

## Social Equals – till the Music stops

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It has often been suggested that Social, that is Country Dancing, as performed at balls and assemblies, as opposed to the more formal couple dances which used to precede them, might have acted as a social equaliser. However the arguments presented here would appear to imply that this happened only rarely, and that, when, occasionally perhaps, it did occur, it did not follow that any equality established in the ball-room would then generalise into a wider social setting. What follows is a brief study of comments from the past about such balls and assemblies and also of both some of the pictorial evidence and also the language of the many dance publications from the first edition of Playford's *The Dancing Master* of 1651<sup>1</sup> up to the collections of the early 19th century.



L O N D O N,

Printed by Thomas Harper, and are to be sold by John Playford, at his She Temple neere the Church doore. 1651.

**Fig. 1** Playford, John, *The English Dancing Master*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 1651 - Frontispiece

Certainly the supposition of equality would seem to underlie the intention of those early Playford collections and of many of his successors. The Commonwealth was well established by the date of his first publication and some effort was being made to consider

all men as more or less equal. Playford seems to suggest his acceptance of this equality by his use of the terminology 'man' and 'woman' in all the dance descriptions. Yet, the title page of the First Edition [Fig.1] shows only one quite elegant couple, clearly of high status, alone on the dance floor. This would appear to accord with Playford's own Preface to this edition, where he addresses the 'Ingenious Reader', reminding him that dance is 'Excellent for Recreation' ... and capable of 'making the body active and strong, gracefull (sic) in deportment, a quality very much beseeming a Gentleman'. (*my emphasis*) That one's status as a gentleman should be acknowledged was vitally important also to the man who was about to become the country's Lord Protector. Cromwell made clear his own status in his first speech to Parliament, when he claimed: 'I was by birth a gentleman'. Nevertheless, throughout Playford's First Edition, as in the remainder of the series of these dance collections which cover over seventy years under several different publishers, the dances are consistently presented using only the terms 'man' and 'woman'. This is intriguing since all the pictorial title-pages equally consistently depict only a small number of very well-dressed couples, with a limited number of onlookers, all in elegant surroundings.



**Fig. 2** Playford, John, *The Dancing Master*, 7th Edition, 1686 - Frontispiece

In 1686, the title page [Fig. 2] of the Seventh Edition again shows people who are ‘gracefull in deportment’ and elegant in both stance and manner, this time arranged as a four-couple set. They, and the onlookers who are arranged in two blocks of ladies on one side and men on the other, as in the dance, perhaps await their turn to dance. Clearly, by their dress, all are members of the gentry. Interestingly, there are only two musicians - and the same small cupid, this time playing a violin, standing at the head of the set: perhaps a hint of the possibilities the dance might offer.



**Fig. 3** Playford, John, *The Dancing Master*, 18th Edition, 1728 - Frontispiece

By the time we reach the final edition of 1728, the frontispiece [Fig. 3] offers a new picture - a group of eight dancers, clearly well-dressed and well behaved, standing as a four-couple set, before an equally elegant audience, perhaps waiting to participate in the next dance. Interestingly, all the dancers show a good ‘turn-out’ which would suggest that they were well-versed in the technique of the ‘noble’ baroque style. On this occasion, the onlookers sit together, a gentleman at each end of a line of five ladies. The three-piece band is elevated above the dancers and, for the first time, they may have some music in front of them. Both dancers and onlookers appear ‘gracefull in deportment’, elegant in both stance and manner: clearly members of the gentry.

Throughout the series of the *Dancing Master*, the terminology used in the dance descriptions remained the same – men are designated as men and women as women. It could be argued that the consistent use of this terminology reflects the publishers’ desire to attract commoners - those still aspiring to become gentlemen, the non-nobility, to the world of the country dance - while, at the same time, apparently addressing, through the title page, those of higher status: the people most likely to purchase the books.

