

Some Basics from the Past

Thomas Wilson was without question one of the most important and influential country dance teachers and writers in the history of the Country Dance. His most influential publications appeared in the early years of the 19th Century. One of the most important is his 142-page *Analysis of Country Dancing*, which appeared in 1808. My copy is the third edition of 1811. The book was printed in London by James Gillett, Crown Court, Fleet Street. It was published by J S Dickson, 18 Ivy Lane, near St Paul's Cathedral. Ivy Lane was in Paternoster Row and was where Samuel Johnson set up his Ivy Lane Club - a literary and social club.

Interestingly, the book could be bought direct from the author at his home in Bedford Row or from 'all booksellers in the United Kingdom'.

It may come as a surprise to all Pilling-users that in his diagrams, circles denote men and squares denote ladies. In earlier dance manuals of the 18th century ladies were referred to as 'women', but Wilson preferred 'ladies'. The RSCDS has come full circle by returning to 'women' in its dance instructions.

Turning

Early in the book Wilson explains that the term 'turn' means both hands and the term 'swing' means right or left hand.

Allemande

Wilson is quite explicit on this. A couple 'allemande' by dancing round each other back to back. It would take 4 bars of music.

Footing

This is a term which appears a lot in early dance instructions. Wilson makes it clear that 'foot' and 'set' mean the same. "It is merely dancing in your place to fill up the time of the music."

Corners

The term corners has two meanings. 1st and 2nd couple can 'foot corners' by facing in diagonally and setting to the opposite person, 1st man sets to his corner, 2nd lady, while 1st woman sets to her corner, 2nd man. When he means corners as we use the term today, the term he uses is 'contrary corners'.

Lead down the middle

For Wilson leading down the middle was invariably a progressive movement. His rule is that as soon as 1st couple pass 2nd couple, they move up to top place. 1st couple return to 2nd place.

Casting off

Casting off one place for Wilson took 4 bars - what we call a long cast. He makes it clear that he did not like 'a sudden turn' in casting off as it has 'a disagreeable effect.' This is why in the original instructions for The Frisky on which the RSCDS dance is based each turn and cast takes 4 bars each. Thus, our bars 1-8 originally took a more relaxed 16 bars.

Rights and Lefts

This common formation has several variants. In Wilson's 1811 edition 1st lady changes place with 2nd man, 1st man changes places with 2nd lady; then repeat. He mentions that the 'chain figure' (our rights and lefts) is often substituted for his figure. Our rights and lefts was common in the mid-18th century, then became standard as it was the 'chaine anglaise' which come from France with the arrival of the quadrille post-1815.

Poussette

In fast time Wilson describes poussettes where the couples move round each other without progressing and half-poussettes where progression takes place. It is clear that the poussette was danced with a travelling step akin to our skip change. His diagrams make the movements explicit.

It is interesting that Wilson says very little about steps. The whole focus of his work is on formations and how they can be combined, and, of course, etiquette.

Jimmie Hill

June 2016