The Lingdale Primrose Sword Dancers

By Andrew Kennedy, Jeff Lawson, and John Roberts

Interview with Teddy Knight recorded by Chris Pollington

In his description of the North Skelton Sword Dance, Douglas Kennedy included a footnote referring to the founding of the Lingdale Sword Dancers (**1**):

"Since these notes were first written, another team has arisen in Cleveland district, namely, at Lingdale. The revival at Lingdale is due to Mr. Featherstone, who is a contemporary of Mr. Winspear (*credited by Kennedy with teaching the North Skelton White Rose team*), and evidently learnt the dance from the same source as he did ('an old Plough Stot living in Loftus'). The differences that now exist between the North Skelton and the Lingdale Sword-dances serve to show how new variants of folk-dances and songs depend for their creation on a forgetfulness that is compensated for by individual artistic creation."

An alternative account of the founding of the Lingdale team is that given by Ian Keeler, who credits the local influence of the Pennyman family of Ormesby Hall, allied to the enthusiastic visits of Rolf Gardner..

Much of the information in this article comes from Alison Younger, better known to some of you for her work with Les Barker's Mrs. Ackroyd Band. Alison told us that her grandfather had founded the Lingdale Primrose Sword Dancers, that she had photographs, and that she also had a tape-recorded interview with her Uncle Teddy, who danced with the team.

Alison's Account (interview with authors, 28.2.2007

Alison's grandfather was William Rosevere Knight, known as Bill. He was born in 1899 in Brofton, near Loftus, and worked as an ironstone miner at Boosbeck and Lingdale mines. As a young man he danced with Squire Wharton's team, between Guisborough and Loftus (*Squire Wharton appears to have been William Henry Anthony Wharton, who succeeded his father at Skelton Castle in 1901*). In the mid-1920s he formed the Primrose Sword Dancers, in Lingdale, with other local miners. In the early days they practised at the Boosbeck and Lingdale schools, and music was provided by his wife, who played the piano. The couple had fourteen children, of whom Alison's Uncle Teddy was the youngest of his generation to have danced. He is now 83 years old and lives in York. (*written in 2007*).

The pre-War team enjoyed the patronage of a woman who was always known as 'Madam Sinclair' (*probably the same Marjory Sinclair who jointly collected the Newbiggin dance*). She was linked both to Squire Wharton and to Cecil Sharp House, and it was she who was able to

secure the first invitation for the team to travel to Germany. The musician at this time was Arthur Marshall.

Uncle Teddy's story

Teddy was the only one of Bill Knight's sons to dance sword, although he thinks that his brothers might have learnt the (Cotswold) Morris. He was born c1924 and joined the team when he was 14 and a half, so he missed the first German trip and was considered too young to join in the second. Round about 1938 he was a member of the junior team that won a cup in the Darlington competition, and a few weeks later the men's team won at Whitby. The Whitby competition was judged by Madam Sinclair, and the men's dance was slightly different from that of the juniors. This could be linked to his description of the dancers themselves, who he says were all miners and 'stiff in the knees'. He remembers having to lie about his age and claim to be 17, because if he had admitted his true age (14) he would have been disqualified.

At this time the team wore black shoes (highly polished), black serge trousers, and white shirts. They did not wear ties, and sashes were only worn for the morris dancing (along with bells). They did wear black cummerbunds. Waistcoats, if worn at all, were taken off before dancing to prevent the men from getting too sweaty.

The swords were made by the blacksmith at the mine, who also used to repair damaged swords. He would make a new set every year. The swords were scattered when the team dissolved, and his brother, Ron, still has one (*at the time of writing Ron was living in Lincolnshire*). When asked if he ever saw rappers, Teddy said 'yes, but they sounded a bit tinny compared with ours'.

The dance included a beheading and finished with a lock. There were six dancers and two 'clowns', who wore no special costume but were expected to be very smart. It was one of the clowns who was beheaded in the dance. Teddy was emphatic that the dance was known as the 'Yorkshire Long Traditional Sword Dance' - he states this more than once. His role in the pre-War years was to stand in when one of the men was sick.

Music was usually provided by Dick Hoggarth, who played the melodeon. He would play any danceable tunes, traditional or popular, such as the 'Lambeth Walk'. He was sometimes joined by a trombonist!. After the War music would sometimes be provided by Arthur Marshall, who also played for Loftus. The two teams certainly co-operated in other respects, as when Teddy describes them as sharing taxis home from the sword competition.

Bill Knight had worked as a miner in Rotherham and Durham. Teddy thinks that he might have learnt to dance at school, in Brotton, round about 1912. He first taught the dance when living in Moorsholm in 1920 or so, and continued to do so in Lingdale, where he was living by the time Teddy was born. The team danced widely: more local events included Squire Wharton's castle and the Rowntree chocolate factory in York, but they were also invited through the English Folk Dance and Song Society to dance at a miners' gala in Haringey (London). Teddy's impression was that Bill did not create the dances from scratch, but added to what he'd learnt.

The 1936 visit to Germany was at the invitation of a group of German miners who had already visited Britain. The team went by boat from Hull. The event was linked to German arrangements for the Berlin Olympics of that year, and the Cleveland Gazette reported the team's refusal to do the Nazi salute. (*According to Alison the 1938 visit was a far less happy affair, and despite their refusal to salute, the team returned to Lingdale to find their houses daubed with swastikas*).

Teddy might have missed the German trips but he did dance at the Albert Hall. He left the team when work took him away from the area. He says that one trophy is still in the family. It would be interesting to know what might survive in German archives about the pre-War visits, particularly in relation to the Olympics.

We are indebted to Alison for her information, and would be interested in hearing what others might have to add to this account.

Rattle Up, My Boys: Spring 2007

(**1**) Kennedy, D. (1927) "The North Skelton Sword Dance", in Kennedy, D., Sinclair, M., and Whiteman, e., *The North Skelton Sword Dance and the Newbiggin Rapper Sword-Dance.* (London: English Folk Dance Society).