

BLACKPOOL DANCE FESTIVAL

In Praise of the Iconic

By Keith Todd

Many sports have an "iconic" event. These events either by dint of their age or prestige, become the meter by which the athletes or participants are judged the world over. They are often steeped in tradition and just as often the thrill of winning supercedes any monetary rewards.

In dancesport we have one of these iconic events and it is of course the Blackpool Dance Festival. This is the oldest surviving dance festival in the world and to become a "Blackpool Champion" is probably still the greatest accolade for any dancer.

This year's festival is almost upon us but the venerable institution faces obstacles as never before in the form of boycotts by some countries' dancers. We at Dance Beat neither condemn nor condone these actions. Indeed there is much about the Blackpool Festival that we have taken issue against in the past. However, the fact remains that "Blackpool" is our iconic event in the dance industry and we destroy it at our peril. Lessen it and we fear there is nothing to take its place, no symbol of our continuing history.

Brigitt Mayer in her book, *Ballroom Icons*, made many references to the Blackpool Festival and she has graciously strung them together for us in our tribute to the "Grande Dame" of ballroom dance competitions. We hope you enjoy perusing the iconic and to the organizers of the festival we say, "keep what you have, but don't be afraid of change."

The early years of the Blackpool Dance Festival by Brigitt Mayer

This is a compilation of a variety of excerpts from Brigitt Mayer's book Ballroom Icons regarding the Blackpool Dance Festival.

"Its magnetic attraction for dancers everywhere amounts to an irresistible compulsive obsession! The British Open titles were always, and still are, the championships that you, I and every other competitor, past present and future, wanted or wants to win more than anything!"

Harry Smith-Hampshire summed it up!

The significance of the Blackpool Dance Festival is enormous and has not been surpassed by any other dance festival in the world. In its first four decades it drew dancers from all over Britain, but relatively few from overseas. Now, it's completely the opposite.

Harry continued: "But if Blackpool is important to DanceSport, then equally, DanceSport is important to Blackpool. More money is spent in the town's hotels, boarding houses, shops, restaurants,

etc., each year by this open-to-the-world dance festival than by any other function including main party political conferences."

The earliest championship, which produced winners like Alec Millar and Phyllis Haylor in the late 1920s, was The Star Championship in London. It was launched in 1925 and was undoubtedly the most prestigious until after the war.

The significance of the Blackpool Festival increased gradually with the change of its format over the decades. In the early years it was very much a North of England Championship with considerable accent on stage and sequence¹ dancing. It was not until the postwar period that overseas interest began to

¹ Sequence dancing is a form of dance in which a predetermined pattern of movements is followed. It had its origins in London in the early 1900s

develop and spread so greatly.

The Tower Ballroom in Blackpool was built between 1897 and 1898. It was commissioned by the Blackpool Tower Company in response to the opening of the Empress Ballroom in the Winter Gardens, which had its grand opening in 1878. The Tower Ballroom is still one of the most magnificent ballrooms in the world. Each crystal chandelier can be lowered to the floor to be cleaned, which takes over a week.

The BBC televised the Come Dancing series from the Tower Ballroom for many years and it also hosted shows from Strictly Come Dancing (Dancing with the Stars in the US). The Blackpool Junior Dance Festival has been held each year in the ballroom since 1964.

It's not quite clear anymore who the original brainchild of the Blackpool Dance Festival was, Mr. Harry Wood, musical director of the Winter Gardens, or Mr. Nelson Sharples, music publisher of Blackpool. Mr. Sharples published all the sheet music for the Tower and Empress Ballrooms. It doesn't really matter today. The important thing is, it happened.

During Easter week in 1920, the first Blackpool Dance Festival was held in the Empress Ballroom of the Winter Gardens. The dances were sequence dances like waltzes, lancers and two-step, and many new dances emerged. All the big ballrooms had in-house masters of the ceremonies who dressed in tails, and "ruled" the ballrooms. They invented novelty dances at least one a year, decided what dances were played, and watched for inappropriate behaviour in the ballroom. But they are not to be mistaken for the chairman of the adjudicators.

The first chairman of the adjudicators for the Blackpool Dance Festival was James Finnigan, Julie Laird's great-grandfather. He did it for two years and then his daughter Ethel for another two.

In 1928 the Blackpool Tower Company merged with the Winter Gardens and Pavilion Company and embarked on a policy of improvement and expansion. The Dance Festival took on the North of England Championship, and by 1931, the British Professional and Amateur Championship titles were inaugurated.

During the war, there was only a limited Festival in 1940 and everything was closed thereafter until 1946.

In 1946, P.J. Richardson became the first emcee and chairman of the adjudicators (in one person) and this stayed the tradition from then on.

