

“Gliding with apparent negligence”

Dance style in the early colonial era 1788 – 1840

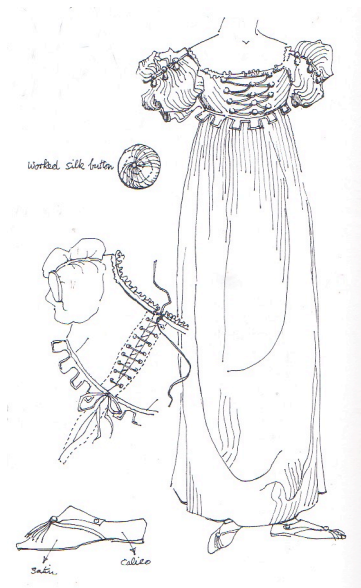
*Heather Clarke 2012**

Philosophy and dance

During the first half of the colonial era, styles in dancing changed markedly.

In the early years, the Minuet, though fading, was still prevalent. This was the dance that captured the essence of 18th century rationalism, exhibiting majesty, absolute control, dignity and complaisance.

Towards the end of the 1700s, inspired by archaeological excavations around Rome and Naples, Neoclassicism influenced everything from politics [Revolutions in America and France, and Napoleon’s Empire espousing ancient Greek democracy] to architecture, fashion and ultimately dance. Philosophy turned towards more natural, graceful lines, a freedom of movement and dress, and thus the change in dance. The highly controlled, sustained form gave way to a lighter, more flowing style.



Left. Wedding dress worn by Miss Anna Blaxland, Sydney 1822. Note the dainty slippers clearly visible under the light dress. The military trimmings on the bodice and sleeves were inspired by the Napoleonic Wars. Vaucluse House, Historic Houses Trust of N.S.W.

It may have been this very interest in fashion that helped to spark off the trouble between Governor Bligh and the military, for when Mrs Putland [Bligh’s daughter] attended a church service with her father, the soldiers were moved to laughter, much to the governor’s annoyance ..[due to] the sight of her dressed ‘very thinly, & to compensate for the want of Petticoats wears breeches, or rather trousers.

Costume in Australia 1788-1901. Marion Fletcher

Fashion

The age of Enlightenment had advanced a new vision of the body dominated by ideas of hygiene - it encouraged a shift away from textiles seen as unwashable and thus unhealthy - satins, silks, and velvets, promoting instead a trend towards cotton and woollen broadcloth. The back-to-nature movement in England in the 1780s espoused these ideas drawing upon an idealised country image with a simplicity of line and colour.

Even before the Revolution in France, this English sartorial style had crossed the Channel where it was quickly adopted by the French and, some felt, heightened to excess. After the Terror, this Anglomania was coupled with the neoclassic movement.

Women’s dress, inspired by wall paintings uncovered in Pompeii, took on a classical form reminiscent of Greek statues: white, figure revealing, diaphanous - an astonishing change after centuries of rigid corsets and layers of petticoats. Flexible, heel-less slippers allowed toes to be

pointed, feet articulated; shorter dresses meant the feet and ankles could be seen, encouraging the development of new and elegant steps.

Men's clothing also changed to a slimmer, unencumbered line – skin tight breeches or pantaloons, and later, tight pants from the instep to a high waist presented well-turned legs to advantage. Complete with cut-away coat and short waistcoat, this further enhanced the figure and allowed great virtuosity in dance steps.

In Australia, convicts and emancipists soon gained the reputation for dressing in the most fashionable clothes including wigs, silk dresses, satin breeches, and pumps with stylish shoe buckles. *Each [ship] brought an ever-increasing array of consumer goods to 'gratify the inhabitants', including 'many elegant articles of dress'.*

Fashion and appearance became extremely important in the colony where dressing well was the first and easiest step up the social ladder.

As the century progressed, morals changed and it became indecent for a lady to show her ankles, certainly not her legs – even the legs of pianos were concealed. By the 1840s women's clothing had returned to tight lacing, numerous petticoats and ultimately, the enormous, caged crinoline. The feminine ideal presented an air of fragility, submission and dependence. Paleness was considered attractive, and women were supposed to look delicate, even sickly. Under no circumstances was a woman to appear vigorous or robust. This restrictive attitude, along with the cumbersome clothing made beautiful steps both difficult and redundant - the art of dancing deteriorated to such an extent that Quadrilles were no longer danced, merely walked, albeit with gliding steps.

Social aspects.

The choice of dances and quality of dancing would vary enormously depending on the occasion and on one's position in society.

Official balls held at Government House were refined and dignified affairs requiring grace and poise; they were always 'splendid' and 'elegant', 'supported with spirit and vivacity'. Dance was esteemed as a genteel accomplishment and the well-bred had the time and resources essential to cultivating the art. A dance in the noble, court style, such as the minuet, required considerable practise to perform well and French dance technique remained the ultimate in sophistication.

At the other end of the spectrum, the lower orders had very strong dance traditions. Dancing was a daily activity and although their country dances may have seemed out of date in the fashionable world, their popular culture also encompassed flings, hornpipes, jigs, reels, even minuets. Regular gatherings in one of the many public houses which thrived in early Sydney, would be described as 'rowdy', 'disorderly' and 'riotous'. Convicts seemed to have danced everywhere: on board ship, around bonfires, at home, in pubs, at fairs, weddings, for competition, in celebration of the Royal family's birthdays, even in chains, – just about any occasion was an opportunity to dance.

