

# “Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance” Part 14 -

## Conclusion - Re-construction of the early Country Dances of the extended Regency Period

Peter Ellis



In Thomas Hardy’s ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’ book mention is made about ‘That well known country dance that opens with six-hands round’. Couples wheel around, promenade in a circle, thread couples one by one till the bottom is reached, then continues till the first couple is back to the top. This provides the basis of a well-known earlier country dance figure that could be easily reconstructed.

Then there is Charles Dickens account under the pseudonym ‘Bos’ when he’s only about 18 – Greenwich Fair 1836,

‘Men stamp their feet every-time hands four round begins; go down the middle and back and up again (cigars in mouth) and whirl their partners round. Ladies bouncing in the dance.’

Finally in the Sydney newspaper “Empire” (24/10/1863) is another country dance figure described: - *“Hands across and four-round poussette and allemande down the middle and back again”*

I’ve also located a brief description of a cotillion, although the break between figures suggests it is really a quadrille:-

**Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser Saturday 30 Nov. 1833** “Miscellaneous – A dignity ball, given by a lady of colour at Barbadoes”

*“All eyes were fixed upon Mr. Apollo Johnson, who first looked at the couples, then at his fiddle, and, lastly, at the other musicians, to see if all was right, and then with a wave of his bow-tick the music began.” Massa lieutenant, " cried Appollo to O'Brien "cross over to apposite lady, right hand and left, den figure to Miss Eurydice - dat right; now four hand round. . . You lily midship- men, set your partner, sir; den twist her round; dat do, now stop. First figure all over." At this time I thought I might venture to talk a little with my partner, and I ventured a remark; to my surprise she answered very sharply, "I come here for dance, sar, and not for chatter; look, Massa Johnson, he tam um bow-tick." The second figure commenced, and I made a sad bungle; so I did of the third, and fourth, and fifth, for I never had danced a **cotillion**.”*

Other well-known Country Dance figures see illustration from Ballroom Manual at the end.

Musical instrument selection for Country Dances.

Although I've lost the reference I found this mention of the instruments of the period in Australia:-

*Instruments played the Royal Artillery Band, of 39 men, in this period, were fifes, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, key bugles, French horns, trombones, ophicleides, serpents, bass horns, tenor and bass drums. If a band was fortunate it may have a Chinese Hat, more popularly known as the Jingling Johnny, the more professional forerunner of the bush 'lagerphone'. The band of the 48th would have played a selection of these instruments depending upon whether they were supporting the Regiment on a formal parade of playing at one of the governor's balls.*

Of course this selection is referring to the Regimental Band that played for very special official occasions and in which a section of musicians would augment for playing music for balls. A harp will often be seen in illustrations.

For simpler affairs the music would normally be provided by a fiddler or perhaps several players including flutes and clarinets as illustrated in the following account:-

### **The Australian (Sydney NSW 1824-48) Saturday 8 July 1826**

*Between 40 and 50 young people of both sexes, and more than half the latter number of married folks, attended' Mr. and Mrs. Burnet Levey's hospitable invitation to a ball and supper last Tuesday evening. The occasion they met to do honor to the birth and baptism of a young daughter, was never more happily celebrated than by the joyous groupe who assembled on the above evening, in one of the largest and most accommodating rooms of the Freemason's Tavern. The room was simply, but neatly decorated. A handsome three-branched lamp impending from the centre, and flanked all round by lights of a lesser magnitude, threw a chastened light over the ball-room and its fair female debutantes. Circles eccentric and concentric were chalked out on the floor with mathematical justness, but there shortly destined to have their dusty forms dispersed by the bounding feet of the merry contre-danseurs. By 9 o'clock 40 couples or more had got arranged in 2 sets. The fiddles and clarionets and flutes struck up in unison from an adjoining room and set the enlivening country dance afloat, which continued almost uninterruptedly until the arrival of a summons to the supper-room, where all "that will delight, a dainty," palate "of beast, fish, fowl," confectionary the best in Mrs. Glass's catalogue, and wines of the brightest hue, appeared in varied profusion on the supper tables. Dancing was afterwards renewed with renewed vigour, and rosy morn peeped "o'er the eastern hills," ere the joyous groupe had bade their kind hostess a good morning.*

The Country Dance descriptions provided here from No 42 to 56 are the most typical of the day relating back to the early days of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Pages 3 and 4 below.** From The Royal Ball-Room Guide and etiquette of the drawing room, containing the newest and most elegant dances and a short history of dancing, by Rudolph Radestock Published London, Otley, W. Walker and sons c 1877.