Robert Keller<sup>2</sup>, in the introduction to his CD of all the Playford dances, would seem to support this assumption that the ‘Playford’ dance publications were overtly, if not primarily, directed at the gentry as he writes: -

Civil disorder and natural disasters forced city residents to seek refuge on remote country estates; expanding trade and emigrations to distant lands carried Englishmen far from their homeland. Both phenomena affected the social life of the upper classes for whom these dances were a satisfying vehicle for leisure time recreation. (*my emphasis*)

By 1660, the Interregnum had yielded place to the Restoration, with its almost unavoidable consequences. The return of a monarch had been sufficient to encourage a full revival of a hierarchical society which had indeed never quite disappeared. The fact that Charles II had spent several years at the court of Louis XIV made it almost inevitable that the English court would attempt a return to its earlier glories and the development of the new French style of dancing which Charles had already encountered during his exile. He had also become aware that the French nobility of this period were highly conscious of status, a condition somewhat imposed upon them by Louis XIV’s desire to keep them under his eye in a controlled environment.

A choreographer who deserves mention in this context is André Lorin<sup>3</sup>, who visited England twice in the 1680s to collect information on our ‘national dance’. On his return to France, he set to to tidy up those aspects of the dances which he considered unsuitable for the more exquisite French

nobility and presented Louis XIV with his 'improved' versions of the English dances, having added specific baroque steps for every action. [Fig. 4] For him, there was no question of any mix of classes. His dancers were entirely drawn from the nobility and the terms 'Dame' and 'Seigneur' - with their abbreviations D and S - are used throughout both his manuscripts.

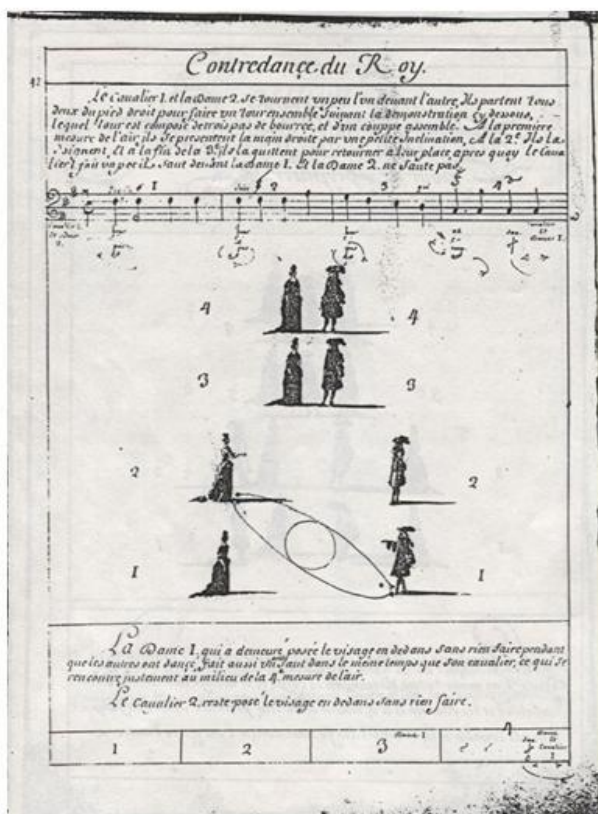


Fig. 4 Lorin, André, *Livre de Contredance présenté Au Roy*, c. 1685

English dancing masters were quick to learn and teach the new French style steps. Several composers of country dances successfully combined both old and new footwork within one dance. Many dance collections from the later 17th century clearly show that they assume that their dancers will be competent in this new French method. Thomas Bray<sup>4</sup>, who published his *Collection* in 1699, was one of those to use a blend of the two cultures and clearly assumes that the dancers will be competent in this new French method since, in a number of his dances, he specifically requests the use of a double step (presumably to be performed in Playfordian manner). This

must imply that, except where the double is specifically mentioned, the dancers would be using the newer baroque style with *pas de bourrée, coupés and contretemps*<sup>5</sup>.