It was noted in Commissioner Bigge's report on the colony in 1823 that dance seemed to have been the chief entertainment for the lower orders, as evidenced by the proliferation of dance halls.



Figure 4
Dancing a hornpipe in fetters; cover illustration to Dicks' Standard Plays
no. 396, *The Way to Get Married* by Thomas Morton.
Courtesy of the British Library

Left. It is curious to observe with what nonchalance some of these fellows will turn the jingling of their chains into music whereto they dance and sing."

Cunningham, Peter. *Two Years in New South Wales*. 1827

Over the years country dances became less complicated as the number of less-educated people wanting to dance at assemblies and public balls increased. Within the decades of the First Fleet arriving in Botany Bay, many country dances had become simple entertainments that could be easily learnt by watching the top couple. It was time for an innovation, a new dance form: quadrilles, with the latest in French technique, became the most popular social dance of the nineteenth century.

Department

The SYDNEY ACADEMY in 1818, advertised their dancing master was “perfectly qualified to instruct Pupils in the graceful Accomplishment of DANCING, which is considered so necessary to the acquirement of a becoming demeanour”. The correct posture was essential for the polished dancer: upright, well balanced, weight over the balls of the feet. Also important was the quality “Avec quelque negligence” – the graceful illusion of dancing completely without effort.

...perhaps in the evening we may trespass upon you for an hour of two, to instruct some of our young neighbours in the art of turning out their toes, keeping their knees straight, and holding up their heads in the newest fashion.

He watched the ease and elegance that marked her, whilst gliding with apparent negligence, yet light and airy, keeping the most exact time with the music

Savery, Henry. Quintus Servinton. Hobart, 1830
The first novel written and published in Australia.
reprinted Jacaranda Press, Queensland, 1962.



Left. Private practise prior to the ball. Thomas Rowlandson, 1800

The following advertisement from the *Sydney Gazette* gives a valuable insight into the early colonial dance scene and hope for those aspiring to better their social standing: *Thanks to the Public for the very liberal Encouragement which he has uniformly experienced, begs to suggest the Advantage which Ladies and Gentlemen would derive, by being finished a few Days previous to any Ball....As many Ladies and Gentlemen, who are somewhat advanced in life, may have, from a variety of causes, neglected to acquire proper Knowledge of Dancing, Monsieur Girard would undertake to teach, in three months, so that they might appear in the Ball-room with perfect grace.* 14 April, 1825.

Steps

Steps for country dances were not defined. Dance manuals provided the music and basic instructions for the dance figures with the understanding that the dancers would choose their own steps depending on their individual ability. A tremendous range of steps were available to the accomplished performer, though simple steps were quite adequate for the average dancer. *Just* walking through the figures was not appropriate. The distinctive feature of the period was the sinking and rising movement throughout the steps which imparted a light, flowing quality to the dance.



Left. Foot positions (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th) were defined and well known by this time; this allowed a high degree of precision and also encouraged the development of new steps. In the early 1800s it became fashionable for young dancers to dance in a very balletic style, high on the balls of the feet with a variety of brilliant steps including extensions, springs and leaps. The more accomplished dancer could call upon a rich choreographic vocabulary to employ *enchainments* of steps displaying great complexity and brilliance. These types of steps were especially applied to cotillions and quadrilles which the French had developed to an exquisite degree.

The country dance genre encompassed all types of dance rhythms and their associated steps: not only hornpipes, jigs and reels but minuets, strathspeys and waltz steps. The most common steps included *assemblé*, *balancé*, *chasse*, *contretemps de gavotte*, *jeté*, *minuets*, *pas de basque*, *pas de bourree*, and *rigadoon*. These steps could be combined according to the individual's ability.

All steps were danced with the feet turned out to a 90 degree angle. This position became established with the minuet in 1650 and remained the fashionable technique for all dance steps for the next two hundred and fifty years. Good turn out provided a stable base and allowed greater freedom of movement, particularly when travelling sideways. Sometimes a training device called 'the stocks' was employed to force the feet into position and held for a certain length of time; although this may have assisted with flexibility, it was a rather uncomfortable experience and would

have done little to develop the musculature necessary for maintaining turn-out. Georgiana McCrae, the first genteel lady to settle in Melbourne, described enduring this very process as a child.

Many of the solo step dances which we now consider as traditional date from this period (*Flora MacDonalld's Fancy, Highland Laddie, Barracks Johnny, Saint Patrick's Day, Three Sea Captains*), and those already in existence were probably significantly developed (*flings, swords, jigs, hornpipes*).



[caption] Balletic style of 1805. This representation of ‘La Trénis’ in Paris shows the dancers high on the balls of their feet, extensions are high and beautifully pointed, the arms open and expressive.

As the century progressed and the quadrille became more popular, steps became simplified and standardised; this accelerating impoverishment of technique lead eventually to the quadrille as being described as ‘a sort of symmetrical promenade with pleasant conversation.’

The waltz followed by the craze for the polka changed the whole ethos of dance with couples turned inwards to face one another rather than in the open social pose of previous dances. Inspiring steps in social dances were no longer required.

***Editor's Acknowledgement.** This overview of the early colonial period can be explored further at www.colonialdance.com.au . Heather Clarke has been researching early colonial dance for over 25 years and is currently developing a web-site on this fascinating subject.