

Beginners' ceilidh workshop notes

Before you read this

An English Ceilidh (pronounced *kaylee*) is designed so that anyone can turn up and have fun, with no prior experience or knowledge about what is going to happen. The more you do them, and the more you understand about how they work, the more fun you can have, and the beginners' ceilidh workshop and these notes are designed to give you that understanding sooner – but you don't *need* to know any of this to get started. The fastest way to learn is to do it, so if you are reading these notes in the middle of a ceilidh then put them down and start dancing!

What is a ceilidh?

Where they come from

Look at any culture or civilisation in the world, and you will find occasions where people get together to celebrate, or just to have a good time. And music and dance are usually involved. "Country dancing" originated in England centuries ago and has been slowly evolving ever since, and is sometimes also referred to as "barn dancing". English ceilidh (nicking the Scottish word) refers to an offshoot of the genre, emphasising innovation, high-energy dancing, and hot bands taking influences from every musical genre going. A few very old dances that have stood the test of time are still used, combined with more recently written dances, with new dances entering "the tradition" all the time!

Format of the evening

You can turn up to a ceilidh with a partner, on your own, or with a group of friends. In addition to the band, there is a "caller" on stage, who runs the evening and explains each dance.

For each dance, the caller announces the name of the dance, and its formation. You then quickly find a partner if you haven't got one already and get yourself into the required formation. When everyone is ready or the caller is tired of waiting (dancing time is precious), the caller teaches everyone how to do the dance by walking it once through. If it is really hard he (I'll use "he" for simplicity but of course it is just as likely to be a woman) might walk it through twice.

We then do the dance a number of times, usually lasting between four and six minutes or so. The caller keeps explaining the moves in the dance until he thinks everyone has got it or can work it out, at which point he gradually drops the calls to let you concentrate on the music. At the end, the next dance is announced and on we go.

At the beginning and end of the evening there is usually a polka, where people dance around the floor fast trying not to hit each other, with varying degrees of success (if you're not joining in, it's advisable to get off the floor!) There is usually a gap in the middle of the evening to get a beer, catch your breath, and watch a display of one kind or another.

Set formations

There are a number of different formations used, which you will quickly get to know. These are the most common. They could really do with some diagrams to help explain – apologies, I haven't had time to add them, and you will quickly get the idea when you do them.

3/4/5/6/8 couple longways

This is the simplest formation and is by far the most commonly used. Each set has a fixed number of couples.

You start facing your partner, with all the men standing in line next to one another with the band on their left, and all the women in the other line with the band on their right.

For the purposes of the dance, "up" is deemed to be towards the band, and "down" is deemed to be away from the band. The couple closest to the band is referred to as the first or "top" couple, the next couple is the second couple, etc.

Strictly speaking you keep your number for one turn through the dance, even though you will not stay in the same place. In practice only the first couple usually need to remember who they are. After one time

through the dance, you will be in new positions (most commonly the first couple have moved to the bottom of the set). This is called progression. At this point everyone gets new numbers and the dance starts again.

Usually the first couple do something special at some point in the dance, so it is worth paying attention to what they have to do during the walk through, so that you can do it when you become the first couple.

Square

This is always for 4 couples. You stand next to your partner, with one couple on each side of a square, facing the centre of the set. In each couple, the man stands on the left, and the woman on the right.

The couple closest to and with their backs to the music is the first couple. The couple to their right is the second couple, and so on for the third and fourth couple. Don't worry if you can't remember which way round it goes as the caller will usually remind you if it matters.

The first and third couples, with their backs to and facing the band respectively, are referred to collectively as "head" couples, and the others are collectively "side" couples.

Sicilian circle

In a Sicilian circle, you stand next to your partner in a big circle, facing either clockwise or anticlockwise around the circle. You face another couple and have your backs to a couple behind you. As in a square, the man is on the left and the woman on the right.

After one time through the dance, you will have moved past the couple you are facing, still facing the same way round the circle, and will be facing a new couple ready to start the dance with them.

Longways set

(Sometimes called "longways for as many as will", "long longways sets", or "longways duple minor".) You stand opposite your partner, much as in a fixed couple longways set described above, except that the set has as many couples in it as the floor will fit (typically 10 to 100!)

The couple closest to the music is called a first couple, the next one down is a second couple, then the next one is another first couple, the next one is another second couple, etc. You really need to know what number you are before the dance starts, so to work it out, everyone holds hands in rings of four people, usually by the top two couples taking hands in a ring, followed by the next two couples down, followed by the next two, etc. This is called taking "hands four from the top". In each group of two couples, the couple closest to the music is the first couple, and the other is the second couple.

One time through the dance will cause you to change places with the other couple, much as in a Sicilian circle. You then *keep your number*. If you were a first couple before, you are still a first couple, and you do the dance again with a new couple who are now hopefully standing below you in the set. Likewise if you were a second couple before, you are still a second couple, and do the dance again with a new first couple above you in the set. In this way, first couples move down the set on place at a time, and second couple's moved up the set.

If you keep doing this eventually you will reach the end of the set and run out of couples. At this point you stand out for one time through the dance, then come in again next time as the other number. It's usually a good idea to remind yourself how the other part works while you are standing out. Or you can just get to know your partner better if you haven't met before...

One other complication is that sometimes all the first couples are asked to change sides (technically referred to as being "improper") before the dance starts. The complication is that when you reach the end of the set you need to change places with your partner during the time standing out, before you start the dance again as the other number. These dances are pretty rare, but if you have just changed numbers at the end of a longways set and the person coming towards you is the wrong sex, this could be the reason why. Or you might just have run into a same-sex couple. Or a couple who fancied changing sides for a bit of fun!