Henry Jacques and Mavis Deeming were one of the famous couples of the 1930s and '40s. They caused a sensation at the newly established British at the Dance Festival in Blackpool. After extensive renovations to the Blackpool Winter Gardens in 1931, the Empress Ballroom had a whole new look, and the first Blackpool Dance Festival, larger now than in previous years, took place. The coveted British titles came into being, and what had been exclusively a North of England Championship (including Scotland 1920-'30), was now "open"

to the rest of Great Britain and in fact the world; although no competitors from abroad came. The first international entries were seen in 1934.

This competition is officially called the Blackpool Dance Festival, but is also referred to as the British Open or just Blackpool. Henry and Mavis were third in the 1930 North of England Championship. In 1931 at the first British Professional they placed second to another brilliant couple, Maxwell Steward and Pat Sykes. The 1932 Championship became a sensation when it was announced by chairman P.J. that Henry and Mavis and Timothy Palmer and Kathleen Price were tied and had to "dance it off."

P.J. wrote that "the applause was so deafening, I doubt if the dancers could hear the music. Timothy and Kathleen won the re-dance. The following year Henry was in Australia, but in 1934 he came back into the fray, and for three successive years he and Mavis were the undefeated British Professional champions."

British Professional Finalists of 1936:

British Professional Finalists of 1939

Henry Jacques/Mavis Deeming
Timothy Palmer/Ella Spowart
Cyril Farmer/Adela Roscoe
Sydney Lee/Vera Dunham

Timothy Palmer/Kathleen Price
James Holland/Elsa Wells
Claude Watts/Mimi Cutler
Duggie Wylie/Gertrude Clark
and Juan/Rosa Kaye

Juan/Rosa Kaye were tied

British Amateur Finalists of 1939

Bobby Israel/Irene Brown
Bob Stanley/Renee Pear
Victor Barrett/Marie Taylor and
Syd Perkin/Laura Dixon were tied



Len Scrivener & Nellie Duggan

Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Len Scrivener and Nellie Duggan became finalists of seven British Open Championships from 1946 to 1948 (1941-45 no competitions were held). Charles Thiebault and Doreen Beahan were first, Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes second, Len and Nellie third and Arthur Norton and Pat Eaton fourth. In 1946 and '47 John Wells and Renee Sissons took first place ahead of Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes. Victor Barrett with Doreen Freeman came third, Len and Nellie fourth and Bobby Henderson and Eileen Henshall were tied with Eric Hancox and Betty Wych for fifth position. By 1949 Len and Nellie were second after Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes and they won in 1950, '51 and '52. In 1953 they retired from competition and travelled the world to teach, demonstrate and adjudicate.

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BLACKPOOL DANCE FESTIVAL TROPHY HISTORY

British Professional Rising Stars Latin Competition

This silver trophy was made by R.R. Sheffield in 1912. Competition 1972

British Professional Rising Stars Modern Competition

This silver trophy was made by Catterall and Swarbrick, Sheffield in 1929. Competition 1967

British Senior Over 35's Modern Championship

This silver trophy was made by J.W. Birmingham in 1908. Competition 1967

British Senior Over 35's Latin Championship

I do not have any details on the maker or the year it was made. Competition 1967

British Amateur Under 21 Years Latin Championship

This silver trophy was made by Walker & Hall, Sheffield in 1922. Competition 1965

British Under 21 Year Modern Championship

This trophy was made by Mappin & Webb but I do not have the year. Competition 1965

British Amateur Latin Championship

This silver trophy was made by Emile Viner, Sheffield in 1936. Competition 1964

British Professional Invitation Team Match
This trophy was made by J Dixon & sons, Sheffield in 1901. Competition 1969

British Modern Formation Dancing Championship

This silver trophy was made in Sheffield in 1907. Competition 1937

British Latin Formation

The trophy used at present was donated by

Constance Grant and Frank Spencer MBE but I do not have the year this was donated. Competition 1961

Professional Exhibition Competition/ Invitation Exhibition Competition

This silver trophy was made in Birmingham in 1934. Competition 1952 discontinued 1964 then Professional Invitation Exhibition Competition then started in 1974

British Professional Latin Championship

This trophy was made by William Sissons & Son but I do not have a year. Competition 1964

Amateur Rising Stars Latin and Ballroom were new trophies in 2004 when the competitions started.

The following trophies are owned by Blackpool Council

British Amateur Ballroom Dancing Championship

This silver trophy was made by C.B & G, London in 1903. Competition 1931

British Professional Ballroom Dancing Championship

This silver trophy was made by C & S Co. Ltd, London in 1926. Competition 1931

All the trophies except the two Blackpool Council ones were owned by the Blackpool Tower Company and have been passed down to the various owners of the Winter Gardens.

I have to the best of my knowledge shown the dates the trophies were made and when the first Competition/Championship was held and would assume the trophy would have been presented from that date.

By Sandra Wilson

Blackpool contd.