[Text resumes on page 5]

## VARIOUS COUNTRY DANCES.

In those dances to which an asterisk (\*) is placed, the first lady and gentleman must exchange places previous to commencing.

42.—\*Two couples down the middle, half-right and left at bottom, back again, hands four half round, *pousette*.

43.—\*First couple cross, giving right hand; back, giving the left; set in *La Poule* figure, first gentleman to turn his partner right and left.

44.—\*Hands four, round and back, down the middle, right and left.

45.—\*Four advance and retire, and turn the opposite lady, advance, retire, and half-right and left, *pousette*.

46.—\*Four advance, retire, half-right and left, down the middle, and *pousette*.

47.—\*Hands four half round, and half-right and left, and each gentleman turn the lady on his right hand; *pousette*.

48.—Change sides and back, down the middle, and turn corners.

49.—First couple hands three round with

second lady, then with gentlemen down the middle, hands four round and back.

50.—Hands across half round, and half-right and left, down the middle, *pousette*.

51.—First gentleman set to the opposite ladies, and hands three round, half-right and left, turn partners, and *pousette*.

52.—Two gentlemen change places, and turn the opposite lady; two ladies change places; turn partners, and *pousette*.

53.—Hands six half round, first couple cross over, while second and third couples half-right and left, down the middle, *pousette*.

54.—\*First lady set to second gentleman, and turn quite round with right hand; first gentleman at the same time set to second lady and turn with right hand; then set to partners, and turn with right hand; two ladies cross over to each other's places; two gentlemen the same; *pousette*.

55.—First lady balance to her partner and retire quite round with right hand; then retaining her partner's hand, gives her left to the second gentleman's left hand; the three balance, and second gentleman passes the lady quite round with left hand; promenade down the middle, up again, and *pousette*.

56.—\*First gentleman balance to second lady, and first lady to second gentleman; cross over, right and left, *pousette*.

In certain sections of the Australian folk community a revival of English country dancing as portrayed in the Jane Austen film series, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (earlier film with Emma Thompson) has become extremely popular. Therefore it is appropriate in conclusion I provide you with an important and relevant overview written by Ellis Rogers' wife Christine for an EFDSS publication.

## **DANCES FOR JANE AUSTEN by Christine Rogers 2007**

When seeking dances that might have been in the repertoire of Jane Austen and her characters, one must first look at dates. Jane was born on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1775; her first published letter mentioning dance was dated 5<sup>th</sup> September 1786, when she was 20 years old. Her major novels were published 1811-1818 (the last posthumously) and she died on 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1817 at the age of 41.

The types of dance Jane mentions are the waltz, quadrille, cotillion and, of course, the country dance.

The only dances she mentions by name are the Boulanger (*Pride and Prejudice*, chapter 3, and her letter to Cassandra Austen dated 5<sup>th</sup> September 1796) and the Minuet de la Cour (*Love and Friendship*, third letter).

There are several descriptions of the Boulanger, all very similar. The music is in 6/8 time, the first part played 'moderato'. Dancers formed a circle of four couples or more and circled to the right for 8 bars (and in some versions circled back again). The second part of the tune is then played 'presto' and the first gentleman turns the right hand lady with the right hand, partner with left, next lady round with the right, partner with left, and so on until he has turned all the ladies, the musicians playing the 'B' music until he has finished. They then return to the 'A' music and the dancers repeat the circling, then the next gentleman takes his turn and so on until all the gentlemen have finished, when the first lady will take her turn and so on. In some versions the ladies go first, in others the gentlemen and ladies alternate. In some versions the turn is made first with partner and then with the next person round the circle. The step for the 'B' section appears to be a hop-and-step.

The Minuet de la Cour is a display dance, too complicated to describe in this short article.

The waltz did not appear in England as a couple dance until about 1815 but the step (reminiscent of the 'pas de bourree' of earlier years – i.e. three steps forward, rising on the first beat, sinking after the third) was commonly used from about 1796 in country dances and it was in this context that Jane mentions it in *Emma*, chapter 26.

