

HISTORY OF

THE SCOTTISH COUNTRY
DANCE CLUB OF CANBERRA INC

1954 - 2004

This history of the Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra Inc has been prepared on the 40th anniversary of the founding of the club. Unfortunately as some of the club papers have been lost much of this account is from the writer's memory jogged by photographs and personal mementoes of events.

During the late 40s and early 50s there was a large influx of migrants to Australia, among them quite a few Scottish people who settled in Canberra. At that time Canberra's population was only about 23 000 and forms of recreation were almost non-existent - few social clubs, no TV, only two radio stations and no late night or week-end shopping. Two cinemas provided the only public entertainment. One small club, the Canberra Highland Society and Burns Club, used the Friendly Societies hall in Wentworth Avenue on a site now part of the Government Printing Office, for its dances on the first and third Saturdays of each month. That was the natural meeting place of the Scottish migrants.

When we arrived in Canberra in 1950 we naturally gravitated to these dances. At that time the music was provided by a two piece band led by Bob Morrow playing the accordion and some Scottish dances were included in the programme. The dances were limited to the Eightsome Reel, Strip the Willow, Dashing White Sergeant and Gay Gordons. However, the interpretations of these dances varied according to which part of Scotland the migrant came from. For instance, in reels of three found in the Eightsome and Dashing White Sergeant some would dance them in the manner to which we are now

accustomed, some would insist on always passing right shoulder. Others would change it into a movement I can only call turn first corner then second corner, sometimes giving hands, sometimes with arms linked and turning once or twice according to preference. Imagine the mix-ups when dancers with different styles were all in the same set. Footwork was almost non-existent, many just walking the figures, others using a sort of running step.

The complications with Strip the Willow were even greater. Some dancers would turn for four bars of music, others for eight bars using different methods of holding their partners and in some instances the second couple would start before the first couple had finished. The result was that when Bob finished playing the music, some sets would finish on time, others were still only part way through and others had started a second time. In short, the dances were often a shambles.

After two years or so Bob and I along with our wives Helen and Jean decided to try to standardise the methods of performing these dances. We knew of the publications of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) and on a quick trip to Sydney we found a shop which had a few of these books in stock and another which had some dance records made by Jimmy Shand. These were the old 78 rpm records (LP records did not become available until about 1958) and did not contain music for a full dance but at least gave us a start.

Having acquired these books and records we started to practise some of the dances in our houses, using our four children to make up a set. Gradually from the books and our recollections of things learned in Scotland we felt sufficiently confident to try to introduce a standard form of the dances on the regular dance nights. At first we got a few people of the same mind as ourselves together to practise the correct way to perform those dances, but the difficulties arose when we tried to introduce them at the regular dances. Some dancers insisted on dancing in the manner to which they had been accustomed, claiming that their method was the correct one. Finally we were compelled to give up the idea of standardising the dances at these regular dance nights but some folk decided to start an autonomous group to learn other dances.

This group consisting of 19 people was the foundation of the Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra. For the record these were Bob & Helen Morrow, Bob & Jean Clark, Charles & Mary Caulfield, George & Jean Ramsay, Joe & Cath Morrow, Allan & Margaret Logie, Bill & Margaret McHardy, Bill & Meryl Bruce, Bill & Barbara Nowell, and Bill Robb, the only one unmarried. Bill brought his current girl friend as partner. Our first idea was to form a branch of the RSCDS which would give some form of backing but on inquiry to Edinburgh we were informed that it required two certificated teachers before a branch could be formed.

The 1950s

Our first problem was to find suitable accommodation but that was solved quickly. The Good Neighbour Council of the ACT had been formed in 1950 with the sponsorship of the Department of Immigration. Its objectives were to help new migrants to settle in Australia and provide facilities for them to practise their national dances, singing etc. That Council occupied three buildings of the old Riverside workers camp which lay off the road which is now Bowen Drive and these buildings were used by the various migrant groups. We affiliated with that Council and thereby shared the use of a small building with a floor big enough for two sets and a small kitchen equipped for tea making. We used these premises for many years, coming in contact with several national groups.

