

# *Australian Social Dances and Tunes of the Victorian Era part 1 “Trad & Fad”*

*Peter Ellis*



The question has been asked whether we have an Australian social dance and music tradition or whether it has simply come from overseas. Without going into extensive debate most of what has ‘evolved’ in our country most likely has origins from overseas. There is a romantic notion crystallising from the concept of folk dancing and national dancing in Europe and the British Isles that Australian social dance and music was brought out by the immigrants. Firstly there were the convicts and the Irish and then the gold-rushes of mid nineteenth century attracted a largely United Nations base of many peoples, particularly from Europe. There is little evidence that any folk dance was established here from these backgrounds although there are a few notable exceptions and certainly tunes were brought out by these peoples. There’s also the very strict protocol in programming a dance, even the informal ones and house parties remained the realm of a very diligent MC (Master of Ceremonies) who was absolute ‘boss cocky’. This is something I think people today don’t have an understanding of the rules of a very controlled discipline in former years.

Shirley Andrews admitted she was on the wrong track to begin, that as a ‘socialist’ she went out to the country to find the dances of the people for her political party. She soon discovered we were not old enough to have an established folk tradition comparable with Europe. It’s a reality going by recent decades that’s not likely to ever happen as we now have canned entertainment at our fingertips.

When white settlement first occurred it was **Country Dances** of the Regency that predominated, these were mainly invented dances for the landed gentry but obviously with a folk process in action following the first footsteps of Governor Phillip. This era was extensively covered in fourteen parts in the proceeding series ‘Calling the Tune and Leading a Merry Dance.

Australia was a frontier country thirsty for word of the ‘latest’ and people queued at the harbours waiting for news of the fashionable dances and music from home. Thus it was the dances of the ball-room and the music that were rapidly taken up here. Even the English *country dances* although seen as having a rustic origin had in the main been invented by the dancing masters for society when at the fore as Australia was first colonised. The **Waltz** arrived in Sydney just after Waterloo (1815) and was the immediate preoccupation with the population except for Governor Macquarie who

detested it and ensured the **Scotch reels** were to be favoured at official functions.

**Quadrilles** or in particular 'The Quadrille' from France had arrived in Britain after the Napoleonic wars and 'quadrille mania' the rage; it was established in Sydney about 1820 with a special Australian musical theme arranged in 1825, La Sydney (fig.1), La Woolloomooloo (fig.2), La Illawarra (fig.3), La Bong-Bong (fig.4), La Engehurst (fig.5).

This picture circa 1910 (acknowledged to Shirley Andrews who bought a post card of the illustration when in Qld at the Lion's Den Hotel) actually illustrates the folk process in action because it is the last figure of The Quadrille. However if you look very closely, there are five couples in the photo, not four. You need to count heads and feet to



work this out as some are obscured. With five people it has to be the last figure only as the Australian 'Stockyards' or 'Bullring'. This illustration is outside the Lion's Den Hotel, Helensvale near the road from Cooktown to Cairns where Shirley bought the postcard. There is also a photo of it held by the State Library of Queensland.

The original 'Quadrille' later known as the '**First Set**' was developing in Paris as Cook was discovered Australia. The French Contredanse and Cotillon had already mutated into square formation and then a selection of these various dances were sequenced into figures as part of one dance and 'hey presto' – **The Quadrille**. This set was instantly popular in France following the Revolution as it was a means of replacing the formal Minuet and other court dances that fell out of favour along with the loss of the heads of the aristocracy. The English seized the chance to cross the channel and learn the

new Quadrille the moment the Napoleonic wars were over, around 1815, although the odd introduction of the Quadrille does occur in Britain as far back as 1803.

A second quadrille known as '**The Lancers**' and thought to be of English conception appears in Dublin in the year 1817, it was mid-century before it really found favour. This was followed by the **Caledonians Quadrille** around the early 1820s and again thought to be of English conception to Scottish themed music. There was also a Hibernian Quadrille based on Irish airs, later developing into the **Royal Irish Quadrille** and numerous others were invented although the principal ones were the First Set, Lancers, Caledonians and by the 1840s a single figure waltz quadrille known as the '**Waltz Cotillion**'. The other principle quadrille to arrive mid nineteenth century was a 'jumble or party' set in which popular figures from the above were sequenced into a new quadrille by a French dancing and music master resident in England, Charles d'Albert and hence taking his name 'd'Alberts Quadrille' or simply '**The Alberts**'. This was to become one of the most popular quadrilles in twentieth century Australia with a couple of distinctly Australian figures, one in which the **Polka Quadrille** was adapted as the final figure and one or two earlier figures based on the old **Spanish waltz** and in which the ballroom profession of the 1930s added a **Polka Mazurka** following the waltz to places.

