

## Two things we take for granted: The 4-couple set

In the introduction to the first edition of Book 1 the Scottish Country Dance Society defined a country dance as one in which the dancers are in lines: 'the men facing their partners, and the women having their right sides to the dais or orchestra'.

No indication was given about the number of couples in a set, but the advice was that 'a dance should not contain too many couples'. They suggested that every fourth couple should begin and continue dancing until they 'end below the bottom couple'. Historically, this is the way country dances were danced – one long set 'for as many as will'. Mrs Stewart, in particular, would have been very familiar with this tradition. The diagram in the Book 1 Foreword contains 5 couples. A later edition of Book 1 around 1938 states that 'it is usual to number off the lines into sets of 4 to 6 couples. The reason I say 'around 1938' is because there is an advert at the back of that edition for Book 12, which was published in 1938. We can assume, then, that set size was not yet fixed at 4 couples by the beginning of the War.

What are the implications of a 6-couple set? In a three-couple dance in a 6-couple set, each couple would dance the dance four times each – 24 times in all. A dance would, therefore, last three times as long as the same dance today in a 4-couple set where each couple dances only twice. With a reel or jig taking around 13 or 14 minutes, you would need fewer dances on a programme. Dancing a strathspey in a 6-couple set would take up to 24 minutes. If the dance was 40 or 48 bars long, the time would be even longer. Dancers would need more stamina – think of the way 2-couple dances have fallen out of favour in the past 20 years. Dancing *The Duke of Atholl's Reel* in our 4-couple set means 96 bars of continuous dancing. In a 6-couple set it would be 5 times 32 bars = 160 bars non-stop! The 2-couple strathspey *Lady Auckland's Reel* in a 6-couple set would be 5 times for each dancer – 30 times in all! In some areas of the country today you can be hard pressed to find one 8 x 32 bar strathspey on a programme! I wondered if the answer to this issue lay in our early gramophone recordings, but it seems that the early 78 records just fitted in the dances as best they could, given the space allowed by the technology of the time. I have a copy of the Beltona record for *Hamilton House* from Book 7 in 1931. The band is Mrs Shand's Dance Orchestra and the record is 'officially recorded and issued by arrangement with the Scottish Country Dance Society'. It plays 6 times through and the strathspey, *Ye'll aye be Welcome Back Again* on the other side plays 4 times – and at a much brisker pace than we are used to today. In Book 7 the advice on tempo was: 'Strathspey time should be the pace of a horse trotting and reel time the pace of a horse cantering'. To record all 12 dances in Book 7 would have needed 6 records.

With the publication of more and more dances it is possible that there was pressure to include more dances on a programme, so it was decided to limit set size to 4 couples, but this is speculation. If anyone can shed any light on when the decision was made that we would henceforth dance in sets of 4 couples, please be in touch! However, if you were 20 years old and dancing in 1938 you are now 100!

### The chord before and after

In 1938 the Society stated: 'a chord (or four bars of music) may be played before a dance begins, during which the women curtsey and the men bow to their partners. They also curtsey and bow at the end of a dance (without chord).' Nowadays, we take the chord before and after for granted, but it is actually a fairly modern practice. Edward Payne's dance manual from 1814 advises the band to play the whole tune through before the dancers begin dancing. Where, then, did our chord come from? When the Quadrille arrived from Paris in 1815, the tradition was that the dancers used the first 8 bars to 'honour' their partners and the person opposite in the square set – and later their corners. The dancing always begins on bar 9 of the tune in a quadrille. And there is no bowing or curtseying at the end. However, each set of (usually) 5 quadrilles ends with a 'finale' quadrille – and traditionally, this one began with a chord and the dancers begin on bar 1. I wonder if this is the origin of our chord.

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### Something else we take for granted

Country dances have always varied in length. In the early 1800s you could choose which version of a dance you wanted to dance: the 16 bar version, the 32 bar version or even the 48 bar version. With very few exceptions, dances were for two or three couples in a longwise set 'for as many as will'. Today we have dances for 2 couples, 3 couples, 4 couples, 5 couples. We dance 2-couple dances in sets of 4 couples and increasingly in sets of 3 couples.

When the Society decided that the four-couple set would be the standard, some time in the mid 1900s (about the time of the Second World War), that worked well for 3-couple dances. Each couple got to dance the dance twice with rests. But have you ever thought about 2-couple dances in a 4-couple set? The first three couples dance the dance three times each and then the 4th couple only dance it twice. Does anyone have any theories as to why we don't ask the band to play it nine times? Then all four couples would dance the dance three times.

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