

## History of the St Andrew's Scottish Country Dance Group

In 1962 an advertisement appeared in the local paper re: meeting for those interested in forming a Scottish Dance Group in Canterbury. There were 6 at the first meeting, held at the Friends Meeting House, of whom one was Eileen Acott, who is here tonight. Eileen danced with the Charing 8 already. Two of those attending had never danced before. From this small beginning, where they did step practice and formations, the Dance group was formed.

With advertisements in the library, numbers attending the weekly dance meeting gradually increased and the fluctuated over the year. Then the two people who had initiated it had to leave the district taking with them their Gramophone!

A friend of Eileen's, called Laurie, who also danced with the Charing 8, suggested that she contact Kent Association of Scottish Dance Societies(KASS) and the London branch of RSCDS. They became members of both societies.

Eileen recalls that Laurie said to her "Canterbury is no problem. You can take it on and don't you dare let me down". As she says now "I haven't, have!". From then until now, 40 years later, she is still teaching us. Eileen had a record player, acquired records and started to teach this group, firstly in St. Andrews United Reform Church, hence our name 'St Andrews Scottish Country Dance Group'. Later it went back to the Friends Meeting House. Members were encouraged to go to dances organised by other clubs.

In 1965 the University of Kent came into being and Laurie suggested that a Scottish Dance Group was also started there. Permission was obtained and classes were led by him until 1968.

Briefly in 1968 Eileen also taught members of the Scottish Society at their request (at St. Dunstons) but numbers dwindled, so this was abandoned. However from time to time members have re-appeared at our St Andrews group to brush up on their 'Eightsome Reels'!

Later in 1968, Eileen took over the teaching of the University group, because Laurie had entered Christchurch College, to take up teaching as a career and could not cope with both.

The University group waxed and waned with the intakes of new students and each time the simple dances had to be re-taught. There was a core of dancers, mainly members of the Friends Meeting House who wanted to have purely social dancing without much in the way of teaching/walk throughs. Therefore this St Andrews group was reconstituted. Eileen was teaching at both the University group and 'unofficially teaching' at the St Andrews group.

My husband Mike, Diane and myself attended the first meeting of this newly reconstituted Canterbury group, which was supported by all the KASS groups, in 1977. Mike decided that he could not manage the complicated dances they were doing, without proper teaching, so we went to the 'Beginners class' at the University for the first year. Eileen found that she couldn't keep both groups going, so after about another year and a half, with lack of interest from the students, the University group stopped functioning. Eileen had taught them for 10 years.

We joined the St Andrews group, comprising of a total of about 30 people, of whom 14-20 came regularly. Finally we bought a tape recorder so the dances on the records could be taped.

By 1978 a Scottish Dancing Day school was held annually in the Dominican Priory, followed by a dance in the evening. Our first 'public' dance was to Bill Young's Band, at his band's 'exorbitant' rate of £10 for the whole evening: the charge for dancers being 75p per head!

However it was difficult to acquire new members because, if they did not know how to dance, they became disillusioned and left. Finally a Committee was formed with Mike as Chairman, Diane as Secretary and John Hildick-Smith as Treasurer. Rosemary, then Jean, joined and then Marion, Rita and a second Rosemary, and Jean's friend came as well.

In 1979 we formed a Demonstration Team that danced at numerous functions including Nunnery Fields Hospital at Christmas in two successive years.

About 1981 the Committee decided to introduce changes to the evening programme with a Beginners group from 7 to 8pm and a time for learning more advanced dances from 8 to 8.50. From 9 to 10pm there would be social dancing, taken by other members of the club. Unfortunately the Beginners Group never really took off and very few members wanted to take the social dancing except John Hildick-Smith, Jean, Rosemary, Diane & ourselves.

It was fortunate that we did some teaching at that time, because in 1983 Eileen had a fall, then concussion and was unable to attend for 9-12 months so it was a 'Do it Yourself' time in our club's life. We were particularly grateful to John who kept us going with his enthusiasm. Unfortunately he subsequently died about 3 years later during one of his favourite dances – the Irish Rover, which was why we have it on the programme tonight!

You can see why in 1983 it was decided to drop the Day School and just have our Spring Dance, which today has become our 40th Anniversary Ball.

The club went through a very bad patch in the late 1980s when we had virtually no money, and dwindling numbers. Mike took over the Treasurer's job and Jean Smith became Chairman. The Beginner's hour-long session was started again, but although we gained some members this way, we still tended to lose others.

During the early 1990s Ann and Dawn came and we had enough people again to have a set for Demonstration dancing. We encouraged interchange between the different Scottish Dancing groups, not just for dances. Several people came weekly from the Thanet group, including Pat and Malcolm and some of the Canterbury group went there regularly. Trips were organised further afield to St Andrews, Scarborough and Leeds. More people came and stayed.

In the late 1990s the club really took off in terms of numbers when Marion took on the job of teaching a Beginners group which was well advertised. This meant though that in terms of venue the Friend's Meeting house was not large enough. It was also occupied by 'the wicked witch of the west' the resident caretaker, who used to banish us on the stroke of 10 o'clock! So we moved, first to a Church Hall, with a hard cement floor, but rapidly switched to Barton Court school and finally to the gym at the Canterbury College of Technology.

For the new millennium we have a new Committee, the 'old' one having gratefully retired. We also have several people who can teach the dances, lots of people willing to help, a very vibrant club, which is fun to attend and where people come to laugh as well as improve their dancing. I personally would like to thank the Officers of the club, all those who have helped to prepare for this event and especially Marion who continues teaching the Beginner's group, so vital to the club's survival.

Finally we come to Eileen, who is still here, still teaching. Without her this club would never have started, or indeed survived. Eileen we salute you! Our heartfelt thanks go to you from all of us, past and present.

We would like to present you with this small token of our appreciation for your 40 years of dedication to the club and to Scottish dancing. A second more substantial token will be following later. Please all raise your glasses in a toast to Eileen!

Barbara J Armstrong

17th May 2003