That these steps may not have been completely accepted by, or indeed possible for all, may be inferred from the rider attached to Lady Mary's Courant, as it appears in publications of *The Dancing Master* from 1710 to 1728. This asks that the dancers should use the courant step, 'if the company can do it'.

To return to the question of dancer designation, it is clear that Bray, like Kynaston<sup>6</sup>, Walsh<sup>7</sup> and others all writing during the first half of the 18th century, still use the basic terms - man and woman - to denote the dancers. On the other hand, if we cross the Atlantic, there exists a Notebook of dance instructions, kept by a Scots lawyer, James Alexander<sup>8</sup>, who had emigrated from Scotland to New York in 1715. Alexander was of noble descent, and his Dutch wife was, in her own right, highly esteemed in the community for running a successful import business. However, this clearly upper class lawyer quite happily uses the denomination 'Man' rather than 'gentleman' throughout the book. In contrast, he always uses the word Lady, or its abbreviation, 'Ly', apart from one solitary instance of the word 'Woman'. What, we may ask, might that exception suggest?

Interestingly, the *Collection of 24 Dances* by Thomas Collett<sup>9</sup>, probably published in 1756 while he was with the young John Spencer at Althorp, avoids the issue entirely. All his dances refer to the couples (First or Second) or to actions where the number of dancers involved is made clear by the context. This meant that he had no real need to use either form of address for the individual dancers - yet it might be supposed that, had he felt it necessary, he would have used the words 'lady' or 'gentleman' since he was writing 'By the Desire of several Persons of Quality'.

Dances in the collections of the later 17th and 18th centuries are often presented as 'the most fashionable', 'the latest', 'with the newest methods'. They are always addressed to 'ladies and gentlemen' as if only those

possessing a degree of courtly elegance, through birth or upbringing, could be involved. We might therefore suspect that, while the authors of these collections may claim that their dances were written for all, they do not, in fact, have an inclusive 'all' in mind. With scarcely veiled purpose, they clearly addressed the gentry even where they may have aimed their text at a wider audience.

From the 1730s till his death in 1761, Richard (Beau) Nash<sup>10</sup> made considerable effort in Bath, as in Tunbridge, to encourage everyone to dance together. Of course, his 'everyone' was still in essence a carefully selected and approved group of people. They were obliged to follow Nash's own 'Rules by general Consent determined', which required them to be possessed of good deportment, good dress and good manners. In this way, Nash was determined to combat the snobbishness that protested that 'trade never mixed with the ladies' and tried to encourage people of different rank and distinction to mingle at the public assemblies. The fact that he had to produce these Rules to ensure that his dancers dressed and behaved in seemly manner – which he did with considerable success – certainly suggests that they were necessary in the mixed company that attended his functions. His positive attempt to persuade people to dance together implies that, prior to this, dance had never been considered as a social equaliser.

Nash's success in Bath was paralleled by a like result in Tunbridge Wells. A contemporary writer claimed that 'People of the greatest title, rank, and dignity, people of every learned profession, of every religious and political persuasion; people of every degree, condition, and occupation of life (if well dressed and well behaved), meet ... amicably here together'.

Of course, the vital caveat in this description – 'if well dressed and well behaved' – must never be over-looked.

Yet Nash's success in this respect was perhaps more apparent than real, since it was still an understood thing – at least, by the aristocracy – 'that an acquaintance made at the spa should not extend after that place was left'.

Does not this rather tell us that the presumed equality that might have existed in the ball-room did not, in fact, continue after the music had stopped?

The original texts for the dances in the 20th century Fallibroome Collection<sup>11</sup> reveal the use of both forms of address. The earlier dances generally use the basic terms 'man' and 'woman' while the terms 'Gent.' and 'Lady' are adopted in all dances from the later 18th century. The earliest of these deliberately more genteel collections all occur around the middle of the century, in the 1750s – alongside some which still use the older terminology. Several avoid the issue by referring only to First or Second Couples. However, this later usage would seem to suggest that there had been a clear change in attitude – at least in print – between these two periods, which was certainly well established by the final quarter of the century. This terminology was to remain in place throughout the Regency period and most of the 19th century, until the new couple dances made them altogether less popular.