**The Polka** is listed on a Goulburn programme in the same year as its English launch in the London Illustrated News of 1844 and the **Galop** of 1829 danced at a Perth ball in 1831. Couple dances such as the **Varsoviana, Schottische and Polka Mazurka** were here by the late 1840s along with the Lancers Quadrille of 1817; all again arriving as the latest fad rather than a folk dance of the ethnic peoples on the goldrush. There was also a special Schottische to Scottish strathspey tunes but in Schottische timing which was also extremely popular from mid 19thC and called the '**Highland Schottische**'.

Having said this, it should be observed that almost all of these new dances are not of Anglo-Celtic source, but of European origin. Although formerly arranged as dances of the ball-room they had individually existed developing previously as various folk and national dances. Generally they were 'taken up' by dancing masters, launched at Paris and then via London to Great Britain and Ireland, the Colonies and America as well as to many other countries. The tunes for these dances were generally classically composed but based on the style of the relevant original folk dance tune. There is little that is Anglo-Celtic for example in the Australian tradition except for some of the jigs and reels associated with the very early period and those that the Scots and Irish certainly brought out with them. Only a few of these survived in comparison to the enormous number of waltzes, schottisches, mazurkas, polkas and quadrille set tunes. We simply followed that which had become the mainstream part of the English culture at 'home'.

As a consequence there is a common pool of ballroom dances and music of the era shared throughout the Western World of the day as well as percolating through to other cultures in the New World. **It should be remembered the countries of the New World did not have social dancing as we know it** until European colonisation. Gradually these dances were adopted by all different levels of the populace, classes and society and began to mutate by the folk process; many developed to have an essence of their adopted country whilst retaining some original characteristics or links. A quick review of the dances of Canada, America, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia will reveal the common homeland links on the one hand and a wonderful individuality and

nuance on the other. It's comparable with Australian English and its many colourful colloquialisms, accent, sayings and spoonerisms that make it distinctive from both England and the likewise differences in the other English speaking countries. The Boers in South Africa for example have a parallel but different tradition to ours.

What has occurred since Colonial times in Australia is a tremendous development of 'folk-life' in which communities shared the dances of the time from ballroom origins and tunes from printed music and later recorded music. Over the generations and particularly in the rural districts most communities had their revered Master of Ceremonies, musicians of note and accomplished lead dancers. The dances did develop as well as the tunes which many of the musicians only played by ear on old fiddles and squeezeboxes, or on the School or Mechanic's Institute piano. But don't forget the popular songs that were sung by all when dancing or whistled at work. There were interactions with the groups that played by music and the local brass band and the singing around the piano. It's all part of community folk-life.

Both the dances and the tunes were stripped down to the most basic and easiest of performance and then dressed up again with variations and in the case of the tunes, the musicians own 'twiddles' and individual rendition sometimes influenced by the action of the instrument. They have become anonymous as they've been handed on through several generations and perhaps altering a little and sometimes a section forgotten and a substitute 'made up'. Sometimes the same tune has been collected hundreds of miles apart indicating perhaps a common source from published music picked up from listening at a dance or from recorded sources on radio.

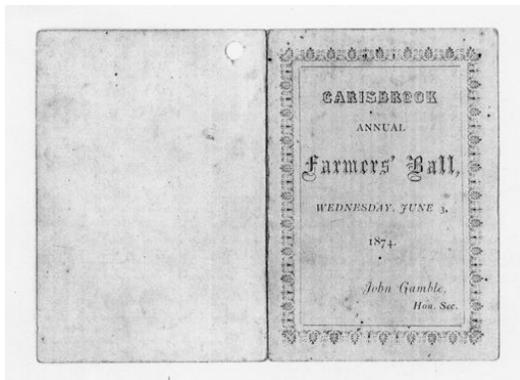
But the differences are also there and often a good tune being a good tune spread rapidly by aural transmission. These 'developed' tunes handed down through several generations are wonderful and are the folk tunes of Australia. These tunes are directly allied to the dances they were associated with, and these dances had altered from ballroom origins to become the folk dances of Australia. They consist mainly of the various forms of the quadrilles mentioned, the Waltz and several sequence dance waltzes, the Schottische and Barn Dance and several sequence dance derivatives from these and likewise with the Mazurka, Polka Mazurka, Polkas, Two Steps, Galop, Varsoviana and so on. The folk process is likely to have kicked in during the Gold Rush period and gained momentum after the restrictions of the Colonial period gave way in the new century.

