The Little Crosby dance of 1712, with a look at the music used

Source: *The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Crosby*, edited and annotated by Frank Tyrer: Volume 1, 1702-1711, vol. 2 1712-1719, vol. 3 1720-1728. Published 1968, 1970, and 1972 by the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire.
Note: in keeping with this edition, I have used modern dating conventions, treating each calendar year as starting on the 1st January and finishing on the 31st December.

Introduction

To those looking for the origins of sword dancing in England it is well-established that two of the earliest accounts come from Lancashire, in the form of a prologue dating from 1638 and an account of a sword dance which took place in 1712. Both were linked to branches of the Blundell family of Roman Catholic gentry. These reflections deal with the events around the 1712 performance, and in particular to the neglected question of the music which accompanied the dance.

In his *Sword Dancing in Europe: A History* (1997, Hisarlik, partially updated at http://stephendcorrsin.com/), Steve Corrsin provides entries from the *Great Diurnal* (journal/diary) of the landowner Nicholas Blundell covering the period from the 3rd-23rd July, 1712. Blundell had employed a gang of men to dig for marl, used in improving agricultural land, and was now preparing celebrations involving the marlers to mark the completion of the task. Blundell recorded that he 'made' his dance on the 3rd and began teaching it to the men on the 7th and 8th. On the 9th he organised a procession to the marl-pit, where the eight dancers performed the dance, and then they danced again on Finishing Day, the 23rd.

About the Dance

Corrsin (p. 93) observes that "It is very hard to know what to make of these two reports together [i.e. 1638 and 1712], or indeed of the second, more informative reference [1712] on its own." It is certainly true that these are isolated reports in comparison with those coming from the Low Countries or, later, from Yorkshire and the English North-East, but it might be possible to draw some tentative conclusions. Firstly, while it is not unknown for a major act of creation to take place in six days with a pause on the seventh to review one's work, most dancers would agree that this is a tight timetable for devising and teaching a new dance. It is here that some speculation might be permitted:

- 3rd July: *I made a Sword Dance against my Marl-pit is flower'd.* This is strikingly matter-of-fact, in keeping with other records such as *I went fishing in a Bote with Mr. Harvy* (2nd August, 1712) or *I payed off my Apothecary* (24th November, 1712). Whilst sword dancing is not mentioned in any of Blundell's previous entries, he treats it as something which, if not encountered every day, is at least relatively unremarkable. To devise a sword dance in one sitting suggests some familiarity with the form - or maybe it was that he was not creating but simply recalling something he had seen previously.
- 7-8th July: teaching the dance. On the 7th, Blundell was busy with farming matters in the morning and helping prepare garlands in the afternoon; teaching only took place between supper and dinner, when he had guests. Precisely how long was given to teaching the dancers is not clear, but it cannot have been a particularly long practice. On the 8th he recorded being busy in the afternoon making *Kaps &c:* for the dancers; he then taught them once again, after which they made an evening of it in his barn with music, and they danced the sword dance. This was a dance, then, which was taught in the space of two practices and an informal dance-out. It might be reasonable to conclude that this was not a complex dance.

On the 9th July the dancers took part in a festive procession to the Marl-pit, where they performed the dance. They danced again at the Finishing-Day celebration, on the 23rd. Corrsin's account ends here, and he speculates as to how this event might fit into a calendar of customs, comparing it with the Ash Wednesday date of the 1638 prologue. Blundell's *Diurnal* shows that the dancers' caps were put away on the 30th July, but that on the following 6th January (Twelfth Night/Epiphany) he organised a Merry Night (what we might now call a ceilidh or barn dance) at which his sword dance was one of the dances performed. It seems to have been not so much a calendar custom as an entertainment that could be brought out when there was a celebration to be had.

One aspect which is common to many sword dance traditions and records is remuneration. Older Flemish records of sword dancing are often to be found in municipal accounts, where payment in cash or wine is noted. In Yorkshire, on the other hand, the plough stots (and similar) might operate a system which fell somewhere between busking, begging, and extortion. Blundell's accounts are in many ways detailed, and record the amounts paid to the marlers for their agricultural work. They do not mention any cash payments to the dancers; all they are said to have received for their dancing was on the 8th July, after their practice, when *I gave to the Marlers, Spreaders, &c: a good Quantity of Boyled Peyes.*

It cannot be said with any degree of certainty from where Blundell got his idea for a sword dance, but it is known that he spent a good part of his childhood in Flanders, having been sent to school at the Jesuit College in St. Omer. A descendant, Margaret Blundell, noted that at that time any English Roman Catholic who went abroad had to pay a fine of £100 upon re-entering the country, a very considerable sum. As a result, William stayed away for six years until he was seventeen years old, putting him in Flanders from 1680-1687 (Blundell, M. 2002, *A Lancashire Squire*). This was a period when municipal authorities were making repeated attempts to suppress sword dancing across the Low Countries but, as Corrsin points out, that

implies that there was still something to suppress, albeit now operating without the official patronage which it had previously enjoyed.

