

The Origins of The Manx Scallop Dances

It was thought that the dances of the Isle of Man were lost in the mists of time, but in recent years during a house clearance, a set of documents, (all be it scant in number), along with a series of photographs came to light which are allegedly the lost dances of the Manx people.

The Isle of Man is a small Island off the west coast of England, and subsequently off the Lancashire coastline, their nearest neighbour. The Manx people are part of the Celtic fringe; they have their own customs, folklore and language along with their own parliament and tax raising powers.

The dances that have come to light are similar in style to the dances of the Bacup Coconut Dancers of Lancashire. Bacup is situated high in the upper reaches of the Rossendale Valley and its dances are unique to this part of the world.

The Bacup dances are thought to have originated from Moorish pirates. But how did this style of dance migrate to Lancashire? The oral history goes something like this; some of these Moorish sailors are thought to have settled in Cornwall and became employed in the local tin mines. When mines and quarries opened up in Lancashire, these miners emigrated north bringing with them their skills and expertise to work in the burgeoning mining industry. They also brought with them their customs and folklore, and hence their dances. The dances are unique in that they incorporate the use of small wooden discs or nuts; these discs are secured on



The Britannia Coconut Dancers
No Date given

the hands, knees and waist of the dancers, who strike them during the dance in time with the music. Their costume is different from any other English Morris team, in that the Bacup men wear a small white kilt over their black britches. They also black their faces for the sake of anonymity and it is said that the blacking of the faces will also ward off evil spirits for the coming year.

The Bacup dancers are accompanied by the playing of concertinas during a normal day of dancing but on Easter Saturday (their traditional day of dance in the mill town of Bacup, where they dance from town boundary to town boundary) they are accompanied by the Stacksteads Silver Band; again unique to the Bacup Coconut Dancers.

The Manx scallop dances differ in a number of ways, but one thing in common with Bacup dancers is that the Scallop dancers were recruited from the employees of the Laxey Mineral Mine. One theory regarding the origins of the Scallop dances is that they might have originated in the Bacup area, as miners left Lancashire to go and work in the Laxey mine on the Isle of Man. Thus perhaps we can deduce that the Scallop dances are adapted from the Bacup dances, to suit their own Manx folk lore and their proximity to the sea and the other big employer of the Island - fishing.

However, a much more plausible and thus credible theory is that the costume worn by the dancers originates from the South Pacific islands of Pitcairn, and possibly the Cook Islands, where dancing with shells is common with the islander to this day. In addition, it is likely that the dances were brought back by sailors on Captain Cook's first voyage of discovery to the South Pacific. It is thought that a number of the sailors from this first voyage settled in Douglas, the Islands capital, and the theory is reinforced by the fact that some of HMS Bounty's mutineers were imprisoned on the Isle of Man before they were tried for mutiny in Portsmouth; perhaps they saw and recognised the scallop dances of the south Pacific and taught the islanders variations of their own dances.

There is much conjecture as to the validity of this theory but if we add to this the fact that at the beginning of each dance a conch shell is blown to bring the dancers to order, then we begin to see a further south Pacific link. Conch shells are not found in the north Irish Sea and the conch shell clearly visible in the picture on the right was found with the documents, so we can presume that it is the original conch shell used when the dances were performed. The shell has been carbon dated to the end of the 18th century, thus reinforcing the theory of assimilation of the dances by sailors returning with Captain Cook. The Turban worn by the dancer in the picture is yet another link with the Far East, since it was not until the 20th century that the turban became a common sight in this part of the world with the coming of immigrants from the sub continent to settle in Lancashire to work in the cotton industry.

There are other characters that perform with the dancers, and one in particular is the Betty or Molly. In Cotswold teams the Betty is a man/women character, (a man dressed up as a grotesque woman) but the Manx character differs, because it is a woman made to look like a man and then dressed up as a woman. This is probably due to the strict anti-homosexual laws on the island, where a man is forbidden to impersonate a woman.



