Creating Accessible and Inclusive Folk Dance

Folk Education Development Day

Cecil Sharp House, London NW1 7AY
Saturday 15 March 2025

Presented by the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Folk Education Network and Dance Development Programme

Review by Kate Wilkinson



Photo: Poppy Price-Dowhan, calling an accessible ceilidh dance. © EFDSS, by Ciaran Trevana

I approached Cecil Sharp House, home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), on a beautiful sunny morning with excitement because despite being involved in folk dance for about a decade, I had never actually been to the building that I considered the heart of all things 'folk'. After a warm welcome from Kerry Fletcher, who is the Folk Education Network Co-ordinator and Jen who is the Dance Development Manager for EFDSS, I knew I would be in for a treat. Jen was the perfect host for this event with her background in care and accessibility and a passion for dance, accessibility and inclusion. As well as being Chair of Open Morris, and her work at EFDSS, Jen also organises ceilidhs and the is the dance coordinator for festivals. She highlighted the 'disability tax', referring to the extra work people with disabilities need to do to access events. Jen's dream is that every event is inclusive and accessible.

The day opened with a keynote speech from Janet Bell. Janet is a highly skilled and inspiring wheelchair dancer and a dedicated advocate for accessibility. Janet described herself as a talented 'ranter' and advocate for accessibility. Janet grew up in folk dance and loved going to ceilidhs. After experiencing symptoms of Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, she began to dance in a wheelchair. She now has a wheelchair which can be programmed for wheelchair dancing. She found buildings often inaccessible to her, which resulted in having to send lots of angry letters and strongly worded emails. Janet also found that there can be a culture in the folk world of preserving traditions and not wanting to change, which has resulted in her experiencing rudeness and hostilities at ceilidhs.

Janet proposed that making accessible information available set the agenda, and people who are hostile to this level of accessibility can then choose not to go. Having a single point of access for queries would reduce the need for having to go to the trouble of finding out if an event will be accessible. This information could be included on the website; loudness, timelines, access to the bar and hearing loops. There are also considerations about how people interact with a space at an event, including moving within it, hearing what is going on, seeing what is happening as well as communication with staff and other customers. Janet highlighted that it would be beneficial to make the most of what already exists, for example, using features which are there to their fullest and training staff about using accessibility features. It is imperative that everyone's needs are met. Janet concluded her talk by asking "why bother?" Followed by a very powerful statement stating that ultimately "we want everyone to have a fantastic time and accessibility is JOYFUL!" Accessibility is one more way of showing love for and sharing joy with our community.

The next session was presented by Penny Lury who is the Co-Leader of Milkmaid Molly and former SEN/D school teacher who presented alongside Mrs Gill Bosley, the founder of Milkmaid Molly Milkmaid Molly are a music and dance performance group for adults with learning disabilities and non-disabled dancers and musicians. Penny explained the background to how she came to set up Milk Maid Molly in 2014, which is an inclusive morris side. It was great to hear the details of how they organise the dance side to be inclusive, including adaptations to dances to suit their members' needs, support from volunteer buddies, to how they organise and attend events in their local area. Penny highlighted that the buddies are 'enablers' not carers. Some of the buddies previously had no background in dance and/or learning disabilities so they have had to train people. Starting each practice with the Circassian Circle dance gives a routine and structure to their practices. Their events include pub night where they invite other morris sides to them (in a sports club with a bar and accessible toilets). They have performed at Ely Folk Festival, the Apex

in Bury St Edmunds, care homes and Stowmarket Traditional Music Day. It is difficult for the dancers (known as ‘Mollies’) to go to festivals and Days of Dance as they have to keep changing venue and it is better for their members to stay in one dance spot. When not dancing, the dancers play percussion and join the band.

It was great to see some video footage of the Mollies to get a sense of how they have adapted their dances. It was clear how much fun everyone has dancing together. I felt really inspired by hearing about the Milkmaid Mollies. It would be amazing if there were more groups like this in every area.

