



Information sheet no 040

Sailors Hornpipe

The hornpipe was originally an old solo dance in three-time danced to the Celