



# Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust

NEWSLETTER WINTER 1997/98

## £1/4 MILLION AWARD FOR THE SCOTTISH TRADITIONS OF DANCE

The Scottish Arts Council Lottery has awarded the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust £250,000 over 3 years for the first phase of a pioneering project to develop all the Scottish Dance Traditions. This first phase will focus on 2 areas: Angus and the Scottish Borders. The aim is to research and develop local dance traditions and stimulate more participation in these.

The award is a welcome boost and will enable the Trust to appoint a Development Officer and Project Assistant in both Angus and the Borders, with a Project Assistant to be based at the Trust's head office in Edinburgh.

The role of the Development Officers will be, firstly, to gather and record information about local dance traditions. Working with people in each community, this information will be used as a resource to develop more dance activities and events. The Development Officers will be responsible for developing a programme of dance activities with communities and schools. The Project Assistants will support this work by transcribing research tapes, arranging events and liaising with local people and agencies.

Posts are currently being advertised and we hope to have our new staff in place by early spring.

In Angus, where the Trust carried out a pilot project in 1995, an exhibition called "The People's Dance" has already been planned in collaboration with Angus Council. This exhibition will tour the main towns in the county and a smaller satellite exhibition will reach many village halls. At the same time, the Trust will be organising dances and other events linked to the exhibition. Over the 3 year period the Trust's Development Officer will also work with schools on projects which will link many aspects of the curriculum with the Scottish traditions of dance.

We know that the fisherfolk of Angus danced all the way to their weddings. They also danced down at the harbourside to bring luck when the catches were poor and to rejoice when the catches were good. We know, too, that there are many people in Angus who are now perhaps in their 80s, 90s and older who remember being taught by the dancing masters: Dancie Neill, Dancie Reid, Dancie Kydd and Dancie Guild. We *must* talk now to these people to discover the steps they were taught, when they danced, where they danced - so that these dances can continue to be enjoyed and become today's traditions. We appeal to you if you or anyone you know would be interested in talking to our researcher, please to be in touch with

us as soon as possible so that this can be arranged.

Angus Council is appealing for any objects, programmes, documents or photographs showing dance or connected with dance in the Angus area. If any members can help with information or if you are willing to lend objects for the exhibition, please contact the Curator, Margaret King, Arbroath Museum, Signal Tower, Ladyloan, Arbroath DD11 1PU, telephone: 01241 875598.

In the Borders there was a rich tradition of hiring fairs and harvest kirns. What did people dance on these occasions? There are riches to be uncovered and much to be researched at every level of society. As well as its bondager and other working traditions, this area is renowned for the number of country seats and noble families, and of course it is close to England. Because in-depth research has never been undertaken in the Borders we are sure it will prove as rich a hunting ground as Angus already has.

### *Everyone's a winner*

Dancing enriches people's lives and these projects have the potential to benefit everyone in the community. People of all ages and all abilities will be encouraged to find out more about their local dance

traditions and join in the dance events. We hope that dance teachers will benefit from expanding their knowledge of Scottish dance traditions and developing their skills in teaching a wider variety. This would re-establish the centuries-old tradition of dance teaching in Scotland where teachers included everything in their work from social dance to intricate step dance.

Local musicians will benefit from the enjoyment of participation; they will also be able to enhance their skills in playing for dance and adapting their playing for different ages and experience levels - an important aspect of traditional music and dance. They will also benefit financially from the employment opportunities.

The amount of dance activity will help to attract more tourists and visitors to these areas as the communities become more vibrant.

The Trust has chosen to focus on the Borders and Angus in the hope that we will establish a model of research and encouragement to dance that can be used all over Scotland and amongst Scots abroad.

The Trust's original application was to cover 3 areas of Scotland, but with £4 million of applications and £1 million of funds, SAC Lottery regretted that it was unable to make a larger award.

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Unfortunately other Scottish dance projects were less successful and we were very sorry to hear that a bid for Caithness and Sutherland was not awarded Lottery funds. However, the Trust will make every effort to secure funding and help to continue the good work which has already been done here. As readers will know, a book of Sutherland Dances has already been produced by Mats Melin and we know that there is still so much more material to be gathered and research to be done. We must help to build on the momentum of dance activity which Mats has started. We very much hope that a Scottish dance project can be re-started here.

The advent of a devolved Scottish Parliament will undoubtedly lead to an enhanced profile for, and consideration of, Scottish traditions. The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust is determined that our extraordinarily rich dance heritage will maintain its time-honoured place as an important part of Scotland's culture.

### **Money, money, money**

We've managed to raise £275,000 plus support "in-kind" from the local authorities but we need to raise a further £87,000 to make the project happen. Can you help? You can send the Trust a donation - whatever you can afford will help; you can hold a fundraising event - perhaps a dance - and send the proceeds to the Trust. All donations will be acknowledged. Perhaps your business has a link with Angus or the Borders and you would like to sponsor an event. Our Co-ordinator, Jennifer Swanson, would be pleased to discuss how you can support this valuable work which will benefit both local communities and everyone interested in Scottish dance.

If the projects in Angus and the Borders are successful - and we will make every effort to ensure they are - the Trust will be able to set up projects in other parts of Scotland and, perhaps, further afield.

It is only with your support that the Trust has come this far in such a relatively short space of time. Please help us to make this a success.

## **A TRIBUTE TO BOBBY WATSON**

### **From Bill Clement**

Robert (Bobby) Watson, who died on 9 November 1997 aged 83, was one of Scotland's great Highland Dancers. Taught by his mother, he won his first medal for a Highland Fling at the age of three. He then went on to win many competitions including the World Junior Highland Dancing Championship at Cowal in 1926.

Following his service in the RAF during the war he married Mavis, also a professional dancer, and together they started the Watson School of Dancing in Aberdeen in 1947 and so continued to promote the traditions of Highland Dancing, which he learned from his mother.

For over 50 years Bobby Watson judged the Highland Dancing at Braemar, and at many other Highland Games not only in Scotland but also in Canada, America, Japan and Australia, where he held an honorary position in the Australian Highland Dancing Association, and in 1988 he was invited to appear on the stage of the Sydney Opera House.

For more than thirty years, the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society was fortunate to have Bobby to teach Highland Dancing to men attending its Summer School in St Andrews, and many men from all over the world benefited from his expert tuition.

However, it was as a performer that Bobby Watson will be best remembered. One of his first national tours was with the Max Jaffa Trio. His solo Highland dancing performances were always spectacular, as those who remember the TV series of the Kilt is My Delight or The White Heather Club will recall.

Bobby Watson was the last of the great Highland Dance legends - J L McKenzie, the Lowe Brothers and the Cuthbertsons. In their day they all vied with one another in competition, as to the variation of steps they danced, each trying to out-do the other.

Bobby was a great character, who will be sorely missed.



## **AN INTERVIEW WITH BOBBY WATSON**

In September 1990, Joan Henderson interviewed Bobby Watson about his dance memories. This is an extract from that interview.

### **The Learning Years**

Bobby Watson was born and grew up in Commercial Street, Aberdeen.

Although no mention was made of his father or his father's occupation, the impression from anecdotes leads to the supposition that money was not plentiful.

His mother, an Aberdonian, had a dancing school during WW1 with 425 pupils. These pupils were taught by her alone, in a small hall in the centre of Aberdeen in a district known as The Green. Her demonstration group was called "Madam Watson's Wee Scotch Thistles".

At age 2 1/2, Bobby began to dance, but was not keen to dance for his mother. She therefore sent him to a famous Aberdeenshire tutor, Mr John A Pirie for lessons. Bobby won his first medal (very small, pure silver, on a tartan ribbon) at the age of three. From then on his enthusiasm grew and his expertise in technique became immaculately tight. "My dancing master used to put the crossed swords on top of lemonade bottles in order to make me spring higher." At the age of 11 or 12, encouraged by Mr Pirie, Bobby became determined to go to Cowal Games and win the Trophy. He practised hard, and his uncle paid his fare to Dunoon in order that he could compete. To his great delight he won the cup but he wasn't able to stay for the customary triumphal chariot ride round Dunoon afterwards as he had to return home to avoid parental disapproval. His mother gave him little praise on his return.

As well as learning Highland Dancing locally, his school PE teacher Mr Duncan also gave him great encouragement to learn Country Dancing.

### **The Performing and Teaching Years**

As Bobby grew up, he continued to compete in Highland Dance competitions all over Scotland, winning the highest prizes and accolades. When WW2 broke out Bobby joined the RAF; soon he assembled pipe bands and concert parties (including Scots comedian Lex McLean).

He found himself performing Highland Dancing as well as other varieties of dancing, on stage, for many years, for the British troops.

After the War, Bobby returned to Aberdeen. He and his wife began to teach Highland Dancing not only in Aberdeen but in the surrounding towns and villages in Aberdeenshire. From 1949 to this day this weekly routine has never ceased. Bobby has 40 dances in his repertoire.



An example of his routine is:

Teach two classes at Ballater between 3pm and 6pm then travel to Braemar to teach from 6.30-8.45 pm. All ages are enthusiastic to receive his tuition; at Aboyne his pupils' ages range from 3 1/2 years to 27 (nowadays they are mostly girls). He also coaches his own demonstration group in his studio at least once a week.

Bobby Watson's fame as a performer spread through Scotland; he performed frequently on television, starting in 1950 with the popular Scottish TV programme "The White Heather Club". From then on, invitations were received from all over the world. To this day, Bobby undertakes performing and teaching tours especially in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The Japanese have invited him back again in 1991. (It is well documented that Bobby Watson's performances as a Highland Dancer seem to communicate an effortless joy to his audiences; his accuracy of footwork and flow of arm and body movement have made him legendary.)

Before 1950, the many dance step variations were causing problems for adjudicators at Highland Dance competitions; Mr Jack Muir then invited Bobby Watson, J L Mackenzie and Mr Jack McConachie to meet together to standardise the steps, to simplify the judges' tasks. Thus the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing was formed and its first publication laid down prescribed steps for the basic dances; Highland Fling, Sword Dance and Seann Triublas. There is some regret that there are no local styles nowadays - the local flavour of former days is explained thus, with an example of the dance 'Flora MacDonald': Bobby learned this dance from a Mrs Cruickshank of Peterhead; in another example Bobby made up a variation of step 3 of a dance he learned from Mrs I Cramb in Aberdeen; he was the first person to dance this dance, known as Barracks Johnnie.

One day, he was inspired by the drumbeat of a military band which was marching down the street near his home; it occurred to Bobby that he could incorporate the beats of the drum into the leg movements of the third step of this dance and this he did.

Bobby Watson's association with the other mainstream style of Scottish dancing, namely Scottish Country dancing, began casually in the early

fifties, when some friends invited him along to their class. In a very short time, he became a member of their demonstration team, helping Aberdeen to win Cups in competitions. Noticed at once by the redoubtable Miss Jean Milligan, he was soon invited to give tuition at the annual Summer School of the RSCDS in St Andrews. From that time, Bobby taught this class for an unbroken 35 years of service, to RSCDS, thus spreading his knowledge and expertise in Highland Dance yet again round the world with his many pupils.

### *Bobby Watson's View on the Future of Highland Dancing*

Whereas in earlier days, Highland Dancing could be easily learned by the majority of boys and girls, today it requires a highly trained physique and only really dedicated dancers can take the long hours of practice required for today's competitions.

In Bobby's view, Highland dancing is now an athletic sport, requiring special exercises for extra turn-out and mobility in hip, knee, ankle and foot joints. The leaps require a height well beyond the ability of normal pupils. Accuracy of adjudication is very difficult because of human considerations: Judges are expected to differentiate by eye the accurate detail of aerial positions of dancers at speed. It is difficult to avoid being subjective.

There is no doubt however, that Highland Dancing will continue to be a popular pursuit, especially in that corner of Scotland so rich in dance heritage - the Aberdeenshire area. However, it is of concern that technical demands may discourage rather than encourage young people to pursue it as a hobby.

### *Summary*

Bobby Watson has made a very great contribution to the Scottish Dance heritage. He is a fine dancing master in the style which has been customary in Scotland for centuries; he teaches his pupils by knowledge, by practical expertise and example, by insistence on sound technique and by high standards instilled with kindness and understanding to pupils of all abilities.

His contribution to Scottish Dancing is acknowledged by well-known dancers, teachers and researchers, and deserves greater public acknowledgement.



## **EIGG WAR DANCE**

As a follow-up to Joan Flett's recent article about researching the Eigg War Dance in 1953, readers of the Newsletter might be interested to see the following, which Alastair MacFadyen has extracted from the Scottish Country Dance Society Bulletin of March 1934. It was written by Ysobel Stewart, who, with Jean C Milligan, founded the Scottish Country Dance Society in Glasgow in November 1923.

"When in the Island of Barra last summer, I tried, without success, to find traces of the old 'round reels,' from the recollections of which the Eightsome Reel was formed. I was told however a little about the 'Eigg war dance' as some fisherman from the island of Eigg had danced it in Barra. It is reported to be danced by eight men, four facing the other four. They all take hands and dance round and back again. Then seven men sing in Gaelic to the one, shaking their forefingers at him. He sings back again to them. Then he goes off, followed by another in and out of the remaining six, and so on.

"I heard at Christmas time from Barra that 'Dannsa nan guiseachan' had taken place - evidently in fancy dress. I know no particulars of this, but when asking an acquaintance from the Isle of Skye he said that he remembered in his youth seeing 'Dannsa nan tunnagan' (the ducks' dance). This was danced, first everyone on their toes, then on the heels only, and lastly, with a great thumping noise on the flat of the foot. There was also a 'hens' dance' which was begun with bent knees and bent backs pretending to be lame, and then the dancers would suddenly straighten themselves and continue dancing.

