

## ANYONE FOR A RANT?

Anthony Robb wonders why this wonderful style is so neglected.

Like many people, my first direct contact with music was via dance, when, in the mid 1950s, Miss Molly McIver taught us Irish dancing. By the late 50s I had started ballroom classes and later added tap dance which came in useful many years later when I took up clogging in the North East Style. In the 60s when I began playing "sundry sonorous engines" as Johnny Handle would say and in 1970 I joined "The Aston Folk Dance Band".

Under the brilliant leadership of Chris and Phyllis Gilford<sup>(1)</sup>, this group gave me extended (and well-paid) dance band experience and introduced the idea of dancing as way of getting a tune into the whole system. Their rule that we were not allowed to play for a dance before thoroughly learning the dance itself instilled an even stronger appreciation of the concordance of the two activities. They also spoke, almost in awe, of the flourishing and absolutely continuous dance tradition of Northumberland, where "they rant everything"<sup>(2)</sup>. Five years later I was to experience that personally when at my first Whittingham Show dance we began by ranting the Gay Gordons; 50 couples stepping vigorously in a vertical plane rather than moving forwards & backwards had the village hall floor feeling more like a trampoline than a firm surface. Dances such as The Dashing White Sergeant and Eightsome Reel were also ranted along with the obvious candidates like Morpeth Rant and Corn Rigs.

Local bands had the rant rhythm and tempo embedded in their nature and reels, as such, were quite alien. This was brought home more recently when renowned fiddler Stewart Hardy followed up his highly successful 'Secret of Jigs' book & CD by writing a similar in depth study of reels. After much research He failed to find a good example of a genuine Northumbrian reel and made the decision to include rants in his book of hornpipes. Recent chats with Jimmy Little and Hannah Hutton have confirmed this; in their words, "everything was a rant"!

Certainly the music played in homes and sessions by the likes of Willie Taylor, Will Atkinson, Joe Hutton, Archie Bertram and John Armstrong of Carrick featured reels as rants exclusively, even if the name, for example "Hesleyside Reel", suggested otherwise. In their day, the "The Shepherds" were excellent dancers. I still get teary-eyed at the memory of Willie and Nancy Taylor dancing in the 80s; their Morpeth Rant was unusual with Willie as number one man setting off at the same time as Nancy, turning outwards from the set in a circular path to join with the number two couples in perfect time to make the arch for Nancy to pass under. This was sheer beauty but they were by no means the only dancers at that time to reach dance perfection!

As a keen but far less skilled dancer myself I am interested in delving further into the best tempo for these dances and tunes and also how they differ from Scottish and Irish Reels. The most obvious difference on first hearing is the tempo. The opening reels on a lovely recent piping CD fairly sprint along; 192 bars of music taking exactly 3 minutes to play, but how fast do rants go? The "Morpeth Rant" set played by "The Shepherds" on "Harthope Burn" (also 192 bars) takes 3 min 45 sec. Jimmy Little's rant track on "How Does It Gan?" (again 192 bars) takes 3min 47sec. The Border Country Dance Band (the most popular band during my own dancing days) come in at 3min 23sec (that was going some for a rant set)!

It is clear that rants seem to have a more leisurely tempo than reels so why, I wonder, are they not more popular with many of the best players? I've talked to Stewart Hardy about this and he believes that fingers work more easily and fluently where the notes are more or

less evenly spaced as, say, in a typical reel. He reckons it is more demanding to play with a rant style lilt because the coordination requirements are greater. This made a good deal of sense to me as I had no difficulty, as a (relative) youth, reeling off the Hesleyside Reel as a straight reel but I found enormous difficulty with the same tune at a slower pace but with a rant lilt.

In almost 50 years of teaching I have discovered that I am not the only one with such difficulties. Many students remark that they've tried to play along with tracks by The Shepherds as they sounded reassuringly steady, but, when pipes were fingered and/or bows applied, the pace seemed much faster and very often impossible to match. Perhaps there is another factor beyond tempo at work here?

Some simple calculations seem to shed light on the problem. The opening reels mentioned earlier contain large numbers of fairly even quavers grouped in fours interspersed with crotchets. If, for simplicity's sake, we regard all 192 bars of music as made up of 8 even quavers then there'd be 1536 notes played in 3 minutes with each note taking 0.117 seconds to play. Comparing this to the "leisurely" pace of the Shepherds' rant and applying identical simplifications we find that 1536 evenly spaced notes would take a reasonable 0.146 seconds each. The rub is, of course, the rant lilt requires the ratio of note values to be almost hornpipe style (a ratio close to 2:1) this means that in a group of 8 quavers half of them would be played at a rate of 0.196 seconds each but the other half would be played at a rate of 0.098 seconds each, demanding even faster reflexes than a top speed reel requires. Even if the rant lilt is a moderate 5:3 ratio the figures come in at 0.183 and 0.109 sec. Playing rants even at a "leisurely" pace not only makes greater demands on coordination but the faster notes have to be played more quickly than those in full on reels. Could this be why the Rant rhythm is losing popularity?

Also in decline, for possibly similar reasons, seem to be the bouncy jigs and marches that filled the village halls and huts of north Northumberland at least up to the 90s. At the moment we are still able to rejoice in the live music of the last truly traditional Northumbrian musician, Jimmy Little. Is it a false hope to think there is still time to learn from him? Jimmy himself has tried to get the message across. Many seem ill-equipped to follow his lead and one or two 'dots trained' practitioners actually tell him he is not playing correctly!

Perhaps it will take a younger generation with commitment and time to devote to learning and appreciating the quality and uniqueness of this style of playing. On the other hand, should some of us more established players be putting in the hours to master this beautiful traditional style even if it comes at the expense of far fewer tunes in the repertoire?

*1. Chris Gilford was the Reader in acoustics at Aston University and published several works on studio design. Ex head of research at the BBC, his main claim to fame was designing the "Flying Saucer" reverb absorbers in The Albert Hall.*

*2. I should point out for accuracy's sake that these commentators meant as far as reel-type time was concerned. Waltzes, hornpipes, two steps, three steps, polkas etc. maintained their original form.*