Well, this is the proper Elgin - we know the people that collected it.

Oddly enough, these thoughts about the Elgin Sword Dance were prompted by the Papa Stour workshop that North British Sword Dancers gave at this year's Whitby Folk Week. Jeff Lawson has written about Papa Stour, and the main thing about the North British version is that it is just that, the North British version. We got it from the Carlisle Sword Dancers and changed it just a little, making the clew resemble more closely the ball of wool or string which the name suggests. After one performance I was approached by a woman who had visited Shetland, and she pointed out where we had gone wrong. We've discussed this with George Peterson of the Papa Stour Sword Dancers, and he explained why he didn't like our choice of walk-on tune (Da Day Dawn, rather than The Trip) and the speed at which we dance (rapid and flowing, although possibly not quite as rapid as we would like). He also said that he was fine with other teams doing the dance as long as they made it clear that they were doing their own interpretation and not the Shetland Sword Dance. That's exactly what we do.

We went through all this at the workshop. In fact, it's interesting to look at some of the very different interpretations which are out there. One remarkable variation is the dancers who tap their swords together as they go through the tunnels, to resemble, they say, the clink of the miners' tools. As the economy of Shetland was traditionally dominated by fishing and farming, these miners would presumably have been working down the herring mines which Mrs Thatcher so ruthlessly closed. Or something. Thus are legends (and traditions) born.

Elgin, then. It is a dance which has caught on and is now very widespread, being found in many versions on both sides of the Atlantic. A couple of years ago Mrs. Kennedy heard a member of one team explaining to someone from another why the second team's version was wrong, and that the dancer from the first team knew this for a fact because they knew the person who had collected the traditional notation. This amused her a lot, because she was already married to me when I wrote it. From my own point of view, this is marvellous; I know that some teams guard their notations carefully to avoid them being copied/nicked/stolen, but what could be better than to have one of your dances escape into the wild and breed successfully? (A glance through YouTube shows how popular the dance has become, and no two versions are identical. How, for example, did it get to Oslo?)

The origins of the Elgin Sword Dance lie at the end of the 1980s when I was a member of Clydeside Rapper. I had already looked into what was known about the dance, and later published my findings in **RUMB** (see *The Elgin Sword Dance (1623*)). A surprising amount is known about the dancers, but nothing of the dance itself, save for when, where, and how many dancers. At this point one of the Clydeside dancers was run over by a bus, sustaining very serious head and leg injuries. He had a long and slow recovery and it was clear that he might never dance rapper again, so I thought about putting together a simple longsword dance just to get him moving once more. As we were fundamentally a rapper team it made sense to do a dance for five, and with the Elgin research already in my head that's what it became.

We originally had just four simple figures, all taken from elsewhere:

- Tunnel (from Papa Stour)
- Single over/Over your neighbour's, taken from Papa Stour
- Double over, adapted from a six-man figure that Kirkburton Rapier Dancers used
- Casting and lock, adapted from Flamborough threedling

To give it a vaguely 'Scottish' feel (purists and pedants please look away now) it employed not only two Papa Stour moves but also the rapid 9/8 rhythm favoured by Carlisle for their Papa Stour. I was all for dancing to a schottische, but was overruled. Remember, we are talking here not about a work of sword dance scholarship but of occupational therapy.

I left Clydeside around 1992 and the team carried on with it, slowing it down and giving it more of a Cleveland feel. This version was taken up by another Scottish team called the Biggar Seguisers, and was also passed on to Sue Coe, who uses it with Ryburn Longsword (they've changed it). There might be others out there.

A year or two later I was dancing with North British and we decided to add a longsword dance to our rapper repertoire. We settled on the Elgin, but unfortunately I misremembered the double over figure, putting in the doubles figure from the Bampton Weavers' Dance, in whose creation I had been involved while with Carlisle. By the time I realised this we decided it was too late to change and stuck with the erroneous version. I should point out here that when I sent the first draft of this article to Jeff, he told me that he remembered this differently, and that I've got the order of events back to front, in that I misremembered the figure when with Carlisle and we reverted to the original with North British. He might well be right, it's all a long time ago, but this is really my point in writing this article.

A couple of years after that North British were invited to dance at Sidmouth Folk Festival. Reviewing our repertoire, we decided that the Elgin was too short. An additional figure was created in the course of a telephone call I had with Jeff, this being the one now known as the tricky one (a mistake, as such names can become self-fulfilling prophecies). It is essentially a 'window', with each dancer in turn stepping simultaneously over one sword and under another, the tricky element being that the dancer is stepping into the middle of the ring as he does so.

That figure was inserted after double over, to become the new fourth figure. In the course of the same telephone call we agreed that it might be a good idea to more-or-less double the length of the dance by inserting a chorus after each of figures 1-4. In keeping with our version of Papa Stour, which breaks the ring for drop-sword tunnel and clew, we decided to break the ring for an in-and-out figure which is wrongly named 'hey'. We also changed the lock: rather than making the lock in one simultaneous movement, we put the swords in one at a time in a flowing movement we described as the 'Mexican lock' (think Mexican wave). We then organised more of a presentation of the team and lock, pause for applause, and dance off.

You can see different stages in the evolution of the North British version if you look at, for example, those of Redcar and Southport Swords. If I count this right, that makes four or five different ‘authentic’ versions of the Elgin doing the rounds, and that’s before teams make their own improvements, let alone the two different endings we’ve tried. This is all fine, but it does make me worry when I hear people going on about accuracy and authenticity in folk performances. Oh, and we did succeed in getting the Clydeside man dancing again.

Rattle Up, My Boys: Autumn 2019