

Morningside Scottish Country Dance Club

A step back in time to more formal days

At 7.30pm on Monday, 6th October 1952, the newly-formed Morningside (Edinburgh Branch) Club of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) met for the first time in the Lodge Abbotsford Hall in Morningside Road at Holy Corner. Dancing 7.30pm to 10.00pm with a break of 20 minutes for tea, the session would extend over 24 weeks at a cost of 30 shillings (£1.50) plus 5 shillings obligatory annual membership of the RSCDS Edinburgh Branch. (The Club became affiliated to the RSCDS in 2005-06 and changed its name to Morningside Scottish Country Dance Club). Members had to be over 18 years of age, to apply in writing, to have been a member of the RSCDS for at least one year and to have attended classes for at least two years, subsequently increased to three years in 1953.

Dances were not called so prior homework was essential and those whose dancing was not up to scratch might receive a letter from the Committee with this wording: *The Committee regret to inform you that, at a Committee Meeting held recently, it was unanimously decided not to renew your membership of the Club, on account of your dancing not being up to the standard which they consider necessary.*

Until 1988, all gentlemen members had to wear kilts. Ladies always wore skirts. Lacing pumps were a must and ballet pumps only became acceptable in the 1980s. The Club Ball was a formal occasion, with men expected to wear full Highland dress and women long dresses with matching shoes.

Post-war austerity still lingered over the country, with sugar rationing continuing until 1953. The Minutes of October 1952 reflect this: *The Secretary had been in contact with the Food Office about the licence for sugar. The Food Office insisted that any rations specially granted to the Club, must be kept, when not in use, under lock and key in the premises used by the Club. The ladies of the Committee agreed to give effect to this requirement of the Club.*

Times of high membership

The membership was restricted to 72, 52 ladies and 20 men. As the hall seemed rather crowded on the first evening with only seven sets on the floor, it was then agreed that 64 should be the maximum number and that a waiting list should be introduced for the remaining applicants. With full membership, waiting lists and gender balance exercised the minds of the Committee during these early years. *The order of admission should be lady and gentleman alternately.* However, with quite a waiting list of ladies by 1954, the Committee felt that an effort should be made to encourage more men to join, hence preference would be given to single men and married couples.

Occasional visitors were permitted to attend and paid 2/- per evening but prior notice had to be given to the Secretary. In 1959 the Committee decided to invite those on the waiting list to come for an evening as guests, limiting the number to two people on each evening. In some cases their membership would not be considered fully by the Committee until they had attended as a guest on one evening.

In the 1950s, and for most of the 1960s, the Club had a growing membership with good attendances at Christmas and Easter parties, an informal dance held some years in the winter months, its own annual ball and a popular summer outing (dance evening) in May. The 1960 AGM Minutes record the President as [pompously] saying: *Our Club, I think I may claim, has established a position for itself in Scottish Country Dance circles in the East of Scotland, if not further afield, and I feel that we must hold that position and ever increase our prestige.*

Club membership was 65+ with average weekly attendances rising to 45 and more. With a healthy waiting list, it was agreed in 1962 to increase the membership to 70. The Secretary *warned against the danger of the balance in membership between ladies and gentlemen being upset too much. If the number of ladies grew too large, this could act as a deterrent to the recruitment of men and might in fact severely damage the expansion of the Club* (September 1964). Nevertheless, at that time the Club was one of the few clubs in Edinburgh which single people could join (most other clubs being for couples only) and many a romance blossomed between singletons who joined the Club.

Concern about membership

For the first time in 1965 there were concerns regarding declining numbers, with no names on the waiting list and in 1968 the Club had vacancies for those suitably qualified. The Committee discussed how best to recruit new members. The starting time changed to 7.45pm as a move to make it easier for working folk to attend.

Membership numbers fluctuated a lot in the 1970s (averaging about 50) but dropped further in the 1980s (averaging about 40). In 1986-87, as part of the Club's strategy to increase its membership, a class for new members was introduced from 7.15pm to 7.45pm on the weekly dance evening *to go over the finer*

points of dancing but it is not clear for how long this continued. It was also decided to relax some of the Club 'rules' in order to increase membership. Gentlemen were no longer required to wear kilts and dances were called for the first time. Beginners were permitted to join although were encouraged to enrol for a class at the same time to gain knowledge of the basic steps and formations.

At one stage in the early 1990s the numbers dropped to only 10 members, with occasional visitors, and the Club was threatened with possible closure in 1993. Fortunately a recruitment drive in 1993 bore fruit and the membership grew again to secure the Club's future.

