

THE OLD TIME DANCE SOCIETY & ME

by DAVID GRIFFITHS

As a Founder Member of O.T.D.S. in 1984, many people have asked me over the years how and why the Society came into being! To answer this, we must look back to the Old Time Dance Scene at that time. In the 1970's we owned and ran a hotel in Cliftonville, Kent, and, as the hotel had a large Ballroom, most of our clientele were Dance Club Holidays – "Old Time Dance Clubs" who came from all over the U.K. so we got to know and become great friends with so many, many old timers from right across the U.K.

All the clubs conformed to a very similar format – they took their old-time dancing very seriously, but the emphasis was on gaiety and enjoyment of dancing and this formula worked so incredibly well that the atmosphere was always mildly intoxicating – in the nicest possible way (without the costs or hangovers). But all this was to change beyond all recognition in a few short years.

In the early 1980's, Modern Sequence started to have a big impact and began to infiltrate the Old Time Clubs. At first it posed no threat – after all, what's wrong with a few New Dances? But for some reason, it didn't stop there!! What started as a harmless trickle of new dances quickly became a raging torrent, sweeping away everything in its path – mostly old time.

Nobody seemed to know what to do or how to deal with this, those who didn't mind, quickly adapted, but the old-time traditionalists had nowhere to go, many, if not most, gave up – this was NOT their kind of music and dance, they lost their very reason for wanting to dance. Within a few short years most of the clubs had changed beyond all recognition, gone was the happy carefree gaiety and friendship of old time, to be replaced by a stressed, white knuckled, competitive group of dancers who felt pressurized to keep learning more- and even more new dances – old time music and dancing had all but disappeared, something clearly had to be done, urgently!

It was witnessing this every night, that first prompted me to think up the idea of a specialized organisation - a Society to 'ring fence', protect and preserve the magic of Old Time Music & Dancing. I then canvassed all people whom I felt would support such a Society, at first with very limited success, as many felt the idea was impractical and unworkable because most professionals feared upsetting or offending their Dance Teaching Societies by supporting a Society – NOT recognized by them, but two people who were prepared to support this idea were Bryan Smith, the well known musician and recording artist, who played regularly for dancing at our hotel, and my old friend Cyril Cole who was on the Executive Committee of the B.A.T.D. as well as being an excellent M.C. (appearing as guest M.C. on Those Were The Days)

I organised a Weekend Seminar at the hotel for the following February 1984 and invited all interested persons to come along and support us in our quest. There was a reasonable response – probably more out of curiosity than anything else. The price was kept artificially low plus Bryan had invited some (non-paying) dignitaries such as Nancy Clark (President of I.D.T.A. and inventor of Sherrie Saunter), Roger Billington – (Butlins Chief Festival organiser), plus others including Bryan and his Musicians (all whom had to be paid for playing) leaving us with a considerable financial loss for the weekend! However, the result was good, a Society was formed on Sunday 19th February 1984, but all the Professionals present still feared offending the dance teaching Societies so the New Society's name should make it clear to all that it was not a proper dance teaching Society, as a result it was given the ridiculous name of 'The Society for the Appreciation of Old Time Music & Dancing – quite a mouthful!

I then opened a Membership Book for anyone wishing to become a member of this new Society, I wrote my own name in the book and was No 1, Wendy was No 2, Bryan No 3 & so on, I invited others to do the same. I then asked Bryan Smith to be our First President, Cyril Cole First

Chairman and Wendy the Secretary and Treasurer – that day we gained our first 50 members – but its initial success was short lived.

Bryan Smith, who had made many excellent recordings for the Dansan label and many others, wanted to set up in business his own Record Company but hadn't the finance, so he asked me to go into partnership with him – he would provide the musical expertise and I would provide the finance and accountancy and business expertise. We then set up a partnership and called the company 'Savoy Records' and Bryan quickly got on with producing some new recordings for the newly formed Savoy.

After some time, when the recordings failed to appear, we chased Bryan up and it was then that he dropped his bombshell – he had changed his mind and was going to set up his own record label – B.S. Productions and release these recordings (that I had paid for) – on his own label – this, clearly was NOT in the script!!

There followed a protracted legal battle between us and Bryan to get our money back (which we eventually did) but the damage had been done.

The person whom I had invited to be President and I were on opposite sides of a great divide – Bryan, one of the greatest old-time musicians of the day, an extremely popular recording and broadcasting artist with much influence and very well known in the dance world – and I – well – wasn't! ---- But where did this leave The Old Time Dance Society?

It was under such circumstances that I decided that our differences should NOT be fought out in the very public arena of the newly formed Old Time Society (which it had already started to do) but rather in the market place of record sales – Savoy versus B.S. Productions – well away for the O.T.Society – but all of this made my own position in the society as untenable – I felt that in the best interests of this new fledgling Society, Bryan's presence as it's figure head was vital for it's future – mine was not.

And so, I decided to resign from the Society and move it to a place of safety where it could grow and flourish and guarantee its future survival – far, far away from our grubby little squabbles so I had to find a person to hand the Society over to – someone who firstly had a great love of old time, trustworthy and honest, a safe pair of hands, and yet! Very importantly, acceptable to President Bryan Smith.

I was very fortunate to find such a person in Fred Boast. Fred & Bryan grew up together – lived in the same street – went to the same school and Fred was one of the original Founders Members with us at the hotel in 1984. I should perhaps point out at this stage that neither Fred nor anybody else knew ANY of this, so that nothing should detract from the Society's future.

However I was free to pursue my other great love - old time music - and over the years I have been fortunate to have produced and re-produced, on both Savoy & Dancetime, one of the finest collections of traditional old time recordings ever produced (including some of my Old Friend - Bryan Smith) all of which had to be heavily subsidised by the more profitable Modern Sequence recordings – But justice for old time had been accomplished – the very reason Savoy was originally formed in 1984 was to produce old time music.

Sadly, I was to play no further part in the Society's future development, for obvious reasons, and it was not until the Society's 25th Anniversary in 2009, when, out of the blue, we received an Invitation as Founder Members to be guests at it's 25th Anniversary Ball, which we were delighted to accept.

Since then history has repeated itself and we again resigned from OTDS because of the problems at the 2015 AGM and the use of Classical Sequence dances at old time events. The future lies with ENOTDS.