What more might we learn about the actual performance of these dances and the dancers attitudes to them? What can contemporary pictorial evidence tell us?

The early Playford title page pictures place a strong emphasis on dress and decorum – and a strong sense that these people were not of low or even middle-class standing. That emphasis continues throughout the 17th and 18th centuries as is clear from the 'Rules' published by Nash.

Yet if we look, for instance, at Hogarth's depiction of a longways set in his *Analysis of Beauty*<sup>12</sup>, 1753, [Fig. 5] we are aware of the less finely clad and certainly less decorous behaviour of the 'lower end' couples. At the extreme left, an elegant couple grace the 'top' of the set, yet this elegance soon deteriorates to what must be the considerably less refined couples at the 'bottom'. It is also clear that the elegant couple pay but little attention to the other dancers whom they will soon be obliged to meet. Are we to believe that this represents a dance in progress or might Hogarth have had a different intention?





**Fig. 5** Hogarth, William, *Analysis of Beauty*, 1753 - a longways set

Could it be that this picture is intended to represent something other than an actual longways set? Might it be a portrayal of the ideas expressed in Hogarth's book, so presenting a commentary on the ideals of beauty - or is it perhaps intended as a commentary on the nature of man as a dancer? Much of Hogarth's work clearly deals with the foibles of mankind and, in this 'set', certain couples undoubtedly depict his wry amusement at their inability to dance and the resulting ungainliness of their actions.



**Fig. 6** Hogarth, William, *A Wedding Dance*, 1745

An answer to the above question might be found in another of Hogarth's paintings - again a representation of a longways set but with a more homogeneous look to it. Almost

all the couples attending this Country Dance, depicting a Wedding Dance of 1745, [Fig. 6] seem to be of similar status as they obviously enjoy their dance. There is one couple better in both dress and demeanour than the others, yet the ample but cosy room and the pile of hats on the floor, together with the moon shining through the open window, suggest a homely atmosphere in which the dancers are totally at ease. Even the more elegant couple, here on the extreme right, might be assumed to be quite content to dance their way down the set. It should be noted that the presence of hats on the floor is, in itself, not unusual as the same can be seen in the considerably more elegant setting of the picture from Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*.



**Fig. 7** Thompson, Chas. & Saml., *Twenty Four Country Dances for 1798*

The title page of Thompson's *Compleat Collection of 200 Favourite Country Dances of 1798*<sup>13</sup> [Fig. 7] serves to remind us that publishers of country dances were primarily interested in selling their products and therefore visually appealed to the 'polite set': those who could afford to buy. Echoing the earlier Playford title pages, here three musicians sit to one side in a fine hall while the eight dancers, most elegantly attired, clearly seem to be enjoying their dance - and paying some attention to each other. Nash would have been delighted to see them!

By the late 18th century, Almack's famous Assembly Rooms in London had extended admission not just to gentlemen interested in

gambling but also to ladies - for dancing. With its governing Lady Patronesses in firm control, it was deliberately exclusive. Membership was by a costly non-transferable annual Voucher which inevitably made it available only to the wealthy, upper classes. There is no doubt here of a deliberate exclusivity of membership where breeding and behaviour were even more important than simply money or title.

That such behaviour was not confined to London can be seen in a report in *The York Chronicle* of March<sup>14</sup>, 1773 -

‘the Officers of the 10th Regiment of dragoons, quartered in this city, gave an elegant Ball at the Assembly Rooms to the ladies. After the ball a genteel supper was served. The polite behaviour of the gentlemen who gave the Ball can only be equalled by the satisfaction of the company who had the honour of being invited.’

In June, 1795, the same paper advertised –

‘a Ball and Supper at the Assembly Rooms to be given by the Officers of the Prince of Wales Regiment of Dragoons in honour of His Majesty’s Birthday... for which the most sumptuous and splendid preparations are making and which is expected to be graced by the presence of all the Beauty and Fashion of the City and Neighbourhood.’

