

IRISH JIG HISTORY

Prepared by the Technical Committee

Published 4th July 2023

- This dance may seem to be out of place at Scottish Games, but the dance is not only an Irish Tradition. The Scottish version however is meant to be a parody of an Irish washerwoman in an agitated frame of mind.
- Dundee dancing master David Anderson may have started the choreographic process of the dance. Written descriptions appear in his Ballroom Guide of 1897 called “D. Anderson’s Irish Jig”.
- In 1935, Dancie John Reid of Newtyle, Angus wrote “The Irish Jig a solo dance for either men or women has been a prominent item among the Step Dances at Highland Games etc. for many years. It was called Paddy Rafferty and was a shadow of the present Irish Jig.

- Before that three steps were noted in Frederick Hill's notebook in 1841. It has been a competitive dance from the mid-nineteenth century.
- George B Lowe wrote many families left Ireland to work at the potato dressing on Angus farms. They brought their jig steps to Dundee.
- The Scottish Jig is a version of the Irish Washerwoman and has the steps The Tipperary Trot, Paddy's Breeches and the Donnybrook.
- Dundee had it's own Jig and so had Aberdeen.

- While the steps may be traditional, the arm movements are not.
- Arm movements are an intrinsic part of the Scottish dance and so the Scots added them to the Irish Jig as a humorous salute to their Celtic brethren across the Irish Sea.
- Irish Jig is an energetic dance featuring lots of fist shaking and skirt flouncing among female competitors. It is a parody of Irish Dancing and the infamous Irish temper.

- Females dancing the Jig are acting out an angry fit of an Irish woman who's husband has not made it home from the pub until all hours.
- Males dancing the Jig act out the happy go lucky Irishman facing the wife's tirade.
- Another version may be that of an angry Irish washerwoman when she finds all of her clean wash knocked to the ground by unruly neighbourhood boys
- The Donnybrook is a slang term for brawl or riot possibly referring to disturbing behaviour at the Donnybrook Fair which was held in Dublin in the thirteenth century to about the 1850s.

- The dance has its own costume different from the standard Highland or National outfits.
- The male dancer dressed in 19th century Irish breeches, waistcoat, hat and tailcoat complete with shillelagh in hand.
- Females dress as a peasant Colleen with an apron.



Irish Jig, from *National Dances*
1889. In public domain.



An Irish Jig.

Some explanations of the steps and their meaning:

- 1st Step – cramp roll shows frustration
- 2nd Step – scrubbing or wash board.
- Circular rolling springs – representing gathering potatoes. Bar 3 of 9th Step (Diagonal Roll) represents digging potatoes. In the retire skips back the males used to pull the potatoes back into place.
- Four Beat Side Run – known as Tipperary Trot. Driving horse and cart to the market or fair.
- Donnybrook – is a town in Ireland with no river or brook but with 2 elegant bridges. A fair was held on 26th August and ran for 15 days during the years 1204 to 1855. This was sometimes called the Humours of Donnybrook. It would seem to have ended in a huge brawl or riot. This would account for the twisting and turning side to side in this step.
- The Chase – also called De'il on the run.

- The Shillelagh is thought to have originated in the village of Shillelagh, county Wicklow, which was once said to be surrounded by vast oak forests.
- Shillelaghs are usually made from Blackthorn wood with a leather wrist strap joined to the handle.
- The Shillelagh was commonly used as a walking cane or walking stick, and can sometimes be described as a cudgel.
- It is typically made from a stout knobbly and knotty stick with a knotty head, which can be used for gripping or striking.
- There are some historical records and references that say the practice of stick fighting in ancient Ireland may have helped to train Irish Warriors in broadsword and sabre fencing.
- It seems that from the original Irish staff spear, axe, stick and sword fighting methods originated the later form of Irish stick fighting which came to be associated with the Shillelagh.

GLOSSARY

- Colleen – an Irish girl
- Dancie – name for dance teachers who went round the local area to teach. Usually on their bikes with their fiddles strapped to their backs.
- Potato Dressing – a process that is used to sort the potatoes into different sizes and remove the bad potatoes. Some of the smaller sized potatoes were used for seeds for the following year's crops.