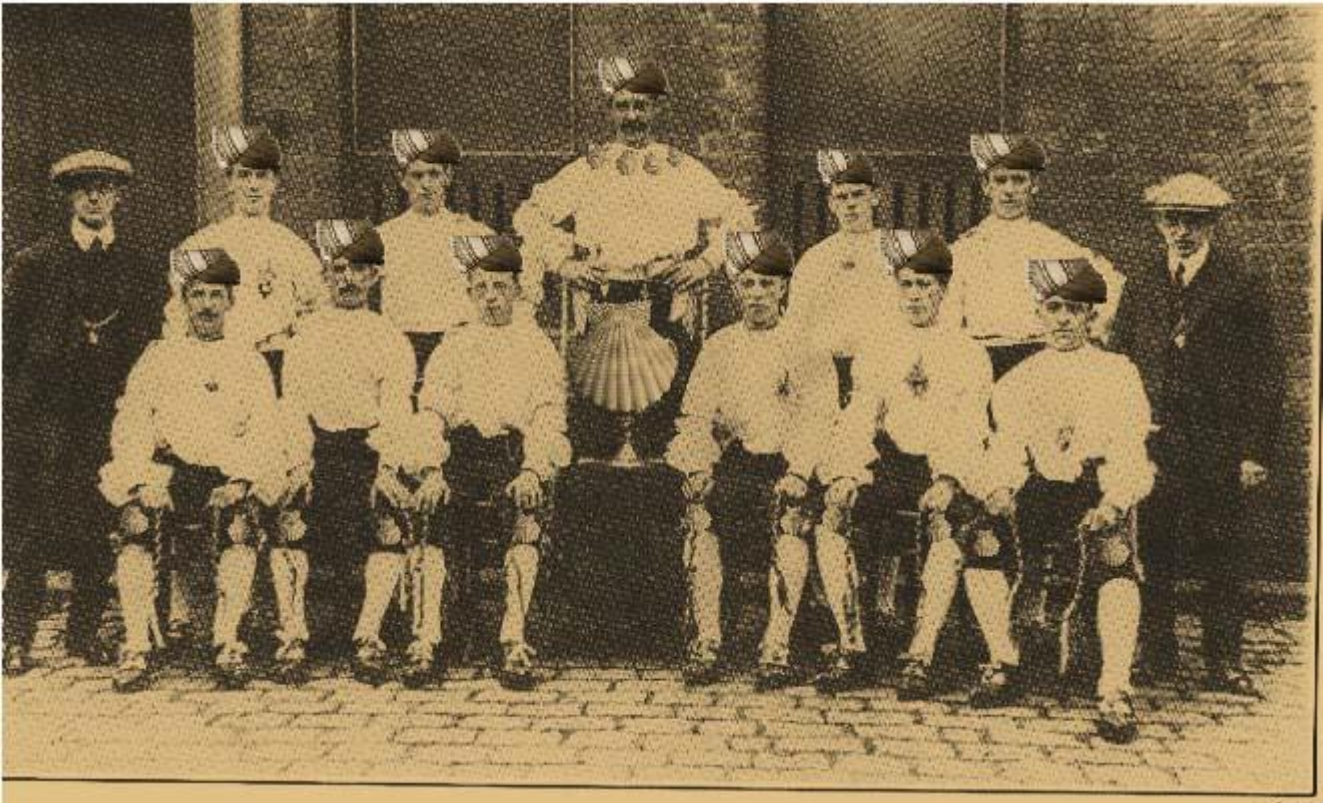
Manx Scallop Dancer Arthur Pitcan In Full Regalia
C 1889 (Note the conch shell by Arthur's right foot)

The traditional instrument that accompanies the dancers also has its links with the southern oceans, for it is a Hawaiian ukulele, also thought to have been introduced to the Isle of Man by the Cook sailors. Sometimes a harmonica will be used as an accompaniment to the ukulele, this also is a traditional sailor's instrument.

The Musicians who played for the dancers were semi-professional as they also played in a formal ukulele band for dances, weddings and funerals. Many of them were clerks in the offices of the Laxey mining company during the week. There was a notable exception to this though, as the very tall man in the picture was a rodent control officer for the Douglas urban council. There is a distinct difference between the Manx musicians and those who performed for other dancers. At this time in history you would normally only expect male musicians to be seen playing for the Morris dancers. On the Isle of Man, an equal opportunity law was enacted as far back as 1885, way ahead of the mainland and the picture shows women playing alongside male musicians - something very unique at the time the photograph was taken.



Mrs Vi Woodley made to look like a man and then dressed as the Betty/Molly



The Manx Scallop Dancing Team of 1909
Photographed Outside of the of the Laxey Mine Offices
After winning a Gold Medal at the Eisteddfod of That Year
(Far Left in Cap) General Manager Obadiah Laxey
(Far Right in Cap) His Brother Jediah Laxey
Photograph lent by kind permission of the Douglas Evening Herald (Picture Archive)



Mr. Edward Pitcairn
Life President of The Scallop
Dancers
Father of Arthur Pitcan



The Manx Scallop Dancers Musicians Ukulele Band
The professional name of the Ukulele Band was The Sea Shells
Picture Lent By The Manx Photographic Studios
C 1901

Though the finding of this unique set of documents has shed a light on the lost dance traditions of the Manx people, it is unfortunate that there are no photographs of the team dancing and no written accounts of how the dances were performed. This is unlike other English traditions, collected around the turn of the twentieth century by notable collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Lucy Broadwood, whose collected works are now held at the headquarters of the EFDSS in London. At least we will be able to pass our findings and research on to the EFDSS to add yet another piece to the ever expanding jigsaw of British folklore. Who knows, in years to come, some further documentation may be unearthed to shed some light on how the dances were actually performed. Until then, dear reader, we will have to content ourselves with this brief glimpse into the past of the Scallop Dancers of the Isle of Man.

Sources of Information:-

Thanks must go to;

The Manx Folk Lore Society.

The Douglas Evening Herald

The Manx Museum Trust

Mrs Rebecca Woodley

Fred Scuttle, Fishmonger