

Irish Set Dancing
Study Notes written by Joe O'Hara

SET DANCE GLOSSARY

Terms marked with an * are explained elsewhere in the Glossary.

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MOVEMENTS

- Advance and retire** A reel/hornpipe movement danced in open waltz hold* and danced to the count - 1 & 2 & 123 and back & 2 & 123 instead of normal 3s (4 bars). It is often danced twice to make an 8 bar movement.
- Balance** A jig/slide/polka movement, often confused with the 'Advance and retire'*. It too is danced in open waltz hold* but dancing 3s instead of the advance and retire step (4 bars). It is normally repeated or followed by another 4 bar movement e.g. 'Dance at home'* turning once.
- Basket** Another term for a 'Christmas'*
- Body** This is a term borrowed from figure dancing terminology in the early days of the set dancing revival and before a set dancing vocabulary had been formulated. It is still in use by some teachers to name the movement better described as a 'Quarterhouse'*. For examples of the correct use of this term see my Study Notes for one of the figure dances, e.g. [The High Cauleed Cap](#).
- Cast off** Prior to this movement, couples will have danced side-by-side across the set. To cast off, partners separate, the gents moving anti-clockwise and the ladies clockwise around the set to meet again in the place opposite that from which they cast off.
- Chain** A movement in which dancers pass each other, either to cross the set or to move half way or all the way around the set. They pass on alternate sides, first passing R to R, then L to L and so on. Three different holds may be used - hand, arm and elbow. The hand hold is a light handshake hold below waist level. For the arm hold, each dancer lightly grips the inside elbow of the other so that the two forearms lie alongside each other. The elbow hold is achieved by hooking the other dancer's arm inside elbow to inside elbow.
- Christmas** Where four, six, or eight dancers come together with crossed hands joined behind their backs to swing. Nowadays, for reasons of safety, most dancers adopt a standard hold, with L arms going over and R arms under those of the dancers either side while the L hand grips the wrist of the next-but-one dancer as the R wrist is gripped by another L hand. R hands should be held flat against the back of the adjoining dancer rather than with bunched knuckles to prevent causing hurt to the small of the back. Variations are described in the Study Notes of those sets which require them. (8 or 16 bars)
- Dance at home** Dancing, one, two (or more) full clockwise turns, normally in waltz hold*, while remaining in the 'home' place. It is done in either of two ways; partners can start shoulder to shoulder and facing in opposite directions and simply dance around each other (this is the high revving version) or, facing each other, dance a series of short forward (for the gent) and backward steps with a 1/4 turn on each step to complete one or two turns. It shows little consideration for dancers in neighbouring sets and spoils their enjoyment of the movement if dancing at home becomes, in practice, dancing across four fields! (4 or 8 bars)
- Dance in place** Dancing on the spot in the place currently occupied by the dancers.
- Dance in and out** Dancing alternate short steps towards the centre of the set and back. These steps should not become anything more than a simple shift of bodyweight - leave the leaping to the goats!
- Diamond** A version of the 'House around'* 'House across'* and 'House within'* found only in sets from Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon. Unlike the House around it can be danced in either direction. It is fully described in the Study Notes for those sets in which it is danced. See e.g. the [Kildownet Halfset](#) and the [Roscommon Lancers](#) (Seventh Figure).
- House** The verb 'to house' is now generally accepted as the act of moving in a general anti-clockwise direction while simultaneously turning clockwise one full turn in each 2 bar sequence.
- House around** The term, an abbreviated form of 'Around the house - and mind the dresser!', used to describe the anti-clockwise progress of all four couples around the space occupied by the set, with couples turning clockwise one full turn into each place (2 bars) as they go, thus making four full turns to get back home. Each dancer steps around his/her partner on the step beginning with the L foot and turns in place on that beginning with the R in order to achieve a smooth circular movement. (8 bars)
- House around each other** When opposite* or corner* couples dance the 'House around'* movement into each other's place and back home. (8 bars)