Rules of engagement

Finding a partner

If you have brought a partner and you want to spend the evening dancing with that partner then that's fine. If you have a group of friends with you then you might also have plenty of people you wants to dance with. However if you haven't brought a partner, or your partner is tired, or you just fancy dancing with some other

people, then you will need to find a partner. In fact, if you're new to this, I strongly recommend you try dancing with other people, as you will learn a lot from them.

Asking someone to dance is not akin to asking them out for a date (unless perhaps the dance is a couple waltz, such as "Rozsa"). You will have a great time for about 10 minutes and then will most likely never see each other again. So don't be shy.

You have about 15 seconds to find a partner, so don't hang about! It is generally assumed that people sitting down at the sides do not want to dance, so if you just sit at the sides waiting for someone to ask you to dance then nothing will happen. If you want to find a partner, mill around in the centre of the floor, try to catch the eye of someone, and ask them to dance. If you were dancing the previous dance then you will already be on the floor and will be able to do this easily. If not you need to get onto the floor as soon as the previous dance has finished, otherwise you might be too late.

Once upon a time men asked the women to dance, but these days women are just as likely to ask men to dance. If someone asks you to dance and you don't want to, just say no – there is no time for complex etiquette, and they shouldn't be offended.

Same-sex couples are fine – but make sure you remember who is the man and who is the woman!

Forming a set

You should always find a partner before you find a set. Once you have found a partner, if you can see a set with a gap in it then join it. If it is a long longways set then join the shortest one. Otherwise if you can't see a set with a gap in it then start a new set. You need to make it obvious that you are starting a new set so put your hand in the air, or wave furiously, and people will normally join you. Another convention is to hold up as many fingers as couples are required. So if the dance requires 4 couple longways sets, and you are starting a new set, you would hold up three fingers as you need three more couples.

Another reason for putting your hand in the air while you need more couples is that it is something that the caller can see. On a big and crowded dance floor he can't count every set to see if it has the right number of couples, so the only thing he can do is to wait for the waving to stop and then assume that all the sets are made up. If you have your hand up he will almost certainly wait for your set to be complete, and will probably direct people in your direction if necessary.

For all kinds of longways set, you should always join at the bottom of the set. That way, if two couples arrive at the same time when there is only space for one more couple, it is obvious who got there first. Also, if it is a long longways set and people have started taking hands four (as described above), joining in the middle of the set is going to cause carnage for all those below you in the set, as they will change number!

Once you have a full set, don't let anyone else join – point out that they have just started a new set instead, and need more couples to join them. On a crowded dance floor it can be difficult for couples to work out which sets are full and which sets aren't, so make it obvious.

Having fun

There is no definition of the "correct" way to do English ceilidh dancing, although some ways are definitely better than others. The caller describes a basic way to do the dance, and from this you can add whatever embellishments, variations and extra figures (moves) you like *provided* that you don't make it less fun for other people in the set. Usually this means considering whether the other dancers are going to get confused by what you are doing.

You will probably come across people doing extra bits that the caller didn't describe. Sometimes a dance will have popular embellishments that lots of people like doing, and the caller might even briefly explain them. They aren't part of the "official" dance because, if they were, it would be too hard for newcomers to join in.

So don't be surprised when you see people doing different things. If it still fits, they probably meant it. If anyone tells you off for doing something "the wrong way" then you are free to ignore them (but try to work out what they mean because they may be suggesting a way that works better).

But above all, just have fun.

Newcomers' rights

Every now and then someone tells me that they don't want to dance because they are "afraid of messing it up for everyone else". Don't be. The future of English ceilidh relies on people like you having a go. Everyone is a beginner once, and you can't learn without making a few mistakes along the way. Besides, making mistakes is good fun too. You will work it out eventually.

People are almost always really helpful to newcomers. If you are unlucky enough to find someone who isn't then find someone else to dance with next time round!

The caller will usually start with simple dances building up to more complicated dances later, so start early!

Mixing sets

Who you dance with and where you dances with is up to you, but you will learn fastest if:

- You ask lots of different people to dance who have done this before.
- You and your partner dance with lots of other couples who have done this before.
- You join or form a set close to the caller. The caller often can't see what's going on at the other end of a crowded dance floor because of all the lights shining on him. If you are right underneath him he can do far more to help you.

Listening/helping

If you are obviously new to this, people will probably try to help. Remember the following:

- If someone tries to point you in a certain direction, go there! It is almost always better to move in a slightly random direction, than to stand rooted on the spot out of fear of getting it wrong. At least you're dancing that way.
- They may well be wrong! The caller isn't, and is generally paid to be on stage because he is good at explaining this stuff. Try to listen to what the caller has to say before you accept explanation from anyone else. Listening to lots of people at once can be very confusing.

If you are trying to help someone, note the above. Let the caller explain first, and never try to push them around!

The dance

The music

Most of the moves come in phrases of 8 counts (4 bars for the musically inclined). For example, a circle left and right takes 8 counts left, and 8 counts right. If you've never done any dancing before you might find it helps initially to count to 8 so you know when to start each move.

The band usually plays a tune of the same length as the dance, although they will often change the tune after a few times through. So if it all goes horribly wrong, get back into set, try to listen for when the tune sounds like it is starting again, and have another go. Or better still, copy what all the other sets are doing!

The moves

These are easier demonstrated than explained – time to stop reading and get dancing!