The music

At the dancers' first practice, music was provided by Dr Cawood, a Dublin oculist who treated Blundell and had become a family friend, and who features extensively in Blundell's journal. This is the only occasion on which Cawood is mentioned in a musical context. For the performance on the 9th July the musicians were *Gerard Holsold & his Son and Richard Tatlock*. Holsold and Tatlock were musicians known to the family, having been engaged by them to play for evening entertainments on a number of previous occasions. Holsold was a fiddler and Tatlock played both fiddle and pipes. Tatlock played alone for the performance on the 23rd, and again on the 6th January, for which he was paid 4/- on the 7th. Tatlock is noted in entries for January and December 1711 as playing pipes and fiddle, but Blundell does not state which of these he used when playing for the sword dancing. It is possible to speculate, but with less certainty (!) than has been achieved concerning the dancing. Two questions arise here:

- What music were these musicians playing?
- What kind of bagpipes did Tatlock play?

Appendix H in volume 1 of the edited *Diurnal* is a song composed by an earlier Blundell, William Blundell the Cavalier. It looks back to happier times before the English Civil War, and describes, inter alia, people dancing hornpipes to bagpipes and fiddle. The hornpipes would have been in the old 3/2 style (such as, indeed, the Old Lancashire Hornpipe). There is no evidence whatsoever that the dance was performed to a hornpipe; all that can be said is that at this time it remained a familiar and popular dance measure.



There is, however, more that can be said about the pipes. To be played in harmony with a fiddle it is likely that they would have a cylindrical chanter (as with the Northumbrian pipes) rather than a conical bore (think Scottish Highland pipes). We know that Tatlock played them for the family on other occasions, and it seems probable that a cylindrical chanter would have been more suited to domestic use than a conical one. This period was the high-point (such as it was) of the Lancashire bagpipe. In Aphra Behn's play of 1678, *Sir Patient Fancy*, a character claims that something has made them "as melancholy as the drone of a Lancashire Bagpipe". In 1702, a visitor from Yorkshire complained that he had "got little rest, the music and Lancashire bagpipes having continued the whole night". They even had an international reputation: in 1712,

Cervantes wrote in *Don Quixote* that “Zamora is a city in Spain, famous for that sort of music as Lancashire is in England for the bagpipe”. It is far from clear just what a Lancashire bagpipe would have looked like. In Manchester Cathedral there are two carvings of angels playing bagpipes, one with a bellows-blown instrument with a single chanter, the other, illustrated here, with a mouth-blown double chanter set (see *Two Chanter English Bagpipes* here; I cannot get a good picture of the other one but for more information see Hudson (1921) here.

Discussion

In his *Sword Dances of Northern England* Sharp describes fifteen dances. He discusses, or at least alludes to, the tunes used for every one (in eleven cases this is left partly or wholly to the musician’s discretion); he mentions the instruments used for eight of them; on six occasions he mentions that the musicians wore their own clothing; and on two occasions he says nothing at all about musician or instrument. Music (as opposed to rhythm) is to this day regarded as an interchangeable extra by many sword teams; where they express a strong preference it is often for an individual musician rather than for an instrument or style, although teams do get attached to tunes. It is a common experience for sword dance teams to dance to whatever music is at hand, and (one hopes) to be suitably grateful. In the event that a regular musician is available, dance and music tend to grow together, but still on the basis that the music (and particularly the instrument) is whatever the musician can provide. (There will be readers who contest this vigorously, but not so many). We see something of this with the Little Crosby dance: various musicians played to begin with, but it settled down with Tatlock playing for them (and for money). It seems that this was ever so for English sword dances (not, sadly, the money), although it is interesting to compare this approach with European revivals such as Lange Wapper (Antwerp), where the music, the instruments, and the kit are all integral parts of the performance, or German dances such as the Dithmarscher Schwertertanz (Schleswig-Holstein) which is performed to nothing but a very well-practised drumbeat. It is hard to imagine these, or similar, teams ringing round musicians before a booking to see who is free.

Undoubtedly the Little Crosby dancers would have used fiddle music; there is a fair chance that the bagpipe also featured, and that this would be more likely to have a cylindrical than a conical bore - maybe the almost-forgotten Lancashire bagpipe. The dance itself was for eight men, all agricultural labourers, who do not, however, appear to have danced for financial or other reward. It was relatively simple and was brought out for high days and holidays rather than attached to specific points in the calendar. The only specific mention of kit for the dancers is that the dancers wore specially-prepared caps. Nothing is said of the swords themselves, but these would have been plentiful and cheap at this time; Blundell mentions, for example, a number of occasions when he stopped to watch street entertainers performing various tricks involving swords.

There is a discussion to be had about the relationship between musicians, the choice of music, the choice of instruments, the dance, and the style and purpose of the performance; there is no single correct solution, but these choices are constantly being made with consequences which are not always considered. I have tried to run through some of the questions raised in relation to one particular set of events, and would be interested to read about others.

Rattle Up, My Boys: Spring, 2019