Here, the implication is quite obvious: the elegant Officers are gentlemen and they seek the presence of a group of fashionable, and preferably attractive, ladies as would-be partners. To clinch the matter, an advertisement of 1783 offers subscription tickets for sale at 10s. 6d., then explicitly adds that ‘none but gentlemen will be admitted to subscribe’.

Gallini<sup>15</sup>, writing in the 1770s, makes a pertinent critical observation -

‘Among the advantages aimed at in the making the art of dancing a part of genteel education, that of improving the natural graces may be justly considered as the capital one.... learning withal a noble and distinguishing air or port of the person.’

(Gallini - *Critical Observations on the Art of Dancing*, 1770s)

Clearly, by then, a man aspiring to become a gentleman could appear to be one provided he dressed well, behaved perfectly and learned to dance. But it was equally important for a nobleman not to default on standards.

One of the caricatures by Bunbury<sup>16</sup> [Fig. 8] admirably depicts the underlying problem in Gallini’s warning –

‘It is certainly not eligible for a nobleman to have the air and port of a mechanic; but it will be no reproach to a mechanic to have the port and air of a nobleman....’

(Gallini - *Critical Observations on the Art of Dancing*, 1770s)



**Fig. 8** Bunbury, *Lumps of Pudding*

By 1821, the country dance was still popular, in the home and in the ball-room. One aspect of this created its own type of precedence, as Thomas Wilson<sup>17</sup> writes:

‘When part of the company are indifferent Dancers, the persons forming the Dance should be selected and placed according to their talent and knowledge of Dancing; the best couples at and near the top, (so) that by their performance the others may become instructed in the Figure, previous to their having to lead off....’

Since it is also likely that such leading couples will already have been tutored in the gentle art, it is always possible that this caveat underlies the clear distinction in the Hogarth painting discussed earlier, which showed the elegant couple at the top of the set and the others progressively both less elegant and, presumably, less capable lower down the set.





Fig. 9 Rowlandson, *Longways Dance*, 1790s

Of course, the caricaturist in Rowlandson<sup>18</sup> [Fig. 9] delights to show us the total enjoyment in the dance felt by those who are not really concerned by any restrictions imposed by the rules of etiquette.

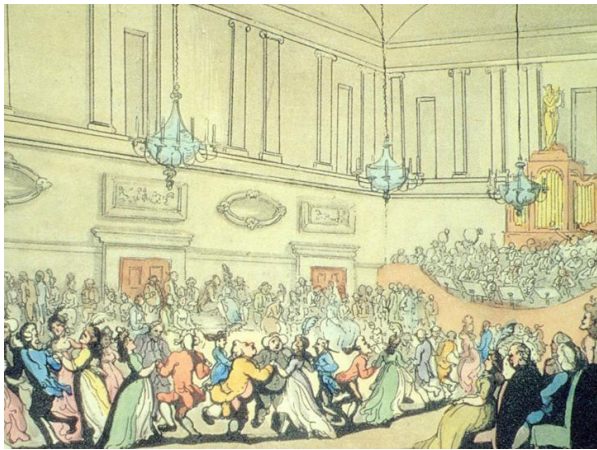


Fig. 10 Rowlandson, *The Comforts of Bath - The Ball*

Even in the apparently more formal venue of the ballroom, [Fig. 10] he shows us the unpolished exuberance of several of the dancers - happily echoed by the enthusiastic timpanist at the back of the large band on the raised platform. There is rather more decorum displayed by the dancers waiting to join the dance, and considerably more still among the onlookers on the raised benches on the far side of the hall.

Rowlandson obviously makes clear the underlying problem in this when he depicts an over-plump gentleman suffering one of what he calls *More Miseries*, 1808. This bears the motto -

‘Being over-persuaded to stand up in a country dance, when you know, or what is equally bad,

conceive that a bear would eclipse you in grace or agility.’