“Much obliged for the Quadrilles, which I am grown to think pretty enough, though of course they are very inferior to the Cotillions of my own day.” (letter to Fanny Knight dated 20<sup>th</sup> February 1817.) The quadrille was a square dance, French in origin, and popular in England from about 1803, this reference in a manuscript from Rothamstead Manor held in archives of a local authority.

In addition to the above, Jane makes two references to cotillions in chapter 10 of *Northanger Abbey*. The second of these - “The cotillions were over, the country dances beginning ...” is most interesting as it indicates that the cotillion had replaced the minuet (not mentioned by Jane) as occupying the first part of a ball, followed by country dances. There is no indication which of the many balls Jane mentions included cotillions and how many of the dances she danced were cotillions. Most of the references in her published letters refer to the number of couples taking part or the names of her partners.

The cotillion was another French square dance, of an earlier date than the quadrille and requiring less

energy but more stamina, as one might be dancing continuously for ten minutes or so. They range from short and simple to long and extremely complex, some with changes of rhythm and some including minuet steps. The form is of simple ‘verses’, called ‘changes’, and a more complex ‘chorus’, called the ‘figure’. These are charming dances that would have been familiar to Mr Darcy and the Bingleys. English and French sources for cotillions can be found in the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House, including *XXIV New Cotillons or French Dances*, published c.1780 in London.

So we come to country dances, the form which appears most frequently in Jane’s books and letters, both directly – “...danced two Country Dances and the Boulangeries ...” (letter to Cassandra Austen dated 5<sup>th</sup> September 1796.) and indirectly – “... having but a short set to dance down ...” (*Northanger Abbey*, chapter 16). Unfortunately she mentions none by name, and there may well be a good reason for this. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the custom for the top couple in the set to select the music and figures for the dance. This is also referred to by Wilson in *Treasures of Terpsichore* (1809). The figures were not necessarily those of a known, named dance but could be invented on the spot or could be the favourite set of figures of the top lady or gentleman. If Jane and her characters were following this custom, their dances may have had no firm title. Wilson’s *An Analysis of Country Dancing*, published in 1811, gives details of a large number of country dance figures, with information on fitting them together to form a country dance. The figures were danced by the top minor set and everyone else waited until the leading couple reached them, when they joined in as second (or third if a triple minor) couples and continued until all were dancing. “She was not yet dancing, she was working her way up from the bottom ...”(Emma, chapter 38).

