

Manx Notes 318 (2018)

“FOLK DANCING FESTIVAL: INTERVIEW WITH MR P.L. STOWELL” (1935)

[11b] At the Merseyside, Liverpool and District Folk Dancing Festival to be held on Friday next (May 24th) the feature which folk dancers from all parts of the North of England are awaiting with eager interest is the appearance of the Manx team of dancers who are to demonstrate ten Manx dances. It will be recalled that some time ago an invitation was extended to the Albert Road School to send a team and since then the scholars assisted by a willing band of helpers, have left no stone unturned to raise sufficient funds to enable them to take advantage of the offer.

Mr P.L. Stowell, who is the leading authority on Manx folk dancing, and is an expert dancer himself, is an interview with an *Examiner* representative, stated that there was growing in folk dance circles on the mainland a desire to know more about Manx folk dancing and its origin, and the real object of the Island team's visit is to show English folk dancers how it is done. (Incidentally it may be stated here that the Albert Road team is renowned in folk dancing circles for the high quality of its dancing, and their reputation for performing the “standard” dances as one might be permitted to call them here, is second to none).

As stated above the team will execute ten Manx dances, and the first group of these will be (a) Long dance, Yn Guilley-hesheree (The Ploughboy), (b) four-hand reel, Jemmy as Nancy, (c) six-hand reel, Car ny Ferrishyn (fairy reel). These three dances are of the social type that used to be so popular in the Island. The air of Car ny Ferrishyn is known all over Britain and a progressive dance of the same name is still popular in Ireland, but its only similarity to the Manx one seems to be in the number of persons taking part, each minor set in the Irish dance being composed of two men and four women.

The White Boys Mummung play and dance will also be included in the programme. Six boys take part in the dance and on account of the use of real swords the performers have to exercise great care. In the final sequence the Doctor is raised on the interlocked swords and carried along by the other dancers.

The Manx ceremonial dance and song—“Hunt the Wren”—is another item in the programme. This dance is rather like a Manx version of the once popular English game “Jolly Miller,” only much more intricate. Then there is the Mylecharane's March, or “Cutting off the Fiddler's Head.” This is acknowledged to be one of the most strenuous and difficult dances in existence and inflicts a severe strain on the participants. This dance formed part of the old Manx New Year ceremonial. The dancers were heralded by the Laare Vane (White Mare) who ran in usually by the end of the New Year supper part, and chased and snapped her jaws at the guests until all were aroused. Then came the Fiddler and dancers. During the dance the Laare

Vane runs and leaps all around the performers, and at the end the Fiddler's head is "cut off" and he falls dead. He is, however, immediately restored by the leader of the dancers, who blindfolds him, raises him up, and leads him to the Laare Vane. The Fiddler then kneels and places his head in the Laare Vanes lap and becomes gifted with oracular powers capable of prophesying happenings in the future, and all the company are at liberty to ask him questions. Usually these related to a marriage or engagement, and, of course, much merriment was provided thereby.

One of the most graceful of Manx dances, "Peter O'Tavy" is said to have been particularly popular at weddings half-a-century ago. It is done by two male dancers and two girls. The dance was performed in days gone by at weddings and resembles the Old English minuets being alike in movement though not in figure. Research work has resulted in the theory being formed that the dance was copied by the Manx people from the minuets danced at Castle Rushen by English nobility who visited the Castle. It is believed that this dance is at least 400 years old.

Another dance which Mr Stowell describes as the best of Manx dances, is the "Car Juan Nan" performed by four men and four girls which concludes with one of the girls being carried aloft. The last record of this dance was discovered at Agneash, where it was performed in a large barn, underneath which was an illicit still. The owner was a well-known fiddler, and used to hold regular gatherings for singing, dancing, drinking, and storytelling in his barn. The dance takes its name from the owner, and the dancers were no doubt inspired by samples from the still. The remains of the barn are still there. This dance was pronounced to be "excellent" by the judge at the recent competition.

Another dance in which accurate footwork is the chief essential is the Eunysshagh-Vona ("Mona's Delight") danced by four men and four girls. This is a very spectacular dance ending with a form of Manx waltzing. This was a prize-winning dance given by the juniors at the Guild this year.

A boy soloist will also be included in the party. He is Stephen Carine, who will render some of the old Manx folk songs. These will all be in the Manx language, and the best item will probably be "The Lament of Illiam Dhone."

The programme given by the Manx team will be interspersed with dances by Morris and sword dancers of the Merseyside Branch. The whole demonstration is to be in charge of Miss Clarice Holbrow (well-known to Manx folk dancers) and Miss Mona Douglas—who has collaborated with Mr. Stowell in the invaluable research work necessary for the piecing together of the old dances—will speak on the derivation of the Manx dances. The team will consist of—Messrs P.L. Stowell and T.C. Quayle (who are both on the teaching staff of Albert Road School), Donald Maddrell, Wilf Craine, E. Christian, S. Carine, with George Percival at the drums, and Owen Taylor, Gertrude [11c] Quayle, Joyce Thompson, and Joan Griffiths.

The “fiddler” will be Miss Joy Sollitt, of Onchan, winner of the open violin class at the last Music Festival. Miss N. Crellin will be the accompanist, and the team will be in charge of Mr. Stowell.

A country dance party is also to be given in honour of the Manx visitors. Mr Stowell emphasised that not one minute of school time had been taken up in rehearsing, despite the fact that so much work had to be done in preparing the children for the Jubilee celebrations, and all practices took place after school hours. In connection with the raising of money, Mr Stowell especially wishes to thank Mrs Black and the members of the Cushag Choir, and Miss Farrington for the assistance they have given.

The skill of these folk dancers is entirely due to the practice they have put in, over one hundred rehearsals having been held for the Liverpool visit. The dancers are all to be complimented on their enthusiasm, and Mr Stowell and Miss Douglas, too, deserve a special word of praise for rescuing these Manx dances from the limbo of forgotten things.

“Folk Dancing Festival: Interview with Mr P.L. Stowell,” *Isle of Man Examiner*, 17 May 1935, 11b–c.

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