions work exactly as writ – arm right, men left hands in and women round, arm again, women left hands in, men round to the left. Not only that but it is the dancers on the shorter inside track that have the longer curve to place so they don't even arrive marginally ahead of their partners.

Now the only sequence which does not involve the dancers in halfway progressions is the very first. Remember the undated manuscript? Yes, it does have the alternative introduction going halfway round and, yes, I'm tempted, but such a substitution would require a proper consideration of such matters as how the country dances were collected and recorded, how fixed any given version was and the status of variations, all well beyond the scope of this exercise so I'll stick, for now, with Playford 1651. The manuscript does seem to confirm some elements of this proposed reconstruction whilst also sometimes leaving confusion worse confounded – confirmation, I suspect, of the intricate nature of the original dance.

So now we have a reconstruction of the dance which fits the music, follows the given structure despite some highly unusual characteristics, and shows a consistency of patterning with repeats which are just that – the same again, the others doing 'the like'.

Having arrived at an interpretation, is there anything to be discovered about a possible context for the dance especially given the very specific title? I suppose some sort of regional connection should be considered, but as the dance is clearly a set dance of some ingenuity, association with a particular person and/or event is more likely. So who was Newcastle?

Newcastle<sup>8</sup> was William Cavendish who was born in 1592. He was nephew of the first Earl of Devonshire and a grandson of Bess of Hardwick. He had country seats in Derbyshire and his London pad was in the select Blackfriars enclave. He was created Earl of Newcastle in 1628 by Charles I who appointed him governor to the Prince of Wales and a member of the Privy Council in 1638. Newcastle left for the continent after Marston Moor in 1644 returning at the Restoration, and was created Duke in 1665. Back in 1633 Newcastle had notably entertained the King at Welbeck Abbey, an exercise which he repeated the following year with a lavish and costly entertainment, this time at Bolsover Castle<sup>9</sup>. He is actually referred to in the text:

'... the glad, and grateful Client, seated here, the over-joy'd Master of the House ...'.

The event was costing him, according to the biography by his second wife, the Duchess, some £14,000 to £15,000. Both entertainments were written by none other than Ben Jonson, of whom the Earl was a patron, and the second is better known for its satire of Inigo Jones and the dance of the mechanicals. Bolsover, noted architecturally for its dominating keep had been started in 1612 and at the time of the entertainment William Cavendish's own additions were still being completed. Reverting to the dance and the last figure: the solution which occurred to me to accommodate the shorter distance required for two of the couples to cross over with each other, was to apply the instruction to turn single to the leading couples only, in the usual way, and it is these couples who have less far to travel. It happens

that these couples are on the ends of the lines each time, and so this seemingly tame figure is suddenly transformed into the representation of a turreted keep – Newcastle’s new castle perhaps?

‘For Dauncing is an exercise  
not only shews ye mouers wit,  
but maketh ye beholder wise,  
as he has powre to rise to it’<sup>10</sup>.

And so the dance itself becomes a text to be read.

Whether or not the dance *Newcastle* had its origin at this event, I feel I must finish with some of the words from it because they seem so peculiarly apposite to this exercise: the words come from the first welcome song presented before the King and Henrietta Maria at the first banquet. It is sung by two tenors and a bass and takes the form of a conversation.

**From *Love’s Welcome at Bolsover*:**

Love’s Welcome

The King and Queen’s Entertainment  
At Bolsover, at the Earl of Newcastle’s  
The thirtieth of July, 1634.

You make of Love a riddle, or a chaine,  
A circle, a mere knott : untie’t againe.

Love is a Circle, both the first, and last  
Of all our Actions, and his knott’s too fast.

A true-love Knot will hardly be unti’d,  
And if it could, who would this Payre divide?

God made them such, and Love;

Who is a ring,

The likest to the yeare of any thing,  
And runs into itself.

[The reconstruction was demonstrated]

## Reconstruction notes

These are brief supplementary notes intended to be read in conjunction with the original Playford instructions.

### Formulaic sequences

### Fancy figures

Take ‘with the next’ as with the dancer in the next place, i.e. one quarter round the set, so passing two dancers each time and finishing with partners halfway round.

I suggest shoulder-to-shoulder siding, right then left, and passing by right, left, then left, right.

As for ‘sides’.

After arming, go halfway round, partners passing right shoulders to fall our ‘improper’ the first time, ‘proper’ at the end of repeat

1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> couples meet, and 1<sup>st</sup> man with 3<sup>rd</sup> woman, 1<sup>st</sup> woman with 3<sup>rd</sup> man, lead out while 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> men, followed by partners, cast off, go halfway round, proceed under arches, and separate (men left first time, right on repeat) so all 4 couples finish ‘improper’. Repeat brings all dancers back to original places ‘proper’.

I suggest leading couples only (1st and 3rd first time, 2nd and 4th on repeat), with shorter distance to travel, turn single before crossing with opposites.

## Acknowledgements

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