Fig. 11 Rowlandson, *More Miseries*, 1808

It is worth noting that the gentlemen’s hats are here hung on the wall and appreciate the clearly enthusiastic foot-stamping of the fiddler alongside the more modest, coloured pipe and tabor player.

In contrast, the Scots seem to have been less aware of these social distinctions. There is frequent reference to the mix of classes which appears to have been quite natural, at least in the specific situations in which they occur. A young Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchas<sup>19</sup> recalls:

‘... we did ‘Merrily danced the quaker’s (sic) wife’ together, quite to the satisfaction of the servants, who all took lessons too, in common with the rest of the population, the highlanders considering this art an essential in the education of all classes, and never losing an opportunity of acquiring a few more flings and shuffles.’

(Memoirs of a Highland Lady, 1806)

She further comments –

‘Many a happy hour we have reeled away both at the Doune and at the Dell, servants and all included in the company...’ (Ibid: c.1813)

But a statement from a book on Manners<sup>20</sup>, written anonymously by ‘a Member of the Aristocracy’ in 1879, seems entirely to contradict this Scottish freedom of association:

Nowhere is ‘class’ more brought into prominence than at a ‘Country Ball’, where

there is a recognised though unwritten law, which everyone obeys, to infringe which would be a breach of etiquette, and argue a want of knowledge of the social code ... where each class has its own set, and where a member of the one set, would be foolish were he or she to attempt to invade another or a higher set.

At some public balls a cord is drawn across the ball-room to render the upper end unassailable, but this extreme exclusiveness is not often resorted to, 'clique' and 'class' being thoroughly maintained without its aid.

(Manners and Tone of Good Society – By a Member of the Aristocracy.. London, 1879, from E. Aldrich, *From the Ballroom to Hell*)

It would be difficult to find a statement more indicative of the absolute division between the classes while apparently dancing together in the ballroom than that.

A humorous comment on this division appears in a short satirical verse by one, Matthew Bramble, the pen name of the Scots poet, Andrew MacDonald<sup>21</sup>, who makes the interesting comment –

Distinction of rank, in a moment is gone,  
And all eager for tea, in one mass, now move on;  
And Mistress O'Darby, the dealer in butter,  
Now sweats by the side of the sweet Lady Flutter,  
Who would certainly faint, but her senses so nice,  
Are supported by smelling Fat Alderman Spice.

Supper - and the possibility of a wealthy partner - may assist in the temporary tempering of class divisions.

As a final clincher on the need to belong to the correct class - in manners and dress, if not actually by birth, Elizabeth Aldrich offers a quotation from *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, published in London in 1832. Although the incident took place in America, the underlying premise would have found an easy match here in England. The author, Mrs. Frances Trollope, tells the sad story of a gentleman's disappointment at a ball -

I could not find (the girl) with whose lovely face I had been particularly struck, and I asked a gentleman why the beautiful Miss C. was not there.

'You do not yet understand our aristocracy,' he replied; 'the family of Miss C. are mechanics.'

'But, the young lady has been educated at the same school (as these others) and ... her brother has a shop in the town, quite as large, and apparently as prosperous, as those belonging to any of these young men. What is the difference?'

'He is a mechanic; he assists in making the articles he sells; the others call themselves merchants.'

(from *From the Ballroom to Hell*, p. 51)

We have looked at attempts to popularise country dancing and attempts to aid ordinary people to behave in daily life in a manner above that of what a class-conscious society might term their 'natural station'. However, it would seem that, despite the efforts of Nash and others like him, rank in the ballroom always found a way to rear its head and solve the problem offered by any attempt to impose class integration.

It would appear from the foregoing that country dancing, up to the beginning of the 20th century, did not, in any way, help towards the creation of a genuinely classless society. We might also suspect that, much like Playford, the dancing masters and also, probably, most of the Masters of Ceremonies at the formal Balls of the past were clearly aware of the impossibility, or even the desirability, of achieving true equality even though they were happy to sell copies of their books to all - gentry and aspiring gentlemen alike.

