

THE AMBLE SWORD DANCE

This notation was written by Bill Cassie and originally published in 1966¹.

Amble is a mining village on the Northumbrian coast about 25 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. As with most longstanding traditional ceremonial dances, this one has depended on the enthusiasm of one family – the Flanagans. The members of the family who contributed to the discussions and demonstrations of steps and knots were Eddie who had danced No. 4, Frank, who had been the Betty and Mark (from whom the knots were eventually collected) who was normally No. 5 but could take any position. He had been in charge of the boys' side, and had also performed in the men's side which was controlled by his father. The old man had died in 1958 at the age of 89, and his long life and good health were attributed to good beer and plenty of dancing! He had been a Northumbrian clog dancing champion and teacher of the art in the region. He had also taught the rapper sword dance in Broomhill, Hemscott Hill and Widdrington.

The dance was handed down by the Flanagan family, and seems to have been performed last about 1931. During the previous few years of the depression, miners' rapper teams had a revival over the Tyneside area, but with the return to work and better times there was not so much need for collections! The Amble side had met teams from Winlaton, Bedlington, Chester-le-Street, Cambois (pron. *Cammus*), Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, and Earsdon. The Amble team had danced as far afield as Morpeth, and references were made to a show at Alnwick Castle for the Duke of Northumberland. The Flanagans last appeared at a rapper meeting when Geordie Osborne was presented with his Gold Badge by Douglas Kennedy, on the occasion of the Morris Ring meeting in Whitley Bay (1958).

The dancers wore black velvet or satin huggers – the pitman's working costume of open-ended breeches – as worn by Earsdon and others. The Amble stockings were white with a cable design up the sides, and the shirts were also white. The men wore red sashes and black shoes. The Betty sported a floral print dress and a large bonnet, while the Tommy wore the usual top hat and frock coat with huggers. Both these characters sometimes wore masks.

The dances were performed to jigs or hornpipes. Eddie mentioned "The Washerwoman" and the "High Level Hornpipe" as examples of each. The music was provided by fiddle, English concertina or melodeon. Mention was made of Fiddler Jones who became so engrossed in his music that he forgot to move on with the dancers, and was left, playing to himself, halfway up the street.

The team was "out" on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and "the New Year". They also danced to collect money at other times, especially in the late twenties. They started at 8 am and danced continuously all day. The normal pitches were in the streets, two or three knots being performed before the team processed down the street with a Single Run or Jog Trot. Their only rest was if they danced into a pub for a drink.

The rappers (more than 30 years old) are still in existence and had been made from saw blades in the pit workshops. The total length was two feet, the width one to one-and-a-quarter inches, and the handles about four inches long. The fixed end was often wrapped with cord, and even clothes pegs had been brought into service to effect repairs when the steel broke on cold, frosty mornings.

THE DANCE

In all, twelve knots were collected from Mark Flanagan. He talked of others which he had forgotten, including his father's own – "The Foursome". There are many similarities with other variations of the rapper dance. The Star is made in the normal way, the Fiddler position is as in Earsdon² or High Spen³ (where it is called "Coach and Horses") and movement into a ring is a common feature. The Ring may be made with swords or shoulders, when the men face round clockwise; or it may be open, with the men facing towards the centre, and the rappers arched between each pair.

THE OPENING

The dancers stand in an open ring facing clockwise, each man with his own sword on his right shoulder and held in his right hand.

One phrase of music is played as a "once-to-yourself" and then the dancers jig in position for another phrase. They then walk round for four beats, holding the swords up vertically in the centre. On the first beat of the next bar, No. 1 clashes the other swords with his own and then the dancers place their swords on their left shoulders and the Ring is made.

During the next two bars the Star is made and the dancers then jig under the Star to the end of the phrase. The Star is not held up but each dancer retains his hold on the swords.

CHORUS MOVEMENT BETWEEN KNOTS

This used to consist of the star and then either Single or Double Guard. The chorus was not stressed by Mark Flanagan, and the usual chorus was merely a Star, leaving Single and Double Guard to be performed as separate knots.