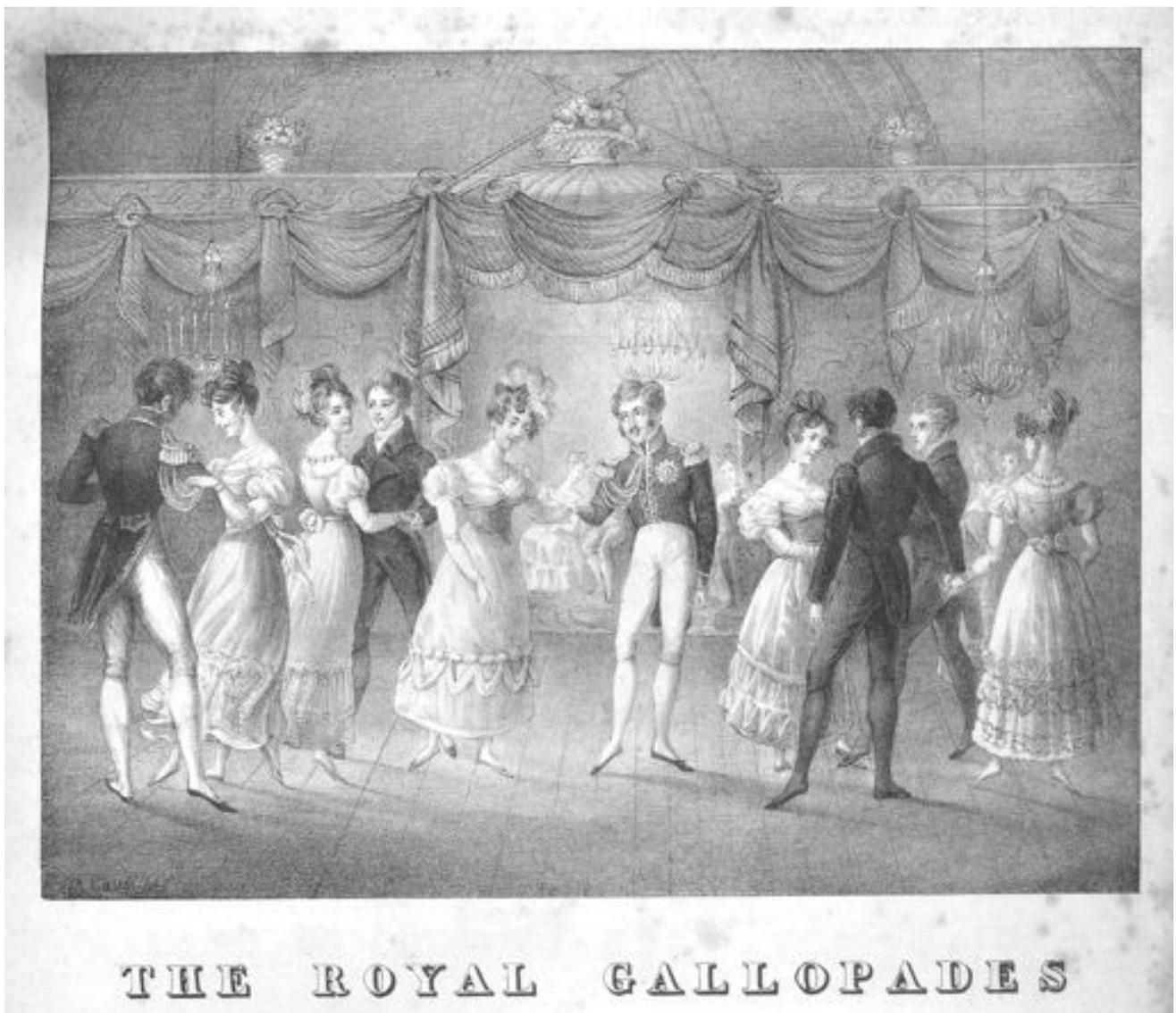
There were, of course, plenty of known, named dances to choose from. We must acknowledge that then, as now, most people wanted to dance the latest, most popular and most fashionable dances that were available to them. So let us return to dates. The Playford collections dated from 1651 to 1728 and were really out-dated by Jane’s time. There are better sources. Thompson’s collections covered 1774 -1790, Ignatius Sancho 1767-1779, Wilson’s *The Treasures of Terpsichore* 1809, and so on. . Dances may also be found on fans, in Ladies’ Pocketbooks and other, similar publications. The vast majority of country dances at this time are triple minor, although many have been re-choreographed to dupe minor in modern publications

In the library at Jane Austen’s House Museum at Chawton, Hampshire, there are two collections of music, including dance music, some of which were copied out by Jane and all of which would have been known to her. The titles are: Mrs Hamilton of Pincaitlands’ Strathspey, four waltzes, The Gloucester, La Rosa cotillon, The Periegodine, Polonaise Russe, Glensiddich, The Chosen Few, Cossack Dance and an untitled country dance.

Finally we must look at the vexed question of steps. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, all dances were *danced* – that is, they were not walked. English collections of country dances at this time give figures but not steps. This does not indicate that steps were not used, rather that individuals were free to choose their own steps to fit the music being played and that the basic single (hop-step), double (hop-step-close-step) and waltz (see above) steps were too familiar to the readership to warrant the expense of printing the instructions. Dukes (*A Concise and Easy Method of Learning the Figuring Part of Country Dances by way of Characters to which is Prefixed the Figure of the Minuet*, 1752) says “... according to the present method of dancing they keep continually footing, as in Casting of (sic), Crossing over, or any other part of Figuring, you may foot it forwards or backwards or sideways as the Case required.” An anonymous Bohemian, writing in Vienna in 1777 describes and notates the step for English dances clearly as the hop-step-close-step. Peacock (*Practice of Dancing*, 1805) mentions “... the bends, the risings or leaps, the steps, the cabriole, the

fallings, the slides, the turns of the body, the cadences.” In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas sees a tired Fanny “walk rather than dance down the shortening set...” Using steps adds immensely to the enjoyment of dancing and it is well worth the trouble of learning them.

For information on the background to dancing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, I recommend *Persuasions On-Line*, by dance historian Allison Thompson at [www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no1/thompson.html](http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no1/thompson.html). More serious students of 19<sup>th</sup> century dancing might wish to invest in *The Quadrille*, by Ellis Rogers – see [www.quadrilles.co.uk](http://www.quadrilles.co.uk). Christine Rogers.



