"Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance" Part 4 - UK Tranter's Party and Dickens' description of a lower class country dance

From the book *Under the Greenwood Tree* or *The Mellstock Quire, A Rural Painting of the Dutch School* by *Thomas Hardy* I found referenced on the site www.strathspey.org/history/ that provides an extremely good description of the 'Triumph Country Dance' as well as another popular (but as usual unnamed) country dance at an ordinary household event.

"Chapter VII: The Tranter's [peddler, hawker, carrier] Party

"The country-dance called the 'Triumph, or Follow my Lover,' was the figure with which they opened. The tranter took for his partner Mrs. Penny, and Mrs. Dewy was chosen by Mr. Penny, who made so much of his limited height by a judicious carriage of the head, straightening of the back, and important flashes of his spectacle-glasses, that he seemed almost as tall as the tranter……..
……. And so the dance proceeded. Mr. Shiner, according to the interesting rule laid down, deserted his own partner, and made off down the middle with this fair one of Dick's--the pair appearing from the top of the room like two persons tripping down a lane to be married. Dick trotted behind with what was intended to be a look of composure, but which was, in fact, a rather silly expression of feature--implying, with too much earnestness, that such an elopement could not be tolerated. Then they turned and came back, when Dick grew more rigid around his mouth, and blushed with ingenuous ardour as he joined hands with the rival and formed the arch over his lady's head; which presumably gave the figure its name; relinquishing her again at setting to partners, when Mr. Shiner's new chain quivered in every link, and all the loose flesh upon the tranter--who here came into action again--shook like jelly. Mrs. Penny, being always rather concerned for her personal safety when she danced with the tranter, fixed her face to a chronic smile of timidity the whole time it lasted—a peculiarity which filled her features with wrinkles, and reduced her eyes to little straight lines like hyphens, as she jigged up and down opposite him; repeating in her own person not only his proper movements, but also the minor flourishes which the richness of the tranter's imagination led him to introduce from time to time - an imitation which had about it something of slavish obedience, not unmixed with fear. The ear-rings of the ladies now flung themselves wildly about, turning violent somersaults, banging this way and that, and then swinging quietly against the ears sustaining them. Mrs. Crumpler--a heavy woman, who, for some reason which nobody ever thought worth inquiry, danced in a clean apron--moved so smoothly through the figure that her feet were never seen; conveying to imaginative minds the idea that she rolled on castors. Minute after minute glided by, and the party reached the period when ladies' back-hair begins to look forgotten and dissipated; when a perceptible dampness makes itself apparent upon the faces even of delicate girls--a ghastly dew having for some time rained from the

features of their masculine partners; when skirts begin to be torn out of their gathers; when elderly people, who have stood up to please their juniors, begin to feel sundry small tremblings in the region of the knees, and to wish the interminable dance was at Jericho; when (at country parties of the thorough sort) waistcoats begin to be unbuttoned, and when the fiddlers' chairs have been wriggled, by the frantic bowing of their occupiers, to a distance of about two feet from where they originally stood.

Carolyn Marrone of Bendigo re-drew this for me in colour from a musical frontispiece in Nell Challingsworth's book '*Dancing Down the Years*', but the original titled 'Barn Dance', has since been located in the National Library of Australia.

Dick had at length secured Fancy for that most delightful of country-dances, opening with six-hands-round. And now a further phase of revelry had disclosed itself. It was the time of night when a guest may write his name in the dust upon the tables and chairs, and a bluish mist pervades the atmosphere, becoming a distinct halo round the candles; when people's nostrils, wrinkles, and crevices in general, seem to be getting gradually plastered up; when the very fiddlers as well as the dancers get red in the face, the dancers having advanced further still towards incandescence, and entered the cadaverous phase; the fiddlers no longer sit down, but kick back their chairs and saw madly at the strings, with legs firmly spread and eyes closed, regardless of the visible world. Again and again did Dick share his Love's hand with another man, and wheel round; then, more delightfully, promenade in a circle with her all to himself, his arm holding her waist more firmly each time, and his elbow getting further and further behind her back, till the distance reached was rather noticeable; and, most blissful, swinging to places shoulder to shoulder, her breath curling round his neck like a summer zephyr that had strayed from its proper date. Threading the couples one by one they reached the bottom, when there arose in Dick's mind a minor misery lest the tune should end before they could work their way to the top again, and have anew the same exciting run down through. Dick's feelings on actually reaching the top in spite of his doubts were supplemented by a mortal fear that the fiddling might even stop at this supreme moment; which prompted him to convey a stealthy whisper to the far-gone musicians, to the effect that they were not to leave off till he and his partner had reached the bottom of the dance once more, which remark was replied to by the nearest of those convulsed and quivering men by a private nod to the

anxious young man between two semiquavers of the tune, and a simultaneous "All right, ay, ay," without opening the eyes. Fancy was now held so closely that Dick and she were practically one person. The room became to Dick like a picture in a dream; all that he could remember of it afterwards being the look of the fiddlers going to sleep, as humming-tops sleep, by increasing their motion and hum, together with the figures of grandfather James and old Simon Crumpler sitting by the chimney-corner, talking and nodding in dumb-show, and beating the air to their emphatic sentences like people near a threshing machine."