British Professional Finalists of 1950:
 Finalists of 1951
 Finalists of 1953
 Len Scrivener/Nellie Duggan
 Len Scrivener/Nellie Duggan
 Scrivener/Duggan
 Bobbie Henderson/ Eileen Henshall
 Wally Fryer/Violet Barnes
 Hugh Carter/Hazel Willis
 Hugh Carter/Hazel Willies
 Carter/Willies and
 Eric Hancox/ Betty Wych
 Eric Hancox/Betty Wych
 Hancox/Wych were tied
 Norman Donaghy/Edna Duffield
 Sonny Binnick/Doris Prater
 Sonny Binnick/Joyce Hayward
 Norman Donaghy/Edna Duffield
 Alf Davies/Julie Reaby
 Sonny Binnick/Doris Prater and
 Bob Burgess/Margaret Baker
 Bob Burgess/Margaret Baker
 Len Colyer/Doris Brace were tied
 Len Colyer/Doris Brace
 Syd Perkin/Edna Duffield

Peter Eggleton and Brenda Winslade, and the Australians Alf Davies and Julie Reaby.

Norman (Sonny) Binnick dominated the professional competition scene for almost a decade from 1950 to 1958, following in the footsteps (pun intended) of the greats Len Scrivener and Nellie Duggan. He had several partners, but the most notable one was his wife Sally Brock, with whom he won five firsts and a second place in the British Open.

They became British Open Professional Ballroom Champions in 1953 and 1954 (tied with Alf Davies and Julie Reaby, Australia) and in 1955 ahead of Alf Davies and



Bob Burgess & Doreen Freeman
 Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Julie Reaby who took their medal in 1956. Then Sonny and Sally won it back again in 1957 and '58.

Doreen Freeman-Burgess danced her first British Open Professional Championship in 1947 with Victor Barrett, and came second after John Wells and Renee Sissons, and Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes who were tied for first place. She also placed first in one of the early World Championships in that same year.

In 1953, Bob Burgess's wife and partner Margaret Baker, sadly, died while undergoing minor surgery. In 1947, they had placed second in the British Open Amateur Championship and were finalists in the professionals in 1952 and 1953. After a couple of years, Bob returned to

the dance floor with Jeannette Wilson and for two years made the finals. He then danced with Eileen Henshall again for two years, and they split-up at the end of 1958.

Now Doreen started to dance with Bob over 10 dances at the same time as Bill and Bobbie Irvine, Peter Eggleton and Brenda Winslade and Walter Laird and Lorraine. In 1962 they came second in the World Championship in Australia behind Bill and Bobbie, opened a studio, (the Starlight, later owned by Bill and Bobbie) and led the typical life of professional dancers. Travelling and being in the studio until late at night hasn't changed much even today.

Benny Tolmeijer was finalist in the British Open for seven years, and a much beloved mentor and coach with an illustrious career that spanned three decades. His first professional final with Sylvia Silve was 1955.

British Professional Finalists of 1958:
 British Amateur Finalists of 1958
 Sonny Binnick/Sally Brock
 Eric Donaldson/Edna Barnett
 Alf Davies/Julie Reaby
 Peter Eggleton/Diane Gradwell
 Harry Smith Hampshire/Doreen Casey
 Michael Houseman/Valerie Waite

contd. pg. 30



Eric Hancox & Betty Wych
 Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Eric Hancox was North of England champion in 1947, '48 and '49. One of his teachers was the "Great Scrivener." They were both finalists at the British Open from 1947 to 1952 when Len and Nellie Duggan came first, Hugh Carter and Hazel Willis second, and Eric and Betty Wych third. After his retirement from competition he trained and coached many champions. He was commissioned to teach, judge, and perform in Germany and the U.S. and became like an ambassador for American couples in England.

Mrs. Ida Ilett, co-principal of the Blackpool School of Dancing, became the first official organizer of the Festival. Before that the various company secretaries ran it. She developed the Festival into the most famous ballroom dance event in the world, comparable to the Wimbledon for tennis. She started in 1954, and continued until her death in 1978.

After the Second World War when life became easier again, ballroom dancing was to British youth what skateboarding and rollerblading are to the adolescents of today. The years between 1946 and 1962 brought forth an "avalanche" of successful partnerships such as Charles Thiebault and Doreen Beahan, John Wells and Renee Sissons, Wally Fryer and Violet Barnes, Victor Barrett and Doreen Freeman, Len Scrivener and Nellie Duggan, Sonny Binnick and Sally Brock, Harry Smith- Hampshire and Doreen Casey, Benny Tolmeijer and Sylvia Silve, Bob Burgess and Doreen Freeman,



Sonny Binnick & Sally Brock and Alf Davies & Julie Reaby
 Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Dance