After a short break, Lisa Heywood and Poppy Price-Dowhan presented the findings from their Accessible Ceilidh Project. Lisa and Poppy are both experienced ceilidh callers and folk dancers. Lisa and Poppy have been collaborating to research the experiences of disabled ceilidh dancers. With funding from an EFDSS mini grant they surveyed over 100 dancers. Lisa has been working on the Accessible Ceilidh Project with Poppy remotely and it was exciting for them to meet in person for the first time at this event. They both brought a wealth of experience, with Lisa having worked as the Access Manager for Drake Music as well as being a Shooting Roots Youth Worker. It was through Lisa’s work with Shooting Roots where she first experienced the challenges of booking an accessible venue. Poppy is a ceilidh dancer and as a wheelchair user, has lived experience of the barriers to accessing certain venues. Some of the accessibility issues to consider include; getting to the venue, availability of Blue Badge parking, is there level access both inside and outside the venue? is there a Hearing Loop? is there a quiet space? This information needs to be listed as access features for an event to prevent people having to keep contacting organisers for more specific information. Poppy emphasised that it is difficult for disabled people who aren’t already embedded in the folk world to access ceilidhs for the first time, which is something she would like to address, and the next stage of the research project will focus on learning from disabled people who don’t already go to ceilidhs.

Poppy set up her own accessible ceilidh group and began to work out how to dance with a chair alongside able bodied people. It was a great place to be able to develop her ideas. She said that it is important to note that dancers don’t have to do exactly what the caller says and can adapt the dance for their own needs. Poppy also realised that having more A and B parts in the music enables people to have more time to do all the parts of the dance. Other aspects which could make a ceilidh more accessible includes callers making people aware of the level of physical contact for the dance and whether you dance with your partner for the whole dance or whether it is a mixer dance, where you will dance with multiple partners. It is also important to consider the length of dances and the speed which allows people to take short breaks, knowing the type of dance e.g. is it a hop-step or a waltz? how long will the dance be? The clarity of the caller is key to many of these points. It would be also helpful if the caller asked about the adaptive needs of their participants. Poppy’s advice for callers is to set the tone of the ceilidh in the introduction by stating that you can adapt the dances to suit your body and that ceilidh dancing is a group activity, and participants need to look after each other and consider everybody’s needs. Dances need to be introduced taking into consideration that some dancers may not be regular ceilidh dancers, so may need a bit more explanation e.g. strip the willow involves lots of spinning!

It was great to then put what we had heard in the talk into practice with the guidance of Poppy. We worked in small groups to adapt a dance, taking into consideration a specific need. My group adapted the dance for a dancer only able to do a left-hand star and for someone who needed more time for each of the moves. It was really helpful to have this experience of adapting a dance and sharing each other's ideas as it really made us think about how accessible or inaccessible a group dance may be and what we need to do in order to be inclusive.

After lunch, Emmie Ward is the lead tutor, and Roary Neat, tutor for EFDSS' Inclusive Folk programme for learning disabled young people, funded by John Lyon's Charity, presented their learning resource, Dancing Days: Using Folk Arts in Inclusive Settings. Emmie and Roary have lead workshops in schools and colleges where they have developed some fantastic activities which make learning dances both fun and accessible. I felt that even though the resource was developed for 12-30 year olds, elements of the approach could be used with any age group. They included dances with a song in them, so when people are singing they aren't moving so people can alternate between singing and dancing. The song at the beginning of the dance is great for getting people's attention, when performing the dance. Both a rapper and a Cotswold morris 'calling on' song has been adapted to use at the beginning of the dance. The traditional use of sticks in the dance was adapted to make it more accessible by using foam pool noodles or ribbons. Dancers can also wear bells and use body percussion for creating sounds. Colour- coded cards are placed in different parts of the room, which can be used for helping dancers to change directions in the dance.