- House across** Usually a way of opposite couples changing places by dancing the 'House around'* movement, but for 4 bars only. In some cases it is danced by one couple only as a precedent to leaving the lady in place beside the opposite gent.
- House within** A single couple movement danced in the same manner as a 'House around'* but within the space determined by the position of the other three couples. It should be an unhurried movement taking the whole 8 bars to get back home, but is often danced so rapidly as to have two, or even more, bars of music still to be filled when the couple gets home.
- Lead around** A movement normally danced by all four couples, using one of a range of hand or partner holds, partners side by side and facing anti-clockwise around the set. All dance 3s around the set and back home. (8 bars)
- Long lead around** Similar in form to the 'Lead around'* but danced two steps forward and two in place, two forward and two in place and so on back home (16 bars). The steps danced in place are often decorated in some way as e.g. in the [Newport](#) and the [Durrow Threshing Set](#)
- Quarterhouse** A movement danced in polka and hornpipe figures though with a significant and often ignored difference between the two. With waltz hold*, all couples dance in place (2 bars) then turn one full turn (2 bars) on to the next place on their R. They repeat this 4 bar movement into each place and back home thus splitting the 'house around' movement into four quarters. The difference referred to is that in the hornpipe version the 2 bars danced in place are actually danced one step into the set and one step back to place whereas in the polka those first two steps are danced virtually in place, with any slight movement being towards the next place rather than into the set and back - see, for example, my note on Steps at the end of the [Sliabh Luachra Set](#). The normal Quarterhouse is danced in 16 bars and the 'Long Quarterhouse' called for in e.g. the [Fermanagh Set](#) takes 32 bars.
- Show the lady** Another name for 'House within'* the set, often followed by a slide or balance and home*.
- Slide and home** A jig or slide movement in which couples, with waltz hold, slide 1 & 2 & 123 towards the centre of the set and back & 2 & 123 then dance at home, making one full turn. (8 bars)
- Square the set/house** This is a group of movements rather than one, and may be danced in either 'closed' or 'open' style. In closed style, partners face each other in waltz hold* while the open style is danced with waist hold*. In the most basic closed style Square, one couple slides 1 & 2 & 123 to face their 2nd corner couple*, turning 1/4 turn clockwise on the last step (2 bars). They then slide to a point in front of their opposite couple* using the same step and turn (2 bars). They then house* back home (4 bars) - see the [Kenmare Polka Set](#) as an example. The closed style can also be danced by two ([Ballyvourney Jig](#)) or four ([Newmarket Mezerts](#)) couples, and is also danced in a long form, with some elaboration, as in the [Black Valley Square Jig](#). In the [Newmarket Mezerts](#) all couples use the slide step into each of the four places (8 bars) - there is no house back home. The open style provides a contrast in that dancers may 'walk the square', taking waist hold and dancing forward 1, 2, 3, hopturn* almost into their 3rd corner*, then backwards 1, 2, 3, hopturn towards their 4th corner, to take waltz hold there and house back home. This style is generally danced with more vigour and requires a little more space for its safe execution - see e.g. the [Borlin Valley Polka](#).
- Star** Two couples, four ladies or four gents take R or L hands in the centre and dance around the set in 8 bars, or around in 4 bars and back in 4 bars.
- Swing** Partners, in either waltz* or ceili* hold, spin around each other making four (or more) complete turns in 8 bars. To accomplish the movement safely, partners' R feet should be placed together, overlapped by about one third and little toe to little toe rather than instep to instep (is 'outstep' an acceptable opposite?). The R foot carries the weight on counts 1 and 3 of each bar while the L foot, held behind the R heel, propels the dancer round on counts 2 and 4. The aim should be to keep the R foot turning in as small a space as possible and as flat to the floor as possible to produce a smooth, flat swing.
- Wheel** Any movement danced by two or four couples in which hands are held in or across the centre - like the spokes of a wheel - and dancers move in either direction around the set, usually as couples with waist hold rather than singly. It is often used as a synonym for 'Star'*.

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PARTNER HOLDS

- Ceili hold** Partners face each other, take L handshake hold and pass their R hands inside their partner's L elbow to lie flat against the small of the back. This hold was devised when Ireland's figure dances were sanitised under the auspices of the Gaelic League around the turn of the century. Its aim was to keep partners a respectable distance apart so that

closer contact should not afford an 'occasion of sin'.