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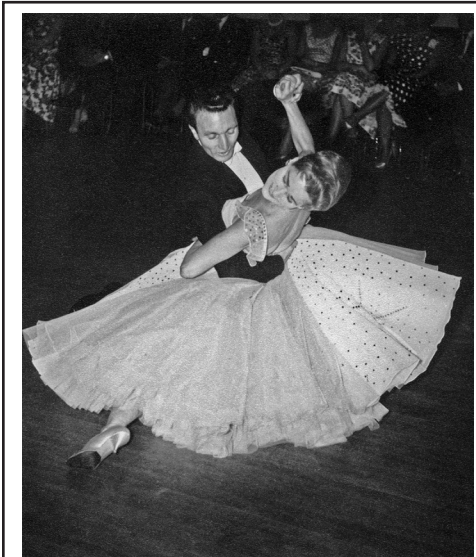
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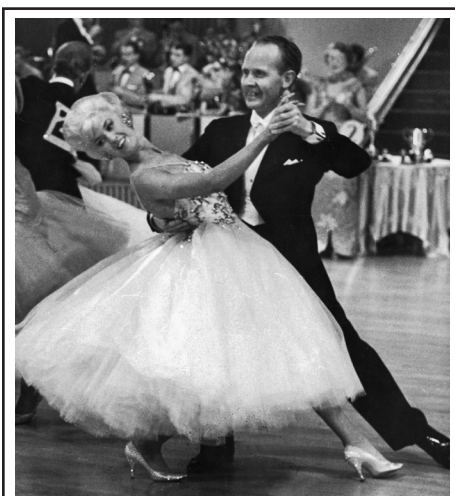


Blackpool contd.



Benny Tolmeijer & Sylvia Sylve
Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Bob Burgess/Eileen Henshall
Anthony Hurley/Fay Saxton
Stan Dudley/Christine Norton
Michael Needham/Pamela Curtis
Benny Tolmeijer/Sylvia Silve
Kit/Phyllis Hallowell
Sammy Leckie/Vera Davis McCartan
Bobby Short/Peggy



Harry Smith Hampshire & Doreen Casey
Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

Harry Smith Hampshire and Doreen Casey won '59, '60 and '61 and after that the era of Eggleton/Irvine began: By 1961 Peter Eggleton and Brenda Winslade were third in the British Open Standard Championship after Harry Smith-Hampshire and Doreen Casey and Bob Burgess and Doreen Freeman, ahead of Sammy Harris and Pearl Rudd, Bill and Bobbie Irvine, Benny Tolmeijer and Sylvia Silve and Eric Donaldson and Edna Barnett. In 1962 Bill and Bobbie won, Peter and Brenda were second and Bob and Doreen were third. The biggest rivalry of that era had begun. Irvine versus Eggleton. It would go back and forth for about five years, and the public loved the excitement it created.



Peter Eggleton & Brenda Winslade and Bill & Bobbie Irvine
Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

“It was a friendly rivalry though, Peter said. It was always very close. They would win and we were second with all the firsts in waltz and foxtrot and they had all the firsts in tango and quickstep. But then we had one third place in the tango and lost the whole thing.

“We both knew that we became better dancers because of this and we worked harder to win next time. And we always used to kid around. I remember one year Bill Irvine said ‘You have no chance tonight, my mother is here watching!’ So as we danced the quickstep somebody was shouting ‘Go Bill go.’ When I passed Bill during the dance I asked ‘Was that your mom?’” So we had fun, and of course you want to beat the other couple. Why else be out there?”

The great success of the Blackpool

Dance Festival is partly due to such great rivalries and the excitement this created amongst fellow competitors and the audience; people wanted to find out who would take the title home this time. The festival got bigger and bigger.

Gillian MacKenzie was Blackpool Dance Festival organizer from 1981-2004. When Gillian started, the professional field alone already had about 150 to 180 couples. During her “reign”, changes needed to be made as in the decades before. For example, when the amateur field grew to approximately 590 couples, something had to be done! There wasn’t enough time available to have them all dance, and Gillian made the decision to have all couples stay in their age categories. They couldn’t dance in the under-21 category and two days later enter as amateurs. She applied the same “treatment” to the senior category.

Inevitably, Gillian’s reign also came to an end with her retirement in 2004. Her successor, Sandra Wilson, joined Gillian in 1996 after working at the Tower for 18 years.

Many wonderful annual events



Gillian MacKenzie retiring after 24 years
Photo courtesy of Brigitt Mayer

have grown over the last decades in different countries and many more will come in the future, but Blackpool is Blackpool and only those who have been there truly understand what Kit Hallowell meant when he wrote:

“The fascination is there for all, and it is an indescribable feeling to step once more down the stairs behind the West end of the North block for yet another festival. Age cannot dim nor custom stale its infinite variety, nor its infinite familiarity.”

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Sandra Wilson
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