Our music problem was solved by getting hold of an old table top gramophone, the type with a spring wind up motor, purchasing a new turntable and adapting an old wireless which had seen better days to act as an amplifier. With our problems solved we then got down to the business of learning the dances and pooling our memories of the way they had been done in Scotland. We learned of a Scottish Country Dance class at Duntroon and went there once or twice but found we could not learn more than we already knew.

We then had a stroke of luck. In the Film Division of the National Library we found three instructional films prepared by the RSCDS. These films demonstrated a reel, a strathspey and a jig and some of the footwork. We had those films on permanent loan for a period, watching them, then trying to dance them, sometimes running the film in slow motion to study them more carefully. Gradually the group became more efficient and confident enough to give demonstrations in public.

The Good Neighbour Council was often asked for groups of National dancers from European countries to give displays at fetes etc. Our first one was in a display of national dancing in Yass. Several other demonstrations made our activities more widely known and other folk wanted to join our group so in 1954 we adopted a constitution and the name The Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra. The first constitution provided that each member became a member of the RSCDS which meant that every member had the book of dances we were learning. In 1956 we affiliated with the RSCDS, and the bulletin of 1958 shows that we were one of only three affiliated clubs in Australia.

Naturally our biggest problem was finance. As our weekly collection of two shillings covered only our tea and incidentals, we ran film nights of Scottish films, Halloween parties, games nights etc with a small charge, at which anybody interested was welcome. Gradually we built up sufficient cash to buy club records and a decent record player.

From that time on the club grew rapidly and took part in many demonstrations. Unfortunately all files of these early years have been lost but I recall giving displays at various school fetes, international clubs, Government House etc and at a Scottish ball in Yass organised by the Presbyterian Church. In 1956 we first came in contact with the Monaro Caledonian Society at a function after the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the Burns Club building in National Circuit and at which we were giving a display. That was the commencement of a long association with that society.

The Monaro Caledonian Society had started running Scottish balls in 1954 and we attended them from 1957 onwards. Generally the programmes were half modern and half Scottish dances, a band providing the music for the modern and a tape recorder for the Scottish. Long play records were not available and the taped music was two of the old 78s joined together, not always very satisfactory for dancing.

Quite often we saw Scottish balls advertised but on attending them we found that they were Scottish in name only. The only thing Scottish about them was the appearance of a pipe band and a short display of Highland dancing. Sometimes the programme included the Eightsome Reel and/or Dashing White Sergeant and the music for the Scottish dances was usually provided by a piper who generally had no idea of tempo or number of bars required for a dance and played until he ran out of breath. We decided then to organise a real Scottish ball with at least half of the dances Scottish and a band to play for all the dances.

First thing was to get a band together which could play Scottish music. Bob Morrow knew two other Scots who were familiar with this music and got them together as a three piece band. Next task was to select the dances for the programme so that the band could select appropriate music and practise together. By this time the Burns Club had moved to its new building but still had the lease of the old premises in Wentworth Avenue which we hired for beginners classes to teach the programme dances. For several weeks we were dancing twice and sometimes three times each week. The great day came on 21 November 1958 when we held our first ball in the Albert Hall. The result far exceeded our expectations. There were 18 sets on the floor for most of the dances. Many came from Cooma attracted by the novelty of dancing to live music. Several came from Sydney attracted by the large number of Scottish dances on the programme. Out of a programme of 25 dances we had 13 Scottish. At that time it was customary to have a guest of honour at a formal ball so that year we had the Secretary of the Interior as guest and in 1959 we had Dame Pattie Menzies. The custom was dropped after that. Members of the committee wanted to take part in the dances instead of dancing attendance on a VIP.

The appearance of LP records was an important milestone for us. The first ones were merely the old 78s transferred to the new medium but soon full length recordings appeared which helped us greatly in our classes. It also involved the purchase of a record player to suit the new records - the first major cost to the club.

In 1959 we received an invitation from the Caledonian Society of North Sydney to compete in a Scottish Country Dance Competition. After much discussion it was decided to decline this invitation, the reason being that the members danced for their own enjoyment, not to try and show that we had better dancers than in other clubs. Since then the club has consistently refused to take part in competitions.

