

Hastings & St Leonard's Country Dance Club - November 2011

The Hastings and St Leonard's Folk Dance Group was founded by Claire Kaley with her husband Bob in 1966. Claire died about 4 years ago, but Bob is alive and well, and living in Bexhill and has passed many of Claire's dance books and tapes to the Club. Claire wrote many dances and also music, and played the accordion (and I think keyboard/organ).

The Club was registered with EFDSS on 1st Nov 1966. At that time they met in St Ethelburga's Church Hall, St Saviour's Rd, St Leonard's – Claire and Bob lived in that road.

Roger Munday was one of the first members, being persuaded to try out the club after meeting Claire and Bob at a barn dance they were calling at Hurst Green. He lived in Bulverhythe Rd, a short distance from St Ethelburga's and was soon drafted into "The Sussex Weavers", a very active display team started by Claire. A member of the Magham Down Club persuaded a young lady, Elizabeth, to dance in the team, and Roger and Elizabeth became dancing partners and married in due course. Elizabeth now runs the Magham Down Club, while Roger tends to organise the music and also plays melodeon a in barn dance band.

Joan and Harold Downing arrived at the Club in 1970 when they moved from Kent, Harold becoming Chairman when Claire and Bob moved from Hastings in 1975. He was helped in calling by Muriel Treasure, David Ashworth, Molly Ransome, and later Doug Eaton, Ruth Kettel, Cecile Houghton and Janice Bolton. Harold resigned as Chairman in 1993, and was followed as Chairman by Joan, and then by Doug Eaton, Kate Eaton and currently Ginny James.

The Club's membership has gone up and down over the years. In the past, there were often 30 - 40 dancers at a Club evening, while the Christmas dances could attract 90-100 people. There were coach trips to the annual Folk Festival at the Albert Hall, and a wonderful annual dinner dance, masterminded by Joan. Dick Reed often called for these, with music typically provided by "Denis and Jim", or "Two's Company". Muriel ran "The Dancing English" display team, and some of the more energetic members started long sword and rapper sword dancing as "The Bunch of Fives", both doing displays at events like village fetes. There were club week-ends and days of dance based at Blacklands Farm Guide campsite near East Grinstead.

Harold started and called for the monthly "Hastings Hops" at St Ethelburga's. These still continue with outside callers, but at Ninfield which is more central for other dancers in the area. The Club also holds bigger Spring and Christmas dances, although falling numbers have meant that we cannot afford to have live music as often as in the past.

After falling attendances coincided with St Ethelburga's hall becoming dilapidated and rather off-putting, the Club moved to St Matthew's Church Centre, Silverhill in 2002, and was re-named as Hastings & St Leonard's Country Dance Club. This attracted a new set of members, who have proved to be a friendly and welcoming group of people who really enjoy their dancing. There are over 40 members, with a average attendance of around 25.

As in other clubs, the numbers these days are much lower (and members older), but we still have a healthy attendance compared to many and are regarded as a very friendly club. Some members seem to come mainly for the social aspect; others are keen enough dancers to go away to folk festival week-ends or even weeks at places like Chippenham, Sidmouth, Broadstairs and Eastbourne – but all enjoy the Tuesday evenings dancing together.

The Club celebrated its 45th Anniversary in November 2011. We had a special Club evening on 1st November, with Moira Underwood calling; Walter White called at the Ninfield dance on 12th November, and his programme included dances written by Claire Kaley, and favourite dances of Harold Downing and club members over the years. Bob Kaley, despite having just come out of hospital, was a special guest. We were also pleased to see Roger Munday, and David Ashworth who had travelled from Essex. Bob cut the cake, helped by Roger, David, Doug Eaton and Joan Downing. It was a happy and memorable evening.