

DANSE PRESSIGNOISE: A Little History
“A Traditional, Social, Country Dance Club”



The Wedding Dance by Hans Bruegel the Elder, 1566
The first depiction of commoners dancing

Untangling the roots of traditional dance is a bit like researching the beginnings of soup. Over the centuries, and over great swathes of geography, people have exchanged ideas and styles, reflecting the personal preferences of individuals and groups, and perhaps also reflecting more subtle trends throughout time and place.

My intention is to try to make a start at explaining how the dances we perform at Danse Pressignoise¹ reflect the history of dance as it has evolved in the British Isles and more recently, in the (now former) colonies of the British Empire.

Many of the elements of our dances originated in medieval times, when people all across Europe, nobility as well as the common person, were taking an interest in one form or another of dancing in groups and in couples. (Well noted by the painter Bruegel as above.) By the time Francois 1er and Henry VIII met at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 for their 17-day extravagant attempt at friendship between their countries, the two royal courts were likely to know quite a few of the dances of the other court. By the time of the reign of

¹ Danse Pressignoise – <https://www.facebook.com/dansepressignoise>

Queen Elizabeth I of England (from 1558 to 1603) many new dances were composed and enjoyed by nobility and royalty in the stately homes and courts of England, in addition to the ones already well established in the public repertoire.

Elizabeth was a keen dancer and her subjects joined in. She was in fact so enthusiastic a dancer that she had a special handle built into her dancing dresses so that her male partners could lift her higher than any other female dancer in the room. (Not something we intend to try in Danse Pressignoise!) We should also say that there were dances in the countryside danced by the rural folk; both noble and rustic dances shared and exchanged movements.

The long and eventful Elizabethan era roughly corresponds to the reigns in France of Henri II, Francois II, Charles IX, Henri III and Henri IV.

At this time, all the courts and royal households of Europe were linked by a common feature – the French Language (YES even in England!). In England, this made it easy for the new breed of “Dancing Masters” to make a healthy living by travelling from court to court and grand house to grand house teaching the new dances, which were eventually transmitted throughout the British Isles.

In Elizabethan times, dances were written down so that people could remember the dance movements after the Dancing Master had moved on to the next household. It also meant that when people visited their neighbours, they would also be dancing the same steps. One of the first dance choreographers was Thoinot Arbeau². His book was called Orchesographie (1589) and takes the form of a discussion between Arbeau and his pupil, Capriol. He is responsible for many actions of etiquette to which we still adhere today (see final paragraphs) and made the first attempts to describe the dances in words. At the end of the 17th century John and Henry Playford collected English Dances and in the following centuries there have been many, many collections.

In the 21st Century (i.e.NOW) people write new dances and write new music in these styles all around the world.

The dances we practice today continue to use the original French descriptions for the various elements, and the composed dances continue to evolve.

Dance Instruction	English	French
Do-si-Do	Back to Back	Dos à dos
Allemande Left	With the left Hand	Avec la main gauche
Allemande Right	With the Right Hand	Avec la main droit
Balance	Balance	Balance
Circle	Circle	Cercle
Pousette	Pousette	Pousette
Honour your Partner	Honour	Révérance

Through the travels of these Elizabethan-era Dancing Masters the dances made their way into other countries, notably Wales, Scotland, and Ireland and through the mass migration

² Thoinot Arbeau’s Book – Orchesographie - <https://www.sjsu.edu/people/gordon.haramaki/courses/practice/s1/Arbeau-Orchesographie.pdf>

of Europeans to the New World, the United States of America. In each country the dances were adapted, changed, half-remembered and developed to include national styles.

In the 20th century an English teacher called Cecil Sharp began a systematic collection of dances from around England. He also travelled widely in the British Isles and in America and found many dances and pieces of music of a very similar nature in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky in the USA. The general population in this area of the USA came from the United Kingdom to start mining communities and, naturally, took their dance and music traditions with them.

Cecil Sharp was very influential during to 1920s and was able to start a national Dance and Song organisation, [The English Folk Dance and Song Society](https://www.efdss.org)³ which still exists today and has a headquarters in North London.

His influence was such that he was able to introduce English Country Dance and an element in the training of Primary School teachers. The result was that most English people danced their national dances, in school, at some point.

The result of this was that many dance groups formed throughout England and people continued the tradition of dancing which included the writing of new dances and the composition of new music. This activity was also continued in the USA where dances are either danced in an historical way in some dance clubs or are danced freely, with new compositions, in other venues.

The dances we dance in our club are described in the English language as “**traditional, social, country dances**” and they are largely from...

- **England**⁴ (with North / South variations and from the collected dances of the nobility. There is a national society dedicated to the promotion and preservation of English dance and song: The English Folk Dance and Song Society. (EFDSS)
- **Scotland**⁵ where we may dance traditional Scottish dance steps. There is a national Society for these social dances: The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS)
- **Wales** (we haven't danced one yet but we're working on it)
- **Ireland** where the folk dances are very similar to the English. Note that the term Irish Dancing in the English language generally refers to Irish Step Dancing⁶, very different from traditional folk dancing, and involves a series of complex stepping movements and special shoes. It's not a type of dance we will learn at Danse Pressignoise.
- **USA** (United States of America) –
 - In 1982, Square Dances were declared to be the American National Dance as the embodiment of teamwork and family.
 - Longways Dances / Contra Dances: These are modern aerobic dances where all the dancers move all the time. The less movement, the older the dance. (NB the French had Contra Dances in the 19th century.)

³ English Folk Dance and Song Society <https://www.efdss.org>

⁴ A collection of English styles

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIIOmCz0jFc&list=RDSIIOMCz0jFc&start_radio=1&rv=SIIOmCz0jFc&t=28

⁵ Scottish Social Dance - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7UoHY57df4>

⁶ Modern Irish Step Dancing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgGAzBDE454>

Quotes from Thoinot Arbeau:

- *“In dancing..... the young men sometimes steal the damsels from their partners and he who has been robbed seeks to obtain another damsel. But I do not hold with this behaviour because it may lead to quarrels and heart burning.”*
- *“... if you desire to marry you must realize that a mistress is won by the good temper and grace displayed while dancing... for dancing is practiced to reveal whether lovers are in good health and sound of limb, after which they are permitted to kiss their mistresses in order that they may touch and savour one another thus to ascertain if they are shapely or emit an unpleasant odour as of bad meat. Therefore, from this standpoint, quite apart from the many other advantages to be derived from dancing, it becomes an essential to a well-ordered society.”*

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La Richardière, Le Petit Pressigny, France

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