1959 was the start of mini Highland Gatherings between the Canberra and Cooma clubs. These were held at Michelago in a paddock supposed to be a playing field. We had to run across it with cars to level the long grass before we could start the games and dancing. One year we had to share the field with some sheep, put there by a local grazier to mow the grass. The programme at these gatherings included tossing the caber, throwing the hammer, tug-of-war, sack and three legged races, dancing and of course a barbeque. These games were an annual event for several years.

The 1960s

The publicity resulting from the balls kept us busy for several years. New dance groups were formed and invitations to other balls to give demonstrations poured in and from these we learned a lot. At the first ball we attended in Newcastle in 1961, the MC described each dance and sets walked through them before dancing, thus delaying every dance. We got the idea then of having prompt sheets made available at every ball. The clubs in Sydney must have been impressed with our standard of dancing in Canberra as we had repeated requests for demonstration teams at balls.

We gave several displays in Sydney and were surprised to find how few Scottish dances were included in ball programmes. The programme for a White Heather Ball in Sydney in 1961 shows only five Scottish dances - Hamilton House, Strip the Willow, Dashing White Sergeant, Eightsome Reel and Gay Gordons. Our favourite dances for those demonstrations were ones mainly considered suitable for displays such as McDonald of Sleat and Rouken Glen.

We also took part in massed displays of dances (over 100 dancers) at the New Year's day gatherings starting in 1961. These massed displays were included annually for several years, first at the Sydney Showground and later at Wentworth Park. In Canberra the club took part in dancing displays on Canberra Day, the first being on a shaky platform erected on City Hill opposite Northbourne Avenue but later ones on grass at Northbourne Oval. We entered floats in Canberra Day processions, the most

ambitious being a representation of the Loch Ness Monster in the year Lake Burley Griffin was filling. We developed a more social side with picnics and barbeques where members could sit and talk instead of dancing all the time. These developed into weekends at various places on the coast with two large marquee tents, ladies occupying one tent and men the other. Places visited included Kiama, Jervis Bay, Batehaven and Kioloa.

Dinner dances were an activity of the club for many years, generally held in a hotel or motel. Records show that the 1970 dinner was in the Embassy motel and the quotation for a three course dinner - entree, main course and sweet was \$3.55 per head. Changed days! Organisation of these dinners was generally left in the capable hands of Fred Frank.

With full length recordings of dances now available we were able to extend our repertoire of dances. We wrote to a firm in Edinburgh and imported some 45 rpm records which were made at the request of the RSCDS each of which contained two full length recordings. The outstanding event for the club in 1961 was undoubtedly securing the services of a regular teacher. Until then Bob Morrow, myself or any other member who felt confident enough took on the role of teacher. All that changed when we located Kath Henderson. Kath had passed the preliminary examination of the RSCDS before leaving Scotland for Australia in 1957 and she took on the role of our teacher. She had a hard task polishing off our rough edges but her teaching must have been obvious at the demonstrations we gave in Sydney. In addition to our regular club nights Kath took on the task of preparing

some of our club members, including Rae Geddes and David Ross, for the preliminary teachers exam, although no such exams were held in Australia at that time.

When the Sydney branch of the RSCDS ran the first of several annual weekend schools in 1964 Kath was asked to teach the advanced class and we were the only club asked to give a display. We danced the Duke of Gordon's Welcome to Aberdeen and Rouken Glen, two dances which are definitely for display purpose only. Twenty-one members with three children attended that first school at Point Wollstonecraft and we were well represented at subsequent schools at Elanora Heights and Narrabeen in Sydney.

Mentioning dances for display purposes: at the school in 1966 every club was asked to give one dance suitable for display. We had located a very complicated dance named Belhaven which is a medley of reel, strathspey and jig with unusual formations and decided to try it. No suitable music was available so we wrote to the author of the dance and in reply received a special tape played by Nan Main, a well known person in dance circles. Armed with this tape we spent months perfecting the dance. When we danced it at the school the main comment was 'How did you manage to remember all that?'. In another year each club was asked for a non-Scottish item and two of our members Moya Ewin and Ann Clark displayed their talents in Spanish dancing.