SINGLE GUARD

This is the same as Earsdon Single Guard and needs no explanation.

DOUBLE GUARD

This is the same as Single Guard until the dancer comes back to his own place. Then, instead of turning in, he make a complete left turn and makes another circuit of the circle.

TWO AND THREE

This is similar to the Twos and Threes of Earsdon. Starting from the Fiddler position, Nos. 1 and 5 move down together shoulder-to-shoulder under the sword between Nos. 3 and 4, and casting out to form two circuits with No. 3 always following No. 2.

WAVES

After one circuit of Two and Three, No. 3 crosses over behind No. 4 to join the other circle. Moving from one side of the set to the other, he does a figure of eight round the centre of the set.

ALL ROUND JUMP

For those who know the long-sword dances, this will be recognisable as Over Your Neighbour's Sword. After breaking from the Star which occurs after each knot, the dancers move into a wide open ring while walking round. As each man prepares to perform he lowers his sword as the man behind him jumps over it. Then on the first beat of the next bar he lifts his own sword (in his right hand) over his head onto his left shoulder. On the second beat he jumps over the sword in his left hand, landing on both feet simultaneously. At the beginning of the next bar he helps that sword over the head of the dancer in front of him.

The dancers go over the swords in the order 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1. This knot is more difficult than it appears to be, but Mark Flanagan insisted that it must be precise.

SINGLE JUMP

The dancers break the Star into an open ring and face the centre. They step for a phrase and then, keeping the set stationary, the first dancer moves towards the opposite sword while the other four form square round him. On the last beat of the phrase, the sword is lowered and the dancer jumps over it. During the next four bars, he moves round the outside of the set back to his place and then the next dancer moves forward. The sequence is as follows:

- No. 1 jumps over the sword between 3 and 4 and turns right.
- No. 5 jumps over the sword between 2 and 3 and turns left.
- No. 2 jumps over the sword between 4 and 5 and turns right.
- No. 3 jumps over the sword between 1 and 5 and turns left.
- No. 4 jumps over the sword between 1 and 2 and turns right.

As soon as No. 4 has jumped over the sword, the set goes straight into the Star. No. 4 passes inside No. 5 on the way round.

THREE JUMP

The dancers move into the fiddler position from the previous Star, and then Nos. 2 and 4 with No. 3 just behind them move up to stand between Nos. 1 and 5. No. 3 rests his hands on the shoulders of Nos. 2 and 4 without releasing the swords, the whole movement taking two bars. The dancers jig in position until the end of the phrase, when No. 5's sword is swept by Nos. 1 and 5 under the feet of the other three. They land on the last beat of the phrase.

The dancers can then turn straight into a Star, or can jig a phrase before doing so. To make the Star, Nos. 2, 3 and 4 make a half-turn left, No. 1 stays as he is, and No. 5 makes a full turn left.

FAST

This knot is performed before the Star is broken. From the Star position No. 1 crosses the set and passes between Nos. 3 and 4. He then turns right and moves round the set clockwise. Meanwhile, No. 5 follows No. 1 and, after crossing, turns left. The others follow: Nos. 2 and 3 follow the route of No. 1, and No. 4 traces the route of No. 5.

The order of crossing is 1, 5, 2, 4, 3. The two circles turn in opposite directions, the dancers passing shoulder to shoulder in the centre of the set. The swords are kept in the air and appear to be "fast" in the centre of the set, which illusion gives the name to the knot.

After the sequence of circles has been performed two or three times, and Nos. 1 and 5 are at the front of the set, they do not move under the swords again, but cross over into the opposite circle, the dancers following in the order, 1, 5, 2, 4 and 3. Each dancer makes a slight turn inwards and the Star is formed.

FAST AND LOOSE

This knot is similar to Fast but each time that Nos. 1 and 5 meet at the front of the set they cross over to the other circle, followed by the other dancers. This crossing loosens the twist of the swords and fastens it up again.

The Star is made, as in Fast, from the position when the swords are "fast" or it can be made when the swords are loose, by Nos. 1 and 5 reaching the front of the set and tying the Star as if from the Fiddler position with 2, 3 and 4 moving under No. 5's sword.

SINGLE RUN

The Star is untied and the dancers immediately form a straight line. No. 1 casts right, out of the Star position, and allows Nos. 2, 3 and 4 to pass under No. 5's sword and fall in behind No. 5. The line is formed with No. 1 at the front, No. 5 immediately behind him, and Nos. 2, 3 and 4 following No. 5 in that order. The positions of the swords are as follows:

- No. 1 has a sword over each shoulder. His own sword is on his right shoulder and the fixed end of No. 5's sword on his left shoulder. These swords cross behind No. 1, No. 5's sword being on top. Other end of No. 1's sword is held by No. 2.
- No. 5 has own sword out in front over No. 1's left shoulder and No. 4's sword over own left shoulder, other end being held by No. 4 at end of the line.
- No. 2 has own sword over left shoulder, other end being held by No. 3 just behind. Left hand holds No. 1's sword out in front.
- No. 3 has own sword over left shoulder, other end held by No. 4 just behind. Left hand holds fixed end of No. 2's sword.
- No. 4 has own sword out in front, the fixed end held by No. 5. Left hand holds fixed end of No. 3's sword.

Once in this position the team either runs or walks to the next dancing pitch. On reaching the pitch the reverse movements form the Star and a new series of knots commences. This is one of the processional knots and is also called the Jog Trot.

DOUBLE RUN AND COUP THE RAPPER

The dancers break from the Star into the Fiddler position. They jig for four bars. Nos. 1 and 5 cast off to the back of the set. This cast takes two bars, and Nos. 2, 3 and 4 move forward slightly to keep the set in position, and continue jiggling in doing so. All jig for two bars and then No. 3 casts to the back. All jig to the end of the phrase. At the turn of the phrase, No. 3 puts his hands on the shoulders of Nos. 2 and 4, and performs a back somersault, landing on the last beat of the phrase. There is no sword behind him when he does this. All then go straight into the Star.

This is also a processional knot. When the Fiddler position is formed, the set can run or walk to the next pitch and complete the knot there. The knot can, of course, be completed without the somersault or "coup the rapper" but the movement is not difficult and adds a great deal to the interest of the dance in the eyes of the audience.

THE FINISH

The end of the dance as performed at Amble consists of the Star being released, for the first time in the dance, and being raised by No. 1 in his right hand with a stiff arm. All the other dancers continue to face the centre and the Star, and end with the usual break.

ORDER OF KNOTS

The order of the dance, if in a stationary position, is suggested as follows:

Opening, Star
Two and Three, Star
Fast and Loose, Star
Single Jump, Star
Single Guard, All Round Jump, Double Guard, Star
Waves, Star
Three Jump, Star
Single Run, Star
Double Run and Somersault, Star
Fast, Star and Finish.

The more usual and better way of performing the dance is as a processional. After the Opening of the dance, a few knots are performed, and then the dancers move on using the Single Run or Jog Trot, the dancers then come out of this knot and perform a few more before Single Run and another processional. A suggested order is:

Opening, Star
Two and Three, Star
Single Guard, Star
Single Jump, Star
Single Run and Processional

Star, Waves, Star
Double Guard, Star
All Round Jump, Star
Single Run and Processional

Star, Fast, Star
Single Guard, Star
Three Jump, Star
Single Run and Processional

Star, Fast and Loose, Star
Double Guard, Star
Double Run and Somersault, Star
Single Run and Processional

References:

1. Bill Cassie, *Rapper Knots from Amble and Bedlington*, Folk Music Journal, 1966; volume 1, pp. 92-101
2. Cecil Sharp, *The Sword Dances of Northern England*, London: Novello, 1911, volume 1, pp. 82-103
3. Bill Cassie, *Rapper Knots from High Spennithorne*, Folk Music Journal, 1965, volume 1, pp. 6-24.

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