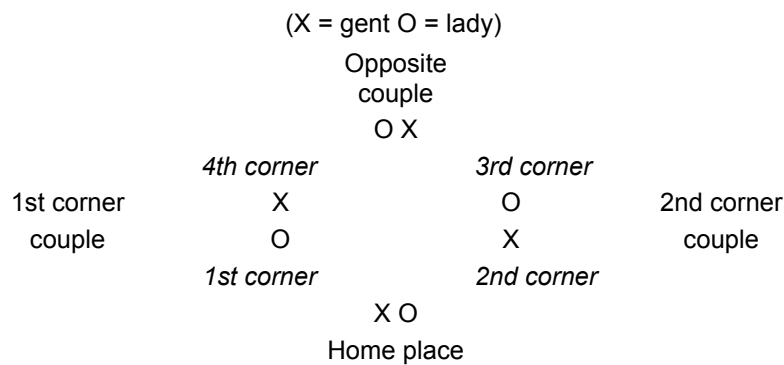
- Crossed hand hold** Partners dance side by side holding R hands crossed over L in front of the body. There is also a crossed hand hold behind the body as, e.g. in the [Cashel Set](#), where three dancers cross hands behind, the two outer dancers holding inside hands and the centre dancer catching both outside hands.
- Hug** This is a swinging hold used, e.g. in the [Tory Lancers](#) in which partners place R arms around each others' waists and, with the L hand, hold the other's R arm just above the elbow.
- Right shoulder hold** The gent places his R hand on the lady's R shoulder, taking her R hand in his. Where the hold is used in a static position L hands are not normally held. Where the hold is used in a 'Lead around', as e.g. in the Third Figure of the [Foraer a Neantin](#) jig set, L hands are held in a low, relaxed hold.
- Left shoulder hold** The gent holds the lady's L hand in his L on the lady's L shoulder.
- Waist hold** The gent's R arm is around the lady's waist while her L hand rests on his R shoulder.
- Waltz hold** More properly called, I suppose, ballroom hold. The lady's R and the gent's L hands are held at, or below shoulder level, while the gent's R arm goes around the lady to hold her somewhere between the waist and the L shoulderblade. The lady's L hand normally rests upon, or behind, her partner's R shoulder although some ladies prefer to hold the gent's upper arm instead. Do what you feel comfortable with. The hold may be termed 'closed' when partners face each other as in a slide* or a house around* and 'open' when partners face into the set as in a balance* or around the set as in the lead around* in the Fifth Figure of the [Foraer a Neantin](#) jig set.

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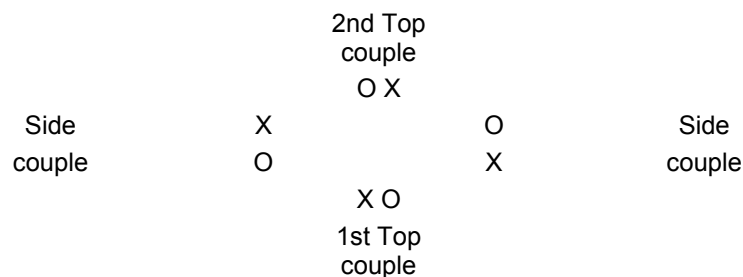
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POSITIONS

Corners and corner couples



Top and Side couples



I have not marked Side couples as 1st or 2nd as their order of play depends on which set is being danced and is indicated in the Study Notes. In all Clare sets the 1st Side couple is on the left of the 1st Top couple, but in the [Connemara Reel](#) and the [North Kerry Polka](#), for instance, 1st Sides are to the right of 1st Tops. At a ceili the 1st Top couple is always the couple with their backs to the band.

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STEPS AND STEPPING

The steps described below are those at the basic level. Experienced dancers will often dance more elaborate versions.