With the rapidly growing population of Canberra the demand for the Albert Hall was so great that for several years we could not obtain it for a ball. We still had our

annual event held in various locations, in the Italian and other clubs which had been formed, at the ANU and St John Priory in Canberra Avenue. We called these functions Cabarets, although the programmes were exactly the same as for balls. Generally the locations used for these functions did not deserve the name of ballroom. By this time the programmes consisted entirely of Scottish Country Dances. With the expanding membership of the club, the premises at Riverside were too small so our main activities were moved to the Trades hall at Acton but retained the use of Riverside for special occasions. As the hall at Acton was to be demolished to make way for the Nurses home at the hospital, we held a lively wake on 27 August 1963. We got temporary accommodation in the Hughes scout hall and the Downer Community Centre until we moved to the Hughes Community Centre where we remained until 1974.

During the 1960s our membership was continually changing. Many people transferred to Canberra by their work contacted us through the RSCDS bulletin and from them we obtained many dances not found in the usual books. Two notable visitors were Dennis and Helen Amy. Dennis was posted to the British High Commission for two years but they liked it so much that they stayed for four and were active members of the club, assisting with teaching and serving on the committee. Both of them passed the final teachers exam in 1970 before leaving Canberra. Incidentally, they learnt Scottish country dancing in Greece when Dennis was posted there. On leaving Canberra he was posted to Central Africa from where he sent a photo of the two of them dressed to take part in a demonstration at a Burns dinner with the piper in

full dress standing between them. He was a tall black African. Just shows how Scottish influence is everywhere.

Until the start of the 60s Australia had very few persons who held the teaching certificate of the RSCDS and there were no persons in Australia authorised to conduct such examinations. At the instigation of the RSCDS branch in Adelaide, headquarters in Edinburgh arranged for a Mrs Florence Lesslie, resident in New Zealand, to visit Australia and conduct exams. In reply to a query in the letter informing us of this proposed visit we said we would be delighted if she would visit Canberra to conduct an exam. Her first visit was in 1966 when both Rae Geddes and David Ross passed the preliminary exam. Mrs Lesslie visited Canberra again in 1967 and 1970 until two official examiners resident in Australia were appointed. Rae passed the full teachers exam in 1967 and became club teacher when Kath had to stop for family reasons. Some of these exams were held on club nights with members acting as guinea pigs for the candidates to practise their skills.

In 1964 the Good Neighbour Council organised an International concert in the Albert Hall at which several national groups including ourselves combined to present a programme of national singing and dancing. This was so successful that it was repeated the following year and again in 1966 when the venue was changed to the Canberra Theatre.

In 1964 the club became an incorporated body under the ACT Associations Incorporation Ordinance 1953.

The 1970s

Mrs Lesslie visited Canberra again in 1970 to conduct exams. Two persons who passed the preliminary exam were Peter and Marion McBryde from Canada. He had written to us enquiring about the club before coming to Canberra for a year and on arrival joined in all our activities. On his return to Canada, Peter published a book of dances of his own compositions and dedicated one, Campbell of Duntroon, to this club and another, The Heir of Errol, to Alison Brown, a long standing member of the club. During Mrs Lesslie's visit the joint clubs held a weekend school at the Cotter at which she conducted two sessions and a workshop for teachers.

Also in 1970 the local Repertory Society performed a show, Brigadoon, which is located in Scotland and we were asked if we could help to give it a Scottish atmosphere. As a result one of our members, Moya Ewin, assisted with the decorations and ladies of the club dressed in white frocks and tartan sashes acted as usherettes. Men in kilts as doormen in the foyer of the Albert Hall welcomed the patrons.

In 1972 several members of the club ventured overseas to a school organised by the New Zealand branch of the RSCDS in Dunedin. The big social event at that school was a New Year's eve ball attended by about 200 dancers from all parts of New Zealand and Australia. It was an ideal place for gossip and exchanging opinions. As a result we had a visit from a number of New Zealand dancers in 1973.

