North British tour North Britain

North British Sword Dancers were formed in 1992 to perform rapper at the Saddleworth Rushcart, but the team was soon seduced by the glamour and sophistication of longsword With its roots in Glasgow, the team's natural starting point was the forgotten sword dances of Scotland. Drawing on work done by Clydeside Rapper, NB continued to develop the Elgin Sword dance, which is now widely performed. The repertoire has continued to expand, and in May, 2007, the team decided to return to its roots by visiting, and dancing at, the various places associated with sword dancing in mainland Scotland. This required a tour of Edinburgh, Buckhaven, Elgin, and Perth. Papa Stour will have to wait for another occasion.

The team gathered in Glasgow on Friday, 26th May, 2007, hiring a minibus from the airport. On Saturday morning we set off bright and early for Edinburgh, where, on the 15th May, 1590, twelve sword dancers performed at the celebrations of the wedding of King James VI. We found a spot under the Castle walls for a warm-up, and, this being Edinburgh, we soon drew a crowd. One woman asked who we were, explaining that she was from Shetland and was part of a team that regularly performs the Papa Stour dance there.

We had hoped to meet Edinburgh's new rapper team, Mons Meg Rapper, but this was not to be. Instead, moving on to the Royal Mile, we found a good spot in Parliament Square, after which we had mixed success getting permission to dance in bars. The Halfway House, in Fleshmarket Close, was very welcoming in an Edinburgh sort of way. ("How did you get here? Minibus? Get out of my bar, then. Just joking.") The landlord recommended the Bow Bar (West Bow) which was also very welcoming until we asked to dance. Not even the presence of a stray Westminster Morrisman who happened to wander in could change their mind (or maybe that was what settled it…).

So that was Edinburgh. The afternoon's destination was Buckhaven, in Fife, a former fishing village turned former mining village. Lockhart records: "In a stall pamphlet, called the history of Buckshaven, it is said those fishers sprung from Danes, and brought with them their war-dance or sword-dance, and a rude wooden cut of it is given". There is supposedly a copy of this pamphlet in the Hong Kong University Library.

Buckhaven was quiet, very quiet. We'd arrived in the middle of the Scottish Cup Final. Undaunted, we found a place to dance and drew an audience of two young boys. A vanload of police passed, but did not stop, as they were on their way to deal with a bottle fight. It was time to move on.

Our next stop (tea-time) was Stonehaven, not a place in our sword-dancing pilgrimage, but where we were to meet the Banchory Ternan Morris Men, and very pleasant it all was. The

BTMM do some sword dancing as well as the morris, having a rapper dance in their repertoire, and they had recently spent a day doing a workshop on Papa Stour. Sadly, they could not be persuaded to do any sword while we were there. Stonehaven is home to the chip shop which claims to have originated the deep-fried Mars bar, so we had one of those. It's more for sharing than eating whole.

The day ended in Aberdeen. We were to have done a rapper tour here with the local team, Gaorsach Rapper, but when she heard we were coming their leader, Clur, had felt the need to go abroad. Mons Meg, Banchory Ternan, Gaorsach – we weren't doing very well in catching up with the local sword scene. Still, we'd spent rather longer in Stonehaven than planned – lovely setting, good company, a couple of rather decent pubs, not to mention the food – and so we had a reflective pint or two and went to bed.

Sunday was another lovely sunny day, and we headed for Elgin, stopping off for a paddle at Spey Bay. In January, 1623, five men were fined for having "past in ane sword dance in Paul Dunbar his closs and in the kirkyeard". A fuller account of this event can be found in the article *The Elgin Sword Dancers (1623)*. We began at the ruined Cathedral, where we were told that we couldn't dance because it was still consecrated ground. The curator then paused, and said that if we went down to the very far end, the lawn was actually an addition which was the site of a former brewery, and if she couldn't see us then no harm was done. So we found the lawn and danced. We then moved on to the town centre, which opens out to the old marketplace and a Kirk with a spectacular frontage.

The rapper went down very well in the Ionic Bar, where they then suggested we try the 'English pub' across the road, by which they meant the Wetherspoon's! Then onwards. The journey from Elgin to Perth is a fair haul through the Highlands – we didn't take the A9, and it seems even longer when the people in the front seat insist on playing a full CD of piobaireachd, which is an allegedly musical but actually technical exercise for the bagpipes. If you want the flavour, go **here**, but bear in mind that this recording lasts a little over five minutes whereas the typical competition track is nearer a quarter of an hour.

We got to Perth in time for tea and a rapper tour. It was a mistake for Dr John to announce the rapper as an English dance, but the large, aggressive gentleman's tiny girlfriend managed to stop him from committing any acts of violence. Perth: the Glovers' Incorporation performed their sword dance for a visit of King James in 1617, and again for King Charles in 1633. This is the most fully described of the Scottish mainland dances. We had arranged to visit the Perth Museum and Art Gallery on Monday morning. The Keeper, Sue Payne, welcomed us with tea and biscuits and then gave an illustrated talk about the dance, the costume, and the Glovers' Incorporation itself. She took us to see the costume, which is currently on display but which might soon be put away for a rest. Finally, she arranged a photocall with the local newspapers. She did us proud.

The records show that the 1633 dance was performed on a timber stage on the River Tay, and we found a wooden platform overhanging the river on which to dance. We also danced outside St. John's Kirk and in a nearby bar. And that was really the end of our dance tour. On the way back we stopped at the Tullibardine Distillery, which is to be recommended both for its whisky and for the beer which is brewed nearby from the same ingredients.

Particular thanks are due to Colin Messer, who organised the accommodation (Youth Hostel in Aberdeen, Travelodge in Perth), to the drivers (Martin Hanley, Pete Milne, and Corrie Schrijver), and to Doug Rowling, for putting us up in Glasgow. Richard Bojanowski collected substantial amounts of money, Brian Tasker's films of us dancing in Elgin can be seen on YouTube, James Kennedy took his life in his hands being carried around on the Manx lock, and Dr John nearly got us beaten up. Graeme Taylor and Jeff Lawson were as miserable as ever, which is a pleasure in itself. Anna came and clogged, which gave a valuable breathing space to elderly men.

Postscript: the dances

The current NB repertoire includes the Elgin and Papa Stour sword dances and two rapper dances. Whilst in Scotland we also performed the Manx sword dance (sometimes, if erroneously, called the White Boys' Dance – Colin Messer can give chapter and verse on this). Given current trends in hoisting, we decided to carry the Doctor in a standing, rather than sitting, position.

The Elgin dance has evolved over the years, and if you look at the versions done by teams such as the Biggar Seguisers, Southport Swords, and the Redcar Sword Dancers you can see snapshots of different stages of its evolution.

Papa Stour is likewise a work in progress. It is said that a Papa Stour man taught it to the Duffy Men in Manchester, some time in the 1960s or 1970s. They taught it to Carlisle Sword, who then taught it to North British. Each team has re-interpreted it a little whilst bearing Scott's notation in mind.

The Perth Glovers' Dance remains an unfulfilled ambition. We taught it at a Sidmouth workshop some years ago, and practise it on occasion, but it has not so far entered the regular dancing repertoire. "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

Rattle Up, My Boys **16:** 2: 2007.