- Basic polka, 'down' jig & slide** The step is danced much in the same way as you would run, if you were so inclined. The bodyweight drops onto the front foot on count 1 of each step with the weight change on counts 2 and 3 being much less pronounced. It is danced on the ball of the foot in the 'down' jig and to slides but should be danced much flatter to polkas, particularly by the gents. The step could be counted - drop 2 3 & drop 2 3 (2 bars) and so on.
- Basic reel & hornpipe** In distinct contrast to the polka step the basic reel step, also danced to hornpipes, employs the same shift of bodyweight as does a walking step. The whole weight is on the back foot, rather than on the front, and the step could be said to be walked but for two significant differences. The first is that the leg is not held rigid as in a walk, but bends slightly at the knee throughout the step. The second is that the step is preceded, on count 4 of the previous bar, by a slight movement which ensures that the weight is held, as it should be, on the back foot. The movement is referred to in these Study Notes as 'heel' and is really the last vestige of a hop i.e. when the whole weight lifts from the floor and lands again on the same foot. This requires too much expenditure of energy and so is replaced by what I describe to my dancers as a 'hint of a hop'. Some dancers, particularly among the men, will not exert themselves even to the extent of a vestigial hop but will lift and bring down the toe of the standing foot instead of the heel, which is altogether fine as it, too, ensures that the weight stays on the back foot. The step could be counted - heel 1 2 3, heel 2 2 3 (2 bars) and so on.
- Brush** Danced on count 4 of the preceding bar mainly in jigs and polkas, the ball of the foot briefly taps the floor and is lifted before being brought down again on count 1 of the step. In calling a dance the term more often used is 'tip' because of its harder sound.
- Clare reel** Hard to describe, but I'll try! The basic reel step is danced with the addition of vertical shifts of bodyweight producing what is known as the Clare 'lift'. As the 'heel' is danced on count 4, the knee is softened so that the body sinks slightly. It is raised to normal position on count 1, sinks again on count 2 and rises on count 3 ready to sink with the 'heel' on count 4 again. And that's all there is to it!
- Cut** This is performed by first taking the weight on, say, the R foot and lifting the L so that the L heel is just in front of the R shin, toes pointing down. It is a move normally danced with considerable understatement.
- Doubled step** A step is said to be doubled when two steps are danced to a bar of music where normally only one step is danced.
- Doubled hornpipe** Instead of dancing - heel 1 2 3 (1 bar), dance heel 1 heel 2 (1 bar) in which the 'heel' is preceded by a pivot on the same foot so that dancers make 1 full turn in the two bars. Where the step in the 'House around' is being doubled, as in the [West Kerry](#) polka set it is advisable for the sake of ease as well as safety that dancers adopt a firmer hold than the waltz* hold. The gent should take his partner around the waist with the lady's hands either holding his upper arms or his shoulders.
- Doubled reel** The step is fully described under STEPS in the Study Notes for the [Connemara Reel](#) set. Exceptionally, the step used by the gents in the 'Floating Reel' Figures in e.g. the [Black Valley](#) and the [Televara](#) is more akin to the doubled Hornpipe, being danced - hop1 hop2 hop3 hop4.
- Doubled jig** Two different versions of this step are described under STEPS in the Study Notes for the [Leitrim](#) jig set and the [Newmarket Mezerts](#).
- Heel** I use this term in two different ways - just to confuse you. The first is to describe the 'hint of a hop' in the basic reel step*. The second describes the striking of the floor with the heel and its immediate lifting again as in the reel step under STEPS in the Study Notes for the [Roscommon Lancers](#).
- Heelclick** When the heel of the weightbearing foot is smartly tapped by the heel of the other. Its only use that I am aware of is in the batter for the [Kilmanagh Lancers](#).
- Heelcut** The weightbearing foot executes a heel* while the other performs a cut* at the same moment.
- Heelswing** The weightbearing foot executes a heel* while the other is swung forward at the same moment.
- Jump** To lift one's bodyweight completely off the floor as is done in the steps for the [Cavan Reel](#) set and the [Roscommon Lancers](#).
- Pivot** The act of swivelling on the ball of the foot in order to change direction as in the Walking Polka (earlier version) in the [Ardgroom](#) set.
- 'Rising' jig** This is, in essence, the step danced off the back foot most often to reels, but in this case danced to jigs. Some set dancers actually call it the 'reel-type' jig step while figure dancers would think of it as 'skip 3s'.
- Shuffle** A lady's lightly danced step in which the non-weightbearing foot briefly touches the floor twice in a sharp out-and-back movement.

Tip Another term for the brush*.

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BATTERED STEPS

Clare reel batter

This step is demonstrated by Mick Mulkerrin in his video "Steps for Sets" and is a 2 bar pattern with three repeats to complete the movement 'Dance at home'* in some Clare reel sets.

Notes:- st means 'step', that is, take the full body weight on that foot; stamp means bring the foot down smartly and lift it again.

Gents	Ladies	&	1,	2	&	3	&	4,	5	&	6	&	7,	8
R	L	Hop	st				stamp,	st				stamp,	st	
L	R		st	heel	toe	st		heel	toe	st				
			just											
			a											
			hint		Ladies shuffle			Ladies shuffle						
			of a											
			hop											

Hornpipe batter

The step which Mick Mulkerrin dances for the first **2 bars** of each quarter of the hornpipe's Quarterhouse, illustrated on his video "Steps for Sets" and demonstrated to us at his Wexford workshop in November, 2000 is:

Notes:- st means 'step', that is, take the full body weight on that foot; heel drop means that the weight is carried on the ball of the foot and the heel is dropped smartly to sound against the floor and is immediately raised again.

Gents	Ladies	&	1,	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&	7,	8
R	L	Hop	st	st			heel		heel		heel toe	st			
L	R		st	heel toe			heel		heel				st	-	
			just												
			a												
			hint		or shuffle		drop drop		drop drop		or shuffle				
			of a												
			hop												

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