

What Our Dances Are Like

What is English Country Dance?

English Country Dance is an old dance form revived for modern dancers. It can claim square and contra dance as descendants. The musicologist and folklorist Cecil Sharp began the revival of ECD in the 1910s, interpreting old texts and living village traditions; we now delight in dances as old as Boston itself, and new dances that use old figures in new ways. Our dances are not solos (like club dancing) or duets (like waltzes) but ask for the cooperation of four, six, or many more.

Why dance without gender roles?

Gender-free dancing includes and celebrates all the dancers, and emphasizes the balance and symmetry of the dances. In dancing with everyone else there, we create community, both on and off the dance floor: our dancers move together to make it all happen. We owe this approach to Carl Wittman (1943-1986), who recognized that dancers didn't need to be divided into male-female couples. English Country Dance, with its attention to symmetries of form, is especially suitable to gender-free dancing: each dancer in every position has an important role to play. We describe movement in ways that de-emphasize gender roles and couples, and use simple cue words based on position.

What happens at the dance?

The "caller" announces the dance by name, and dancers form "sets": often a "longways" set, two lines of people facing each other down the room, but there are other types. There's no need to bring a partner to the evening, or to the dance floor: you find your dance partner across from you in the lines, on either side. The caller explains the figures, and the dancers will "walk through" them (i.e., without music). Then the music starts, and, to the caller's gentle cues, the magic of English Country Dance begins.

Dance list

In English Country Dance each dance has a name and a piece of music that corresponds to the dance (frequently with the same name). During each evening session the name of the each dance is recorded on a white board and then transcribed.