In Dr K N MacDonald's book of *Puirt a beul* (Mouth tunes) the following words are given to the tune of Lord MacDonald's Reel:-

"Dannsaidh na coilich dhubh  
Is ruidhlidh na tunnagan  
Air an tulach againn fhein  
Air an tulach thurad ud  
Air an tulach againn fhein  
Air an tulach bloidheach.  
(The black cock will dance  
And the ducks will reel  
On our own hillock  
On yonder hillock over there).

(cont.)

"There is evidently a field for research in the Hebrides, and perhaps some SCDS members may discover more about the above dances and information regarding others."

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## NEWS ROUNDUP

### Gythorps Folkdancers

The Trust has received a request from a Swedish folkdance group planning a trip to Scotland in summer 1998. Gythorps Folkdancers would like to dance Swedish folkdances at festivals in Scotland and meet some local dance groups. Their itinerary is as follows: arrive Edinburgh on 9 July - stay for 2 days; travel to Dundee for 1 day; Inverness for 2 days; Oban for 1 day and depart Glasgow on 16 July 1998. If any members would like to contact the group and involve them in their activities during this time, please contact them directly. Their organiser is Agneta N Johansson, Gythorps Folkdangille, Nehelrajen 2E, 713 72 Gythorp, Sweden, telephone/fax: +46 587 25797.

### Volunteer Researchers

On 6 December in Stirling, the Trust held a Dance Research Training Day for the volunteer researchers who have offered their services recently. Volunteers came from many parts of Scotland and we hope they will be able to interview elderly people in their local area who remember dancing in their younger days. We particularly want to record information about local dance traditions and variations so that these can be revived and allowed to thrive in each community. If you, or someone you know, would like to share dance memories, please contact Jennifer Swanson at the Trust so that we can arrange for a researcher to come and talk to you. Telephone: 0131-558 8737.



### Board Seat for Trust

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust is now represented on the Board of the Scottish Arts Network (formerly SALVO - the Scottish Arts Lobby Voice). More details about this in the next issue.

### A First for Fife

Fife Council has appointed its first Traditional Arts Officer, Sheena Wellington. Congratulations to Sheena! As members will know, the Trust carried out a pilot research project in Fife and we look forward to working with Sheena to develop all the Scottish dance traditions in this area.

We would also like to congratulate Sheena on her well-deserved award from the Heritage Society of Scotland for her contribution to Scottish Culture in 1997. Well done!



## THE DANCING BOOKWORM

*Highland Balls and Village Halls* by G W Lockhart. Published Luath Press Ltd, 1997. Price: £6.95.

Wallace Lockhart first published *Highland Balls and Village Halls* in 1985 to considerable critical acclaim. The book's popularity has led directly to this up-dated edition with a foreword by Dave Francis, an additional chapter on the music of Freeland Barbour - a member of the Board of the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust, and on the creation and work of the Trust.

Wallace Lockhart's fluent style conveys in splendid measure two essential constituents of Scottish social dance, those of sheer fun and pleasure. Even if, like us, you already have a copy of *Highland Balls and Village Halls* on your bookshelves, this new edition is well worth acquiring, reflecting as it does the renewed dynamism and interest in Scottish dance.

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## EVENTS

**Share-day for Scottish Country Dancers and Early Dancers presented by STDT in association with DanceBase.**

**Saturday 7 February 1997**

**10 am - 4.30 pm**

**Assembly Rooms, 54 George Street, Edinburgh.**

Come and enjoy a unique experience in the elegant surroundings of the Supper Room at the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh. Why unique? This is the first ever opportunity for Scottish Country Dancers and Early Dancers to share their dance traditions. Country Dances with intricate formations and Early Dances selected from the 15th, 16th and 18th centuries will be taught during 2 workshops. The Scottish Country Dance tutor will be Johan Maclean and the Edinburgh Early Dancers, led by Jackie Tully-Jackson, will tutor the Early Dance Workshop. It is assumed that dancers will have some knowledge of one or other tradition.

To book, contact DanceBase on 0131-225 5525. Tickets: £15/£10 concessions (available also to STDT members).

**Island Fling at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Isle of Skye**

**Friday 10 April - Monday 13 April**

Now in its third year, this popular weekend of Scottish dance and music will include half-day workshops in Old Time Dancing with Jessie Stuart, Scottish Country Dancing with Joan Henderson, Scottish Step Dancing with John Sikorski and Social Dancing from the Far North (including Shetland, Orkney and Sutherland) with Mats Melin.

For further details and to book places, contact Karin Ingram, Northbeat, telephone: 01450-850262.



## NOTICE BOARD

Deadline for the next Newsletter is 5 March 1998. Please send your news, articles and details of dance events to the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust, 54 Blackfriars Street, Edinburgh EH1 1NE, telephone/fax: 0131-558 8737.