I would therefore conclude that, throughout most of the history of the country dance, there was little enough sense of true equality across the classes within most of the formal balls and even in the slightly less formal assemblies and very little - if any - after the music had stopped.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Playford published his first collection of country dances in 1651. The series ran successfully through 18 editions of the First Volume, with a succession of publishers. First after John was his son, Henry, who was in turn followed by John Young.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Keller published, as a CD, a comprehensive review of all the dances in the several editions of *The Dancing Master*. This was first presented in the UK at the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society's Conference, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> André Lorin presented two volumes of country dances – the second specifically on Christchurch Bells, which he called *Carillon d'Oxford*. An edition of his collection of such dances has recently been published by Julia Sutton and her co-editor, Rachele Palnick Tsachor.

<sup>4</sup> The collection of country dances by Bray was originally published in 1699. There have been two editions published in America. My own edition was published privately in 2001 under the title *Lovers Luck*. ISBN 0 9513733 3 1

<sup>5</sup> For further information on baroque step-practice see Wendy Hilton: *Dance of Court & Theatre – The French Noble Style, 1690-1725*, 1981, ISBN 0-903 102-61-7 and Philippa Waite: *Beauchamp-Feuillet Notation*, published in 1998: ISBN 0-9544423-0-X

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Kynaston, 1683-1757, possibly came from the Shropshire area. He wrote many dances, several published by Walsh between 1711 and 1722.

<sup>7</sup> John Walsh, a pre-eminent music publisher, also published several collections of dances in the early 18th century.

<sup>8</sup> An extremely useful edition of James Alexander's country dance notebook of 1730 is that by Kate Van Winkle Keller entitled *Country Dances from Colonial New York*, published in 2000 by the Country Dance Society, Boston Centre, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> A copy of the Collection of dances by Thomas Collett, probably published in 1756, is available from the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House, London.

<sup>10</sup> Information on the life and work of Beau Nash is easily available, not least through the internet.

<sup>11</sup> A valuable and informative edition of these dances, by Nicolas Broadbridge, has recently been published by Cecil Sharp House.

<sup>12</sup> William Hogarth was a painter, printmaker, pictorial satirist and social critic who wrote *The Analysis of Beauty* in 1753 as a study of the concept of beauty.

<sup>13</sup> Chas. & Samuel Thompson published several collections of country dances in the early 18th century.

<sup>14</sup> Quotations from the York Chronicle are taken from *Dancing and Social Assemblies in York*, by Barbara Peel, published by the National Resource Centre for Dance, University of Surrey, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Sir John Gallini was born in Florence in 1728 and died in London in 1805. He was a successful dancing-master and theatre choreographer who also wrote two books on dance.

<sup>16</sup> Henry William Bunbury, 1750-1811, was a prolific artist with a flare for caricature.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Wilson follows in the same tradition as Gallini. He published several collections of dances and also wrote copiously on how to achieve a good dancing style. Leigh Hunt, in his 1840 publication, *The Seer*, included this comment on Wilson - he was 'the author of several dramatic pieces and inductor of ladies and gentlemen into the shapely and salutary art of dancing'.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Rowlandson, 1756-1827, outdoes even the prolific Bunbury in output. He also excels in caricature, though often, as in the second picture used here, presenting a sympathetic twist to his criticism.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchas, 1797-1886, is best known for her *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*. These offer a delightful insight into the daily life of a Scottish community.

<sup>20</sup> This quotation is taken from a most delightful collection of commentaries on etiquette and the dance, called *From the Ballroom to Hell*, by Elizabeth Aldrich, 1991, ISBN 0-8101-0913-1

<sup>21</sup> Andrew MacDonald, 1757-1790, was a Scottish minister who was an accomplished violinist and fond of poetry and music. He used the pseudonym Matthew Bramble to disguise his authorship of his more satirical writings.