The picture above is from the frontispiece of “The Royal Gallopades’ music composed by Joseph Hart London. The period is between 1829 when the couple dance Galop (often called Gallopade) and just before the coming of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837. The costuming for ladies is much better suited for dancing than later in the century when the frame supported crinolines restricted movement. Notice the gentlemen are still wearing ‘knee breeches’ so the date is earlier rather than later when pantaloons (trousers) had found acceptance. The picture perhaps illustrates a version of Gallopade where the couples dance the Galop around the ballroom (left hand view) and then assemble in sets to perform a country dance or quadrille figure (right hand view).

I'll complete this series now with an excellent description of the changes of fashion of dancing at Almack's leading London Assembly from the time of the Regency through to that of Victoria:-

### **The Empire, Sydney, Saturday October 24, 1863 p 3**

*In one of the light papers in London's society, namely "Recollections of Almack's" occur the following remarks about modern dances on their first appearance.*

*"Quadrilles struggled into existence ere Almack's became Almack's; they were first regarded as a heresy. A great deal of romping and happiness went on as a deal of flirtation in the country dances. What a list of pleasures used to be held out for each evening! Hands across and four-round poussette and allemande down the middle and back again: then came the complicated figure of Moneymusk and the college hornpipe- wherefore one cannot call so divine, few so people surely are so little likely to dance a hornpipe as the fellows of a college. Then there was the Boulanger a dance including numbers with a great deal of turning and twisting and holding up arms and a sort of threading the needle that produced much laughter, whence derived I know not, except it may chance to be La Boulangere, a rondo dance in the north of France and also sung to words more piqued than proper. Lastly came Sir Roger de Coverley, the only good thing amongst delights which we attempt to retain. Quadrilles came – Paine's first set I remember they were called. It was ages before country gentlemen could learn them: and when they did, who was the fool hardy man who dared show his steps in that fearful pas soul "La Pastorale"? Shades of Oscar Byrne I have known some of my pupils immolate their reputation in that fatal stake. But the lists (steps?) are now closed to good dancers.*

*"The necessity for male prowess exists no longer. To walk the figure in time, to carry oneself well, and to look as if it felt one was somebody, are all the requisits of a cavalier in those enlightened days. Steps and pirouettes, balances and assembles, rigadoons and chasses, these have gone out with many abuses - for duals and damages for crimson; with silk stockings and pumps and embroidered waistcoats and shorts, and I know not what other absurdities. By degrees the quadrille became a stereotyped process. Paine's quadrilles at first comprised of five distinct figures: - there was La Poule and La Trenise, La Pastorale and L'Ete and a grand conclusion all vanished now into thin air.*

*It was necessary, when the balls at Almack's began to go through the whole set, and learn a code of steps consistent with each. And there was a long preparatory training with a great lots of temper, and a loss of fiddle-strings on the part of the teachers – when lo! a revolution in men and manners! the waltz was introduced. Modestly at first, did young men and maidens, who had as scarcely as much as shaken hands, come into contact tender enough for affianced lovers. Deeply did virtuous matrons blush, whilst worthy fathers looked on from the card-room with horror on their roseate faces; but being assured that all was right and that my Lady Sophy Lindamell had waltzed away, first of all with Captain Cut-bush went back again with an air of resignation to their long whist. It is long since matrons have ceased to blush when they see their young daughters carried off in the whirl of some teetotum [spinning top for gambling]. They blush only, and with resentment too when their blooming daughters are suffered to sit still. The waltz, fixed by fate, as it seemed to be, has had its variations. When first introduced it was a trois temps, danced with a slow sinking step; the left hand of the lady was rested on the upper part of the partner's right arm, it is now placed on his shoulder. The other two hands joined, were held out and aloft, looking like a handle, and the further extended the better; they are now lowered and the step is a deux temps – rapid as human will make it. Then the shocking, vulgar, jerking polka, was an introduction which seemed to herald the downfall of Almack's."*

**In the next issue or two of Trad & Now Heather Clarke will continue** with more information focusing on the Australian aspects of history and the motion and steps of the dance. It will be **titled** *‘Early Colonial Dance – Gliding With Apparent Negligence’*. This will be an excellent article and my thanks to Heather Clarke and to Ellis Rogers who have been so helpful with information for my ‘Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance’ series.