



# the reel

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## GREEN GINGER—What's in a Name?

SINCE this is one of two questions we are often asked, perhaps we should begin by explaining where our name comes from. It's really rather simple – the "Green" is because Ian and Meryl do a lot of recycling and try to be environmentally friendly; the "Ginger" is because Cas and Meryl have always loved cooking with ginger and use a lot of it when they do. Put together it mixes well with whisky!

The second question is: "Why don't you have an accordion in the band?" This was often asked when we started playing for Scottish dancing four years ago, because it is still considered unusual not to have an accordion as it is what people are used to. All three of us are fascinated by eighteenth century fiddle music. Such composers as Niel Gow, Robert Mackintosh and William Marshall wrote wonderful tunes, some of which are seldom played nowadays and which we feel very strongly should come to light. We, therefore, spend a large amount of time trawling through manuscripts looking for music. There are few things more satisfying than people dancing to a tune which is 200 years old and whooping with excitement. There are so many new tunes being published, some of which are good but a lot are pretty awful – some don't even sound Scottish! This is particularly true of strathspeys. Many modern strathspey tunes are weak and uninspiring – they make you crave what we call a fiery strathspey which gets the blood racing through your veins. It is very interesting as a band to see how dancers react to strong fiddle music; their whole style of dancing can change in an instant.

We met playing in an English barn dance band and later played for historical dance from seventeenth century country dances to dances from the Edwardian era. We were also asked to play at weddings with a diverse repertoire ranging from classical to Scott Joplin. We became interested in Scottish music after having heard the fiddler Alastair Fraser playing "Lady Louisa Gordon" by William Marshall. Then we watched a few dance classes, had a go ourselves and finally started playing at Irene Edgar's Reigate class each month, dancing for the first three weeks and playing for the fourth. This gave us invaluable experience and has led to where we are today. We have never felt the need for an accordion—why copy everyone else? We wanted to provide something different—a lively, interesting sound with harmonies to listen to and we also wanted to show that you can dance to just fiddles and piano.

We take pains to arrange our music and make sure that our accompanying tunes fit well with the original. We spend time writing harmonies for each tune we play, to give us a different sound.

Our tune database has now reached over 2000. (Thank goodness for computers and electronic music publishing). Cas and Meryl have even developed their own shorthand for keying in tunes and spend blissful hours discovering new gems to add to the repertoire. In doing this, we've discovered different types of dance tunes, such as 3/2 hornpipes, slow jigs, the strathspey minuet and sets of dances which must have been used as "party pieces" or perhaps staged in a theatre. Sometime in the future we plan to work with a baroque dancer

27th October combined appreciative, friendly dancers with superb organisation and great enthusiasm throughout. As a visiting band we were looked after from the moment we arrived and were made to feel very welcome. Everything had been thought of, from the supplying and setting up of amplification on the night of the ball to organising transport for us to and from the airport. It was also lovely to meet old friends and make new ones and the beautiful scenery put the finishing touch on a great weekend. On both of these occasions it

was great to see such enthusiastic dancers from throughout Europe united in enjoyment of Scottish music and dance.

At the RSCDS Summer School this year we played as a band and for classes. We had a very enjoyable and busy time, not only playing for classes but also meeting and playing with other musicians, discussing music and exchanging ideas. Even the one evening we went to a pub led to joining in a session with a group of local musicians, taking over half the pub!

Life is certainly not boring when playing, whether for Scottish Country Dancing, reeling, weddings, ceilidhs or concerts. We played for a birthday party last year where the room caught fire and we had

to evacuate. Needless to say we refused to budge without grabbing the instruments first. Just before the start of a dance this year, the fingerboard came unstuck from Ian's fiddle and we had to bind it to the neck of the fiddle with masking tape—interestingly, no-one seemed to notice! We have great fun playing for reeling where every dance is played at breakneck speed and goes on for 15-20 minutes. After this everyone disappears for 10 minutes to recover, returning refreshed to start all over again.

Whatever we play for, we always have great fun and we hope this is communicated to the audience, be it dancers or spectators. It gives us a great feeling to see people enjoying our music and responding to the tunes we choose to play. After all, Scottish music and dance has always been about people having a good time and the rapport between musicians and dancers is a significant part of that. As a band we shall continue to stretch ourselves musically, but more importantly we will carry on having fun while playing the music we love.

**Meryl & Ian Thomson and Cas Sloan**



Cas, Ian and Meryl (left to right)

and music coach to get an idea of the style of the music. This includes learning the steps and he also said he'd teach us baroque gestures! We've also been playing nineteenth century quadrilles and lancers for a friend who is an expert in nineteenth century dance which led to us playing for the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Summer School. A more classical style is required to suit this music and type of dance.

During the last three years the band has branched out in various different ways. We produced our first CD "Gang on the Same Gate", which gave us the opportunity to record a lot of the music we are interested in. This year, Ian and Meryl played for classes in Cape Breton step dancing and dances from Shetland and the Northern Isles taught by Mats Melin, which were great fun and gave them a chance to play in a different style, exploring the close bonds between musicians and dancers in this type of music. For example in the Shetland four couple reel the musicians are expected to put in an extra bar or two to give dancers time to finish a complicated reel.

In June this year the band played its first overseas and very enjoyable engagement in Luxembourg. Our recent trip to play in Rechberg for their 30th anniversary ball on