

A Beginner's Guide to English Social Dance

(extract from the Beginner's Guide to English Folk Dance)



English social dancing is dancing in groups, most often with a partner and one or more other couples with a caller to guide and lead the dances. The dances are made up of a sequence of figures, which may be more or less complex.

Many people have danced social folk dances at a wedding, or community event – they can be very accessible to new dancers.

The terms used can be interchangeable and have much crossover. The nature of the occasion in which the dances take place tends to determine whether it's called a **ceilidh**, **country** or **barn dance**.

For example, **Ceilidh**, **Country**, and **Barn dance** may be used at an event with a party atmosphere; a school might organise what they call a **barn dance**, whilst a social dance at a **festival** might be called a **ceilidh**.

A slightly more formal occasion may have a predominance of the older period dances, such as those from the Playford collection and other dancing masters, the dance might be called a Playford dance or Ball.

These dances originated from collections of English country dances from the 17th through to the 19th century, beginning with John Playford's English Dancing Master in 1651. They were revived and popularised by Cecil Sharp in the early part of the 20th century and are similar to those seen in the dance sequences in films of Jane Austen's novels.

The dances can be in several different formations such as, circles, squares and longways sets (a column of pairs). There will always be a caller who first teaches the moves, and figures, and then calls the figures throughout the dance. These have names such as dip & dive, promenade and basket and are danced with steps such, as a skip, slip step, hop step, rant, and polka.

Cornish social dancing is a distinctive form with visible connections to Breton dances (both with common Celtic roots) and is currently experiencing a revival. The dances are often processional.

As with performance dance, social dancing is a thriving and evolving tradition; new dances are constantly being devised.

The old dances have moved around the country and indeed, to other countries and back and have developed along with the music, retaining common roots. For example, Contra dance, popularly danced in Britain today, developed in the USA from British roots, and is now an up-tempo, fastmoving, intricate dance form.

Currently, the folk dance scene has many dance clubs, some specialising in one particular form, as well as regular and one-off public dances with a more mixed programme.

Most folk festivals will have a ceilidh.