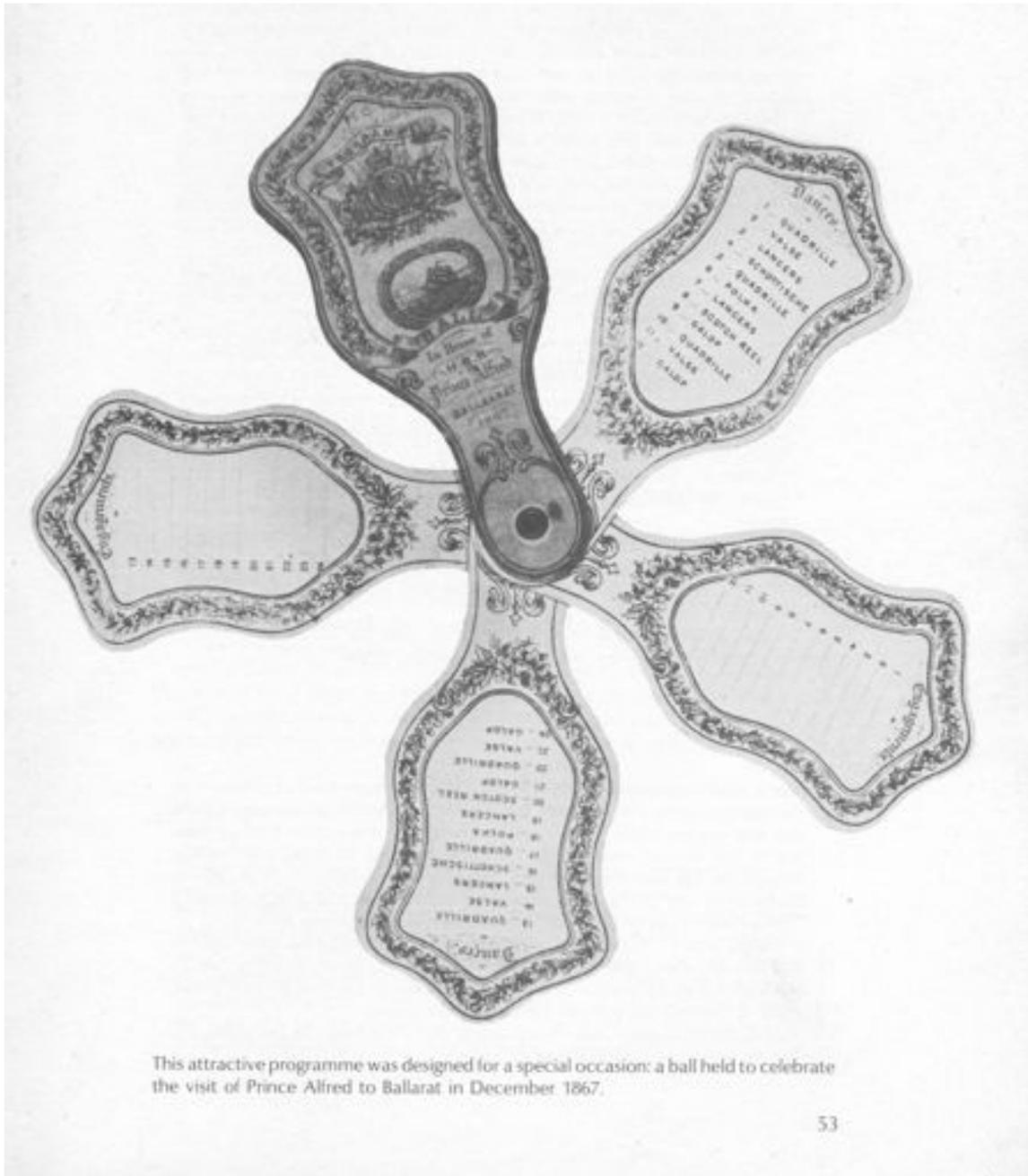
Subscription Ball Ballarat. Painting by S.T. Gill 1852 “LaTrobe Collection” State Library of Victoria.