This picture above of Sir Roger de Coverley or the 'Haymaker's Jig' as known in less formal circles is an artist's image of the ordinary type dance once held in barns and woolsheds all over Australia.

While in Tasmania recently I discovered an extremely interesting article in the Colonial Times of Hobart, Tuesday 13 March 1838 p 6 titled 'Greenwich Fair'. It describes a country dance in progress and in this instance it's not the 'landed gentry'. The skit is introduced by saying the following "sketch" by Boz, the editor, or author, of the Pickwick Papers will recall to many of our readers, the recollection of many a happy day of juvenile fun and frolic; we make no apology for its length, as every line teems with entertainment (turns out Boz is a very young Charles Dickens writing snippets of everyday life in England and this episode reproduced in the Tasmanian Colonial Times):-

"*The grandest and most numerously frequented booth in the whole fair, however is "The Crown and Anchor" - a temporary ball-room- we forget how many hundred feet long, the price to which is one shilling. Immediately on your right as you enter, after paying your money, is a refreshment place, at which cold beef, roast and boiled – French rolls, stout, wine, tongue, ham, even fowls, if we recollect right, are displayed in tempting array. There is a raised orchestra, and the place is boarded all the way down in patches, just wide enough for a country dance. There is no master of ceremonies in this artificial Eden – all is primitive, unreserved, and unstudied. The dust is blinding, the heat insupportable, the company somewhat noisy, and in the highest spirits possible; the ladies in the height of their innocent animation, dancing in the gentlemen's hats, and the gentlemen promenading the gay and festive scene in the ladies' bonnets, or with the more expensive ornaments of false noses, and low crowned, tinder box looking hats, playing children's drums, and accompanied by ladies on the penny trumpet, the noise of the various instruments, the orchestra, the shouting, 'the scratchers', and the dancing is perfectly bewildering. The dancing itself beggars description – every figure lasts about an hour, and the ladies bounce about with a degree of spirit which is quite indescribable. As to the gentlemen, they stamp their feet every time 'hands four round' begins; go down the middle and up again with cigars in their mouths and silk handkerchiefs in their hands and whirl their partners round, nothing loath, scrambling and falling, and embracing, and knocking up against other couples, until they are fairly tired out, and can move no longer. The scene is repeated again and again (slightly varied by an occasional 'row') until a late hour at night; and a great many clerks and 'prentices find themselves next morning with aching heads, empty pockets, damaged hats, and a very imperfect recollection of how it was they did not get home."*

Greenwich Fair **George Cruikshank, 1792-1878**
http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/cruikshank/9.jpg

Wood engraving 1836 Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* Scanned image and text by Philip V. Allingham.

There's several things to note there, all of which could have been exactly the same out here in some of the inns or pub assemblies, outside lawn or flat patch of dirt, boat deck, whatever. The bouncing of the ladies in dancing and the stamping of the gentlemen's feet is perhaps more descriptive of the middle and lower class country dance than that of Jane Austen's society ball, but there's also Rose de Freycinet's mention of the 'hopping' which I'll cover in a moment.. No MC, heaven forbid; thought I'd never see that in writing, but therefore no formal restraint outside the general customs of the day. The gentlemen dancing with cigars in their mouths and all with hats on (even if reverse dress); exactly that pictured out here in the nineteenth century illustrations such as the Araluen Ball. Alcoholic beverages laid on, same out here until the wowser-ism or temperance movement had it all changed around the early 20th century. Gentlemen dancing with silk handkerchiefs, do you know what that was about? Well in society gentlemen wore gloves so as not to soil the ladies dresses in the various dance holds. This was also the case here, and within living memory I've seen it myself, when the Wedderburn Oldtimers revived the traditional old time bush ball in 1975, the MC (Ronnie Robertson) didn't have gloves in this ordinary country situation; he had a big red handkerchief held

behind the lady's back while leading her through the dance. When he perspired he mopped his brow with it, when his nose dribbled he wiped it. That's what the silk handkerchiefs were all about fellas! Sorry ladies, and to protect your ballgowns.

Picture from a glass plate by courtesy of Chris Woodland. It can also be found in the Australian News of 28/5/1867. They could be dancing a polka although the 'movement' suggests more the galop. Note the wearing of hats at a public ball, whereas a private function would offer a cloakroom.

The next consolidation of information came while also researching in the State Library Hobart over

the March long weekend. I found a couple of other translations of Rose de Freycinet's diary with slightly different interpretation as well as an earlier voyage account (1818) when they docked at Mauritius, a recent English colonial acquisition. This is from 'Realms & Islands' by Marnie Bassett – 'The World Voyage of Rose de Freycinet 1817-20, 'Mauritius'.

