

## The Reel Profile - Today's Dance Devisers: John Brenchley in his own words

From time to time it is the intention of *The Reel* to invite a popular dance deviser, to reveal a little of themselves - their beginnings and stimuli. *The Reel* is very grateful to former London Branch member John Brenchley from Perth, Australia for sending us his story. John in collaboration with Marian Anderson and her Band has published the Kangaroo Paw collections of dances with accompanying music, John has also had several dances published in RSCDS Books.

**Early Days:** I was born in Bromley, UK. As a child I was aware that once a week, my mother went Scottish country dancing at a local authority class run by Peggy Randall who at that time taught both a beginners and general class. I did not start dancing until I left school and initially attended Peggy's general class. When Peggy retired from teaching, I started dancing at the Orpington and District Caledonian Society and about this time also joined the RSCDS London Branch. In 1983 I decided to try a holiday at St Andrews and, thought that the preliminary teaching class might be interesting. With the class taught by Johann MacLean, I was quickly hooked on the idea of teaching SCD. Also, at St Andrews I met my future wife Christine from Australia, visiting relatives (her parents were from Glasgow), and travelling in Europe on a Contiki tour. Back in London, I started attending the Branch advanced class taken by Mary Stoker and, later by Jenny Greene and Rita Marlow. Mary's teaching was inspirational and I am sure many dancers and teachers who were taught by her will always remember her precise directions, particularly as to how to dance an allemande. I can still sometimes hear myself quoting her when teaching my own classes. After marrying in 1985, we lived in Swanley but still went along to the Orpington club and London Branch classes and events. We also danced with the MacLennan Scottish group. In 1989 we emigrated to Perth, Australia and the local branch there encouraged me with teaching opportunities so that I could gain experience to take the final certificate which I did in 1991, going back to St Andrews at the time of the 60th Summer School. My teacher for this was Brenda Burnell.

**When I Started Dancing,** my favourite dances were devised by John Drewry - and I still like many of his creations. I also admire many of Roy Goldring's dances, particularly the way he gets one formation to flow into the next. I especially like how he does this in many of his five-couple dances. Other devisers whose dances I like are Chris Ronald, Terry Glasspool and Duncan Brown. For me my inspiration for dances often comes about because of requests for birthdays or to commemorate a person or event. This doesn't necessarily translate into inspiration and it often takes a while for an idea to come to mind. I am amazed at how prolific some devisers have been with so many ideas. I often struggle to come up with something new.

As I am not musical and regret that I cannot sing in tune at all, it can be a nuisance when trying to ask a class musician for a particular tune whose name I have forgotten. Luckily, I can hear musical rhythm, tell reels from jigs and dance in time and know and visualise tempo so I can decide when I need a recording to be slowed down for class. When deciding on a rhythm for a dance I try

to match these to the formations and style of the dance I have devised, ie if it is quite a flowing dance perhaps with lots of reels of three and four, this is usually more suited to a jig whereas, I will probably pick a reel if the dance seems to have lots of setting or more stop-start combinations.

**My Favourite Figures** are probably formations that involve corners and working on the diagonal. It is likely that I have more formations that I do not like rather than those that I do. For example, I do not really like set and turn corners in quick time as I feel that apart from very advanced dancers, the turns cannot be done well with pas de basque steps by the average dancer, so the formation looks awkward and untidy. No doubt this view is controversial, but I am more in favour of the 'Edinburgh approach' of using skip change of step (not that I would



John and Christine Brenchley at 2013 Australian Winter School in Albany, Western Australia.

teach it this way though - as an RSCDS teacher, I still 'toe the line'). I feel that using pas de basque just makes the formation harder for no obvious gain. For a totally different reason I am not happy about the current strathspey pousette - to me, having to dance it on the first corner diagonal makes it unbalanced. Many years ago I went to a class taught by Bob Grant and he demonstrated how the formation had originally been danced in a pure diamond shape - maybe being an accountant means that my mathematical brain appreciates this symmetry.

**My First Attempt** at devising a dance was for the 90th birthday of Frank Sheridan, a member of Orpington and District Caledonian Society. It was never formally published but I believe was briefly resurrected for his 100th birthday though by that time I had moved to Australia. Subsequently, I submitted some dances for the competition to find a dance to go with Robin Ellis' tune *Orpington Caledonians* when that club had its 50th Anniversary in 1987. Luckily, one of them was chosen and although included in a club booklet, the dance was not formally published but was danced occasionally and at the time of the club's 75th Anniversary was noticed by the RSCDS Tunbridge Wells Branch who asked if they could submit it to the Society for publication in Bk 49.

**Devising New Dances:** Nowadays, I feel that any new dance has to be a bit different. There are so many dances being devised at the moment that are just combining a few formations in a different order and often these do not give us anything that has not already been danced. Having said that, I am

not in favour of creating new formations that are too contrived and are awkward to dance just for the sake of coming up with something new. Often I try now to combine existing formations or half formations in a different way, eg maybe starting at second corner before first corner (as in *The Kangaroo Paw*) or inserting turns with corners in between half diagonal reels of three (as in *Christine M Phillips*). *High Society* actually has very traditional formations but each one is 'tweaked' slightly so that they are just a little bit different. I particularly like dances to flow from one formation to the next. I would rather avoid any dancer having an awkward change of direction though that is not always possible. For that reason, I am not very keen on some of the older RSCDS dances that get taught at weekend schools to advanced dancers

presumably, as they are a challenge to do well - they may well be a challenge but they are not actually enjoyable to dance and what is the point of dancing something if no one enjoys it. I also like symmetry in a dance eg if a formation is danced with one corner, then I like it to be repeated with the other corner. One of my favourite recent dances is *The Cocket Hat* - the central part of the dance is perfect in its symmetry - right hands across at one end, half diagonal reel with one corner, repeated with the other corner then right hands across again at the opposite end.

I mentioned John Drewry before and his dance for the London Branch, *The Jubilee Line* (See *Reel* 150) is another favourite of mine for experienced dancers, again because of its brilliant symmetry.

**My Inspiration:** Usually the dance comes before the music. Living in this part of Australia without local live music for classes or social dancing, I am reliant on recorded music so I will try to find a recording that is not associated with too many other well-known dances and use this when trying out a new dance. Sometimes a tune used as number two or three in a track will appear to work well with a dance so I check on the online databases to see if it has been used as the lead tune for too many other dances and if not will suggest it as a possible tune for my dance. Although, I do not have a consistent starting point my inspiration is often a formation used in another dance that will inspire me - my mind sometimes drifts in class to thinking, "I like that but what would happen if I tried it this way". Alternatively, I may be dancing something that does not seem to quite work so I find myself wondering how to change it. For example, at a recent class the dance had first couple advancing towards each other with pas de basque and then turning all the way round with both hands in two bars (pas de basque again) to end both facing down nearer hand joined. Now the extra requirement to face down makes it rather hard for first man who has a polite turn to include within those two bars so I started thinking what could I do with the movement to make it easier. One option would be if first man was to finish facing up - maybe facing on first corner diagonal to flow into a half diagonal reel - watch this space, maybe a new dance is on the way!

See *The Dance Corner* on p14 for a new dance from John - *The Brig Amity*. Also to visit all of John's published dances visit this link [my.strathspey.org/dd/person/884](http://my.strathspey.org/dd/person/884)