This programme is of course a ‘formal one’ with less variety than would have been held in rural venues. Compare with the Farmers’ Ball at Carisbrook in the following decade.

This country programme is a ‘bobby dazzler’. Courtesy State Library of Victoria ‘Maryborough Collection’





This attractive programme was designed for a special occasion: a ball held to celebrate the visit of Prince Alfred to Ballarat in December 1867.

Then from the Victorian era into the early decades of the twentieth century Old Time sequence dances such as Pride of Erin have become mainstays of Australian social dancing.

I have decided to take it upon myself to present a series of articles highlighting some of the interesting 'collected dances and tunes' to illustrate what a wonderful tradition we do

have and a heritage in which to be proud. It will not be 'pure', as with our tradition it will contain some aspects that have been 'revived' or 'composed', but in the main it will highlight an integral part of the essence of Australian folk-life of social dance and music.

The first dance I've chosen is a couple dance that has its home in Dimboola in Western Victoria. It was first brought to my attention around 1984 by Peter Hunter of Adelaide who was collecting dances of interest for his Colonial Dance Group. Peter's partner of the day, Pam Pittaway, was a Dimboola girl and through their contact with a local MC *Mr. Ken Baker*, they discovered the Dutch Hoe Waltz. It was danced regularly as part of their normal programme. The origin is not known but there is a dance of a similar name (Dutch -O!) described in a 1970s Adelaide Old Time & New Vogue instruction booklet. Also a lady that played piano accordion with the Wongawilli musicians at the monthly dance at Wongawilli Hall, *Leslie Widdicombe* - known as 'Widdie' was from Dimboola and when I taught the Dutch Hoe to the Wongas, she said she knew the dance as '**The Clog Waltz**'. And that is the essential character, a rhythm struck out by the heel and toe in a clogging action to waltz time. Shirley Andrews, Lorraine Ogilvie, Harry McQueen and I made two annual special trips to meet up with Peter, Pam and the Dimboola dancers to find out more about the Dutch Hoe. Ken Baker favoured the tune '**A Gordon For Me**' and it seems the almost 3 beat to the bar rhythm in this tune really emphasises the clogging footwork. *A Gordon For Me* was a popular Scottish song on the radio and available on a 78 record around 1950 and is still well known today. I then chose another tune from a Colonial source (Allans Jigs & Reels No. 37 including Country Dances and Clog Dances) called '*Dutch Dance*' and is a good tune. What could be termed the chorus is the well-known song '**Oh Where Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?**' The opening section I didn't know and can't say whether it is the verse of the song, but certainly in this Dutch Dance the tune really emphasises the clogging action. The final piece I selected was Charlie Batchelor's Orotaba Waltz. This tune also has the particular emphasis suitable for the clogging. It is a good example of an aurally transmitted tune that has an original printed music link. It is in a dance music album of Paling's of the 1920s as the Orotava Waltz in Eb.

The Dutch Hoe performed by Shirley Andrews and myself can be viewed on You Tube by sourcing the Bush Dance & Music Club of Bendigo via Google and then following the video links.



**DUTCH HOE WALTZ (Clog Waltz)** 16 bar sequence of 3-4.

Bower hold man facing wall lady facing centre. Man commencing left foot, lady right (footwork together in the same direction).

1 bar Both angle diagonally along line of dance and sweep or brush inside foot along

- line of dance with a slight toe then heel tap, and sweep foot back to place with another light tap (this time heel toe) and then lifting this foot at place with a heavier tap while changing weight.
- 1 bar Repeat the sequence with the opposite foot against line dance and angling to face in that direction.
- 2 bars Changing weight on the previous step and angling diagonally again toward line of dance sweep the inside foot forward and back and forward with stronger taps (this section is all performed with the same foot) and finishing at place with a slight stomp, changing weight and facing diagonally against line of dance.
- 4 bars Repeat the sequence mirror image, i.e. counter direction before commencing other foot.
- 8 bars Circular waltz

#### **NOTE**

It can be a bit tricky coming out of the Circular Waltz and changing hold and foot position to commence the clogging. I generally have to crib it to start, but after a couple of times it becomes easier. It's like wine, the more you have the better it gets. Peter.

**Music** Oh Where Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone, A Gordon For Me, The Orotaba Waltz at a tempo of 52 bars per minute.