Monday evening venues

The Club has always met on a Monday evening although not always in the same hall. From 1954 Lodge Dunedin Hall in Morningside Drive became the regular venue until 1967 when the unsatisfactory condition of the hall and increased rent (£4 per night), with no improvement in facilities, prompted the Club to seek alternative premises. A move was made to the Church Hill Theatre Small Hall in Morningside Road for £2 per night, *with the use of the modern kitchen and crockery for a cup of tea*. The caretaker's wife *accepted 10/- per night to carry out the making and washing up*.

When numbers dwindled and the rent became too high, the Club moved to Cluny Lodge Care Home in 1988 and dancing took place in the room where residents had their meals. The floor had to be mopped before dancing could begin! During this period, other halls used for the Christmas and Easter Parties included the New Hall at Holy Corner Church Centre, Morningside Parish Church Hall and St Margaret's School Hall.

In 1993 the Club moved to the Cluny Centre, using the Lower Hall for Monday evenings and the Upper Hall for parties. In 2013 the more capacious Upper Hall became available and, with dancing numbers in the low to mid forties, members voted overwhelmingly to move upstairs.

When the Cluny Centre was sold the club moved to the St Matthew Hall in Morningside Parish Church in January 2018.

Dancing to live music

Dancing to live music has always been a feature appreciated by members. Netta MacLean was the pianist for the first season; her fee one guinea per evening. Arthur Allan then played for the Club for 35 years, retiring at the age of 85 in 1988. Frequently commended for his perfect attendance and high standard of music, Arthur was also often available for the Christmas and Easter Parties, and usually accompanied by a violinist or drummer. The combined fee for pianist and violinist for the first Easter Party in 1953 was £4 10s, to include the cost of a taxi home.

After Arthur's retirement, Sadie Gillan took over on accordion, but the weekly commitment became too much and so accordionists Bill Richardson and Alan Craigie then shared alternate weeks from 1990 until 1996. From 1996 to 1998 Beryl McGuire became the Club's weekly pianist, composing many dance tunes received with enthusiasm by members. In 1998 the Club reverted to two musicians playing on alternate evenings, with accordionists (Gary Donaldson, Graeme Munro, Freeland Barbour and Calum Marwick) alternating fortnightly with George McLennan. Following the latter's retiral after fifteen years, Calum now plays each Monday.

The Club has two dances of its own. *Dunedin Ha*, devised in 1960 by the then Secretary, J.K.C. Wilson, refers to the Club's former venue. *The Morningside Welcome* was devised in 2002 by J.B.C. Brown (Chairman of the RSCDS 1970-1973 and Morningside Club President 1996-97, Vice President 1994-96 and Treasurer 1990-94) in celebration of the Club's 50th anniversary and named in recognition of the friendly welcome for which the Club is justifiably famous.

The glass ceiling

The President and Treasurer positions were initially always held by men. The Minutes of April 1955 record that *it was customary to have a man as President and a man as Honorary Treasurer*. It was only in 1974 that the first female Treasurer (Rosemary Cruickshank) was elected and it was 1981 before the first woman President (Priscilla Williamson) was elected. Wendy Doran then followed as President (1983-86) with a second period of office 1994-96. The Vice-President position was mostly held by a woman. Nowadays that glass ceiling is no more!

Other social events

Unsurprisingly there have been a number of balls and special events over the years, the first of these being a Coronation Ball in June 1953 in the George Hotel Adam Suite at the time of the Queen's visit to Edinburgh, attended by 96 members and guests. A 21st Anniversary Supper followed by dancing was held in November 1973 in the Church Hill Theatre Small Hall and attended by 98 members and former members. The Club then celebrated its Golden Jubilee in November 2002 at the Orwell Lodge Hotel. The

Diamond Jubilee was another successful Club event held in the Cluny Centre in November 2012, with a buffet supper followed by dancing and attended by 78 members, former members and guests.

From 1955 to 1977 the Club organised its own annual Ball, held mainly at the Charlotte Rooms in South Charlotte Street, but other venues included the George Hotel Adam Rooms, the Assembly Rooms, plus the Caledonian and Roxburghe Hotels. In those days it was important to have a venue which could accommodate 10 sets and up to 80+ tickets were available for members and guests. Various bands played for these events and an extended licence was obtained so that the evening could run from 8.00pm to 1.00am. Even when its viability was threatened through potential lack of support, it was felt that the Club would lose more in prestige and money if it were to cancel the Ball. So it was only in 1978 that the Club decided to stop running its own annual ball and concentrate on supporting the RSCDS Annual Ball.