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" The next day we had a very fine ball, where I enjoyed dancing more than at Mr. Smith's, for it was not so hot, there were fewer people, and the quadrilles were danced as in Paris, whereas generally in Mauritius they have such odd figures that I was disconnected when I danced them for the first time."

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"Soon afterwards we went to take the air on the bridge, where the band played pretty contre-danses – The bridge was lit by torches, and everyone chose his partner and continued until midnight hopping about in the English style."

Then on p 190-191 , **Sydney 1819**, a slightly different translation to my quote in the 1st part of this

series; Rose again met the strange activity of the English Country Dances that in Mauritius had so taken her aback:-
"Although I did not know how to dance English dances, they had to be danced; I acquitted myself badly enough, but what seemed to me frightful was the heat, which was really too great for dancing."

From this you can see that the quadrilles were already well established in the English colonies of 1818 and danced as in Paris, but that Rose did not know the English country dances which were still obviously very prevalent and that the steps were 'hopping'. One other translation said English reels instead of dances, if so, I'd be inclined to think it was the Scottish Foursome although it's likely this is simply a slip in terminology.

Despite a rise in things Scottish during the Regency Period and Governor Macquarie's upholding the Scotch Reel over the new Waltz and possibly the Quadrille, the newer dances gradually displaced the older. Towards the end of the 1830s and certainly by the 40s only a few Country Dances and Reels lingered. This newspaper account indicates not all musicians were au fait with the necessary Scottish music for the Scotch Reel.

The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser Thursday 4th January 1838

The-Emigrants' Annual Ball

-The second Anniversary of the Emigrants' Annual Ball came off at the Pulteney Hotel on Monday evening last. The attendance, especially of the fair sex, was considerably larger than last year and the arrangements were in every respect superior. At nine o'clock the company began to arrive and at half-past nine the dancing commenced and continued almost without intermission until five in the morning. At twelve o'clock a portion of the company, such as could be accommodated with ease, partook of an excellent supper which did much credit to Mr. Levien, mine host of the Pulteney. The remainder of the company continued the dance, and in turn returned to the supper-room to the contents of which they did ample justice. After supper bumpers were emptied with due honours to two toasts proposed by the Chairman "The Emigrants' Annual Ball,"-and "The Australians who have honoured us with their presence." Mr. Cunningham, a youthful Australian in the name of himself and countrymen, returned thanks for the honour done them and expressed his high gratification at the arrangements of the evening. After supper the "Highland Fling" was danced in full costume by Mr. Clark, one of the stewards, and encored by the united plaudits of the whole assemblage. It was rather amusing to observe the effect the good things that supper had in rousing the spirits of the dancers, which before had seemed rather to flag. On the whole, we believe, no ball ever came off in the Colony, at which the arrangements were better, or at which there prevailed more joyous and unmingled hilarity. The musicians who were supplied by Mr. Turner of Kent Street, incurred considerable blame from the length of time they kept the company waiting for their arrival, but they did their best from that time till morning to gain the good graces of the company. ***The quadrilles, contra dances, &c, they were perfect masters of, but the reel and strathspey tunes required for the Scots' reels, to which the Caledonian portion of the company were much attached, seemed to puzzle them considerably.*** *The Emigrants have fairly overcome now, every obstacle that ill-disposed men attempted to place in their way, both last year and this, and we may safely look forward now to the Emigrants' Annual Ball as one of the fixed, and certainly one of the most acceptable annual amusements that our Colonial capital affords.*

Needless to say I'm inclined to think anything listed in works such as by Blantyre and by Wilson are representative of the repertoire at home and whilst varying between regions and across borders and as well as common folk simplicity, could be the basis of a least some repertoire in Regency Australia.

Rosemary Coupe also makes the following comment:-

“*Certainly your idea that names applied primarily to tunes rather than dances is true of the culture of the 18th C assembly room where novelty was prized and dance/music collections had titles like "20 New and Fashionable Dances for the Year 17--." One should not over-generalise, however. I have looked at the 18th C Scottish sources, which consist of several manuscripts and arguably also the several volumes of Walsh's Caledonian Country Dances (while these were published by a London publisher and include many obviously English dances, there's considerable overlap between their content and that of the Scottish manuscripts). A number of dance titles occur in more than one of these sources. Quite often the dances carrying the same name were quite different, as with the examples you mention. But in a significant number of cases, the dances with the same name are either the same or resemble each other too closely for coincidence.*

Anyway, by the early 19th C the social context for dancing in Scotland at least had changed and was now dominated by the "dancies" who taught in both towns and countryside. One manuscript from 1803 records the dances taught at a farm near Glasgow by one such teacher. Another records dances taught in the Aberdeenshire countryside in 1841. The fact they were taught and dutifully written down implies that they weren't intended to be danced one day and forgotten the next.”