

Plus ça change

Many will remember discussions over 'dance' or 'lead' down the middle some years ago. *The Silver Tassie* springs to mind. Traditionally, the Society taught that leading down the middle meant right hand in right hand. Devisers began stipulating nearer hands in some dances. The current Manual states that "If dancers 'lead' down the middle, right hands are used. If dancers 'dance' down the middle, nearer hands are used."

You will be amused by the following, taken from 'Country Dancing made Plain and Easy' (Price Two Shillings and Sixpence), published in 1764, where it is clear that 'leading' meant nearer hands joined!

"Leading is when two or more persons, having their faces turned one way, move forwards, and at the same time join the hands that are next to each other: for example, to lead down; the couple so doing must turn their faces towards the bottom of the dance, the man taking the woman's right hand in his left, and so moving forwards."

With nearer hands joined body angle of both dancers is easy to maintain. With right hand in right hand, posture can easily be compromised. When ladies' frocks were wider, nearer hand was also more elegant. I remember one eminent teacher at a Day School arguing for right hand in right hand "because it means you are closer to your partner." An interesting rationalisation.

Another amusing section of the book deals with rights and lefts. Anyone teaching beginners will recognise that the problems are still the same:

"The most difficult figure to young beginners is that of Right and Left: to perform this, it requires two couples, being placed properly (on their own sides, Ed), each opposite their partner; then let all be sure to pass on the right side of their partner, and give the right hand in passing, all moving forward round; the first man and second woman on a circle to the right, and the first woman and second man on a circle to the left, each missing their opposite corners, will next meet woman to woman and man to man, who are to pass on the left sides of each other, and give the left hand in passing, and being careful not to turn the contrary way from your circles, nor keep the hands joined too long, as it stops each party from moving on."

It seems that at that time the figure was more like a circular chain for four dancers than the squarer figure we dance today.

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