Another memorable visitor in 1974 was Miss Jean Milligan, one of the two founders of the RSCDS in 1923. She toured Australia visiting all branches and taught at various places including the weekend school in Sydney where some of our members were present. She also visited Canberra from 13-18 October, taught at one of our regular classes, and conducted an exam when five candidates including our then current teachers Helen McLaren and Stewart McKenzie, passed the preliminary part. A committee formed from the local clubs held a dinner and dance in honour of Miss Milligan at which the Hon. Billy Snedden, leader of the opposition in Federal parliament, and Mrs Snedden were also guests.

With the growing number of clubs in the Canberra district, the possibility of holding a local weekend school was discussed. The result was that Jean Conway, Les Cumming and the writer formed a small committee to organise such events. Two weekend schools were held over the Easter holidays at the YMCA camp at Long Beach near Batemans Bay. The local branch of the RSCDS was formed in 1978 after a public meeting at which a steering committee was formed with Mack McLaren as chairman and the surplus funds from these schools were donated to the new branch. The organising of weekend schools was also handed over to the new branch.

Another interesting happening in the late 70s was the appearance of some members in a movie, *My Brilliant Career*. One night at Lyons we had a visit from the producer of that film, looking for ideas for a woolshed

dance in the film. A set went to the supper room and danced Strip the Willow for her in a manner they imagined it would be done at at a bush dance. The result was they appeared as extras dancing the Brown Jug Polka in that scene which was filmed at Michelago. Have you ever tried dodging posts in a woolshed as a band keeps increasing the speed of a polka?

1979 was the Jubilee year of the club and it was marked by a special dinner at the Old Canberra Inn in Lyneham at which several of the founder members of the club were present.

The club still received requests for display teams and finally formed a panel of enthusiastic dancers to fulfil these requests but unfortunately many of them are not recorded. One demonstration at the request of the Good Neighbour Council in 1977 was at a reception in the Lakeside hotel for a group of overseas parliamentary delegates. Others of which there are records were in the Woden Plaza, at a cherry festival at Young and a gold festival at Major's Creek.

Quite often the organisers of the functions at which our dancers appeared made donations to the club funds and with money raised from other sources the club had by 1970 a new record player and comprehensive stock of records. The committee decided to invest surplus funds in interest-bearing accounts and the first investment was in 1970 when \$2300 was invested at 5%. For many years charges to members at various functions and club nights were fixed to just meet expenses and any interest earned was usually added to the amount invested, the result being that investments grew steadily. Occasionally it was used to purchase better equipment including tape recorders. This allowed us to transfer music from records to tape which made it easier to carry our music around.

The social side of activities was still maintained. One year a Scottish concert party with Jimmy Shand as the star attraction appeared in the Albert Hall. The club made a mass booking of 120 seats for members and their friends. Other outings included picnics at places such as Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and evening barbeques in the various parks in Canberra. These were in addition to the regular trips to various places on the coast.

The 1980s

The club moved from Hughes to the Church of Christ hall in Lyons in 1973. Stewart McKenzie continued his lengthy and valuable role as class teacher until Tony Northey took control in 1982. A 'temporary' move to the YMCA gymnasium across the road in 1984 lasted until our re-location to St John's Church hall in Reid in February 1988.

The bulk of this booklet is a “draft” prepared by the late Bob Clark with the assistance of John Wanless to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Scottish Country Dance Club of Canberra and produced for the Ball held on 15 October 1994.

The original “draft” gives a vivid personal account of the early history of the Club. Events during the more recent decade have been much more routine, so the present edition reproduces the original, which was entitled “40 Years and Still Dancing”, together with a very brief update. It is issued for the Club’s 50th Anniversary Ball, held in the Albert Hall on 16th October 2004, the venue where the Club celebrated its first Ball in 1958. The revised date in the title merely reflects the Club’s continuation for another 10 years of joyous Scottish Country Dancing - and may the forthcoming decades be equally enjoyable!