We then had an opportunity to try both an adapted rapper dance and Cotswold morris dance using some of the techniques from the resource brilliantly accompanied by musician Seth Bye. We learnt a short song and had lots of fun using our pool noodle sticks for our dance. The use of colour coded cards to orientate the dance was particularly effective and is a fantastic idea to help people learn dances, without having to use left and right. Having the opportunity to learn a dance in this way, was a brilliant way to experience how dances can be adapted and has given me lots of ideas about how to incorporate these when I lead a community dance group.

The next presentation was from Laura Dajao aka LauraDDances, a freelance inclusive dance artist, and Louise Katerega, Head of Professional Development at People Dancing and a freelance dance artist. They presented People Dancing's work with disabled people and its professional development programme. Louise started us off with a quick warm up, which was really appreciated to boost our energy at that time of the afternoon! Laura gave a powerful and engaging talk on the theme 'It's not about making things better', speaking from her background in hip-hop dance. Both Laura and Lousie used the mnemonic 'REAL*' to emphasise important aspects of inclusive dance practice, personal to them before asking 'What's Next' and highlighting the need for disabled people as leaders and choreographers. The important points which I took away from Laura are that it is important to do research, so you fully understand who you are working with, having agency to work within your own remit. Louise reflected on her lived experience and emphasised the need to respect people and assume that someone is cognitively able and regarded as a dancer and as an artist first and foremost.

*R.E.A.L Relationships: Research, Expectation, Advocacy, Lived Experience AND Respect, Empowered, Artistic, Longterm

The final session of the day was from Sara Marshall-Rose, Co-Director of, and a dance artist with FOLK3D, as well as a dance movement psychotherapist in private practice. Sara talked about her work, including Folk 3D's inclusive daytime ceilidh series aimed at older adults in the local community, and their families funded by a mini grant from EFDSS in 2024 . The ceilidh has live music and props. They used a combination of existing dances which have been adapted for the participants, as well as coming up with some new choreography. As ceilidhs are often late in the day, this can exclude some groups of people from attending so having it earlier in the day made it more accessible. One of the dance adaptations was to seat people in the middle of the set with others moving around them in the circle. Sara highlighted that it was important for people to be able to access the activity even without necessarily joining in, reducing any pressure and allowing people to do things in their own time. Coloured scarves were a useful prop as it allowed people of different heights to connect to each other by holding one end each. The scarves were used in the bourrée dance to connect people instead of hand holds. The dances were kept short, and Sara emphasised that the caller needed to monitor people's energy levels and adapt the dance accordingly. The accessible daytime ceilidhs are a fantastic idea and I felt that this model could be used by others to create similar more accessible opportunities.

I loved the creativity displayed by everyone in the room during the practical workshop. We all improvised some movements using scarves and ribbons to the beautiful sounds of Jen Cox playing tunes on the whistle. There was something very freeing about not having too much direction and allowing your body to move however you feel inspired to. We danced individually, but very soon began to interact with others in the room in fun and playful ways, with lots of mirroring and communication through gesture and facial expression rather than spoken word. This gradually became a slightly more structured dance, which I felt was engaging, creative, connecting and a joyful experience.

The day concluded with a panel discussion and round up facilitated by Jen Cox. The key points I took away from this is that accessibility benefits everybody and we all need accessibility rights. Accessible practice needs to be standard and mainstream, and we need to be both brave and curious as practitioners and lead by example.

This was an incredibly inspiring day with an amazing wealth of knowledge and experience shared by everyone in the room. There were lots of ideas about how to take things forward at both an organisation level as well as individual practitioners in the field. It will have planted lots of seeds and I'm sure everyone who attended will make sure these seeds are nurtured to grow and flourish!

Kate Wilkinson is a Community Music Practitioner, based in Oxfordshire.
Kate works a community musician in a number of settings including with Soundabout (music making with learning disabled people), hospitals, day centres and care homes with people of all ages (currently 4-104!). Kate has also facilitated community dance sessions, with her most recent projects taking place in a community hospital and a stroke rehabilitation ward. Kate loves to include adapted and accessible morris dances into her sessions.

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