Most years, between 1959 and 1999, the Club organised a May Summer Outing, the most frequent venue being the Toftcombs Hotel on the outskirts of Biggar. Other hotels used included the Tranmare Hotel in Tranent and the Kestrel in Balerno. These were popular dance evenings which included a buffet supper with sometimes over 50 members and non-members attending. The music was usually provided by Bill Richardson's Band, originally known as the Eskdale Players. Transport was by car and shared so drivers received an allowance (4/- initially) to defray their petrol expenses.

Programmes and calling

Before the introduction of the Programme Committee in 1958-59, dance programmes (12 dances per evening) were submitted by Committee members and a Committee member was in charge of the programme each evening. Members could record 'Request Dances' on a list placed on the wall during the Monday evening dancing. With regard to the Easter party in 1954, the Minutes record: *The opinion was expressed that, in order to liven the evening, paper hats might be given out, a 'spot' dance might be introduced, a 'statue' dance put on the programme and that the Hall might be decorated.*

The Minutes of March 1958 record, with regard to the office of Vice-President, that *the Club had always had a qualified teacher of country dancing in that office and the President hoped that would be continued.* As all members were expected to be experienced dancers and no longer attending RSCDS classes, the aim was to introduce one new dance per evening which had to be taught by a qualified Scottish Country Dance teacher. In 1970 the teacher was Gretta Knox (Founder Member). After her retirement in the 1970s Jim Brown and Wendy Doran were appointed. Other teachers have included Vera Seddon, Isobella Wightman, Barbara Ayrton, Gwen Cranfield, Ian Auld, Gemma Findlay, Elaine Kaye and Lynne Brand.

Starting in 1985, the Club submitted one or two programmes most years for the Princes Street Gardens summer dance programme and from 1986 supplied a demonstration team as well. This continued each year until 1993 and then again from 1997 but more recently the Club has not made a contribution every year.

Dancing standards and etiquette

The Club archives contain several of the first Scottish Country Dance Books, issued between 1924 and 1927 by the Scottish Country Dance Society (formed in 1923, with the title "Royal" being conferred upon it in 1951 and Queen Elizabeth 11 becoming its Patron in 1952). Book 4 contains some detailed instructions regarding general deportment and how the music should be played:

The arms should be held back at the sides in a natural manner, the thumbs, rather than the back of the hand, being held foremost. Women should hold their gown lightly between the forefinger and thumb, taking hold of it at the length of the arm and keeping the shoulders back.

When turning by the right hand, or the left, the woman gives her hand into that of the man, the hands raised nearly to the shoulder level, and they dance round with the skip change of step (hooking arms and swinging round should be discouraged). In "set and turn", both hands should be given for the turn, the elbows bent as before.

When leading down the middle, unless otherwise stated, the man offers his right hand to the woman, who gives him her right.

Care must be taken that the deportment be natural. All affectation of manner or carriage must be avoided, and the simple character of the dances preserved.

The music should not be played too fast. Strathspey time should be the pace of a horse trotting (eg Road to Isles) and Reel time the pace of a horse cantering (eg Bonnie Dundee).

Regarding etiquette, it was suggested, for example, that, to prevent people from booking up ahead, the Ball programme (1955) should not be printed on the tickets but not all Committee members supported this. The Minutes of March 1973 reflect some concern too: it was pointed out that *members were not mixing as well as before and it was agreed that the Committee must unite in discouraging cliques by encouraging everyone to avoid pre-arranging sets.*

Refreshments

Refreshments were an important part of the Monday evenings and there was a half hour tea break midway through the evening when tea, coffee and biscuits were served for a small charge. This took place until the Church Hill Theatre days but, from 1980-81, it became necessary to supply juice instead of hot drinks as a £7 charge had been introduced for using the kitchen.

In October 2018, in accordance with the members' wishes, the club stopped issuing juice in plastic tumblers and asked everyone to bring their own drink, so that the club could take a small step towards reducing landfill waste.

The Committee gave considerable thought to the Christmas and Easter party food and a variety of local bakers and caterers were employed. From 1991 onwards, it was agreed to change these arrangements and instead ask members attending the parties to contribute a savoury or sweet item.

For many years flowers and decorations were also an important aspect of party nights which lady Committee members looked after.

This history of the Club has been researched and compiled by Jane Peacock and edited by Robin Howie. It is based on the Club's archives, an article in Dancing Forth of 2007/8 by Bill Mutch and the personal memories of current dancers.

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