

Manx Notes 221 (2015)

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THE MANX FOLK-DANCE SOCIETY: OUR BEGINNINGS

(1954)

[2] Our beginnings are mixed up with Girl Guides. Almost thirty years ago I became a very newly fledged officer of a newly formed company of Girl Guides in Laxey. To gain experience I visited other companies and shared their work and play. It was after a visit to Rosemount guides under their Captain Miss K. Douglas (now Mrs H.J. Carr) that I became “smitten” on Country Dancing. I immediately joined the EFDS and attended their Summer School at Cambridge. It lasted three weeks, it was very strenuous. I took Country, Morris and Sword Dancing, Choral Singing and Singing Games.

Then in the Autumn a gang of us got together to form a class. We were granted the use of the “Old Gym” the wooden shack in the yard of the Girls’ High School. It was given gratis on the supposition that the students would be, for the most part, teachers or Scout and Guide Leaders. Night classes were held in the main building and there was some curiosity concerning our doings. One evening Mr H.J. O’Neill came to “put a sight on us.” I coaxed him to be my partner in “Sweet Kate.” How we all giggled, the sight of a six foot man playing “peep” over the shoulder of a five foot girl is quite funny!

We suffered from the complaint common to all Dramatic and Dancing Classes, that is, the shortage of men. Mr Leighton Stowell could only come on rare occasions. He was living in Ramsey and had a class of his own there. It was Mr P.E. Humphreys who made our first set of swords. A very young and energetic member who thoroughly enjoyed himself was Mr H.J. Carr. On very wet nights he would climb up to a gap in the roof and try to wedge it with dusters or paper to keep out the rain, or if that were not possible he would take his turn at emptying the wash-up bowl that caught the drips.

One of his colleagues was a blonde boy, Mr Higgins, whom we used to ask to play for us. He was a good player, but not of country dance music. His “variations” in the matter of time and tune could be most tantalising. Mr James Bowles was a most promising dancer and—well there were many romances among these young people, what is it that these young schoolmasters have?

We had among our casuals two or three of the staff of KWC also a couple from the Buchan School; travelling difficulties prevented them being regulars. It was through their visits, however, that contact with Castletown was made, and this eventually led to the formation of a class there under the leadership of Miss Florence Moore (now Mrs Moore). Miss J. Dodd was to become one of the pioneers for the Peel District.

Our first adventure “across the water” was to give a demonstration at the Picton Hall, Liverpool at Christmas 1928. As a Manx Team we were expected to offer

something ‘native’; Hyndaa dy [3] Bwoailley was our one Manx Dance, but we had no man in the team, so we gave “The Widow’s House.” This was an adaptation from two English dances to the Manx tune “The Widow’s House” (The Cutting of the Turf) with Gaelic Hooghs shouted for the last chorus.

We made a good impression, both from our dancing and our appearance, we wore very posh team dances of Liberty silk self-green for the “men” and floral for the women.

Miss Holborn (Organiser for Liverpool and Merseyside EFDS) laconically described us as—2 Caines, 2 Moores, 2 Laces, 1 Gawne and 1 Taggart.

And now, having looked back a quarter of a century, it is up to you “young ones” to make real your visions for the quarter century that is to come.

Meanwhile, we who are now not so young, may still—like Charley’s Aunt—keep on running!

Source: A.I. Caine, “The Manx Folk-Dance Society: Our Beginnings.” *Yn Lioran* 1 (1954): 2–3. © 2015 Estate of A.I. Caine. Note: Besides the general interest of the piece in filling in the background to the formation of the Manx Folk Dance Society, the mention of the performance of “Hyndaa dy Bwoailley” in 1928 is at present the earliest reference to a Manx dance from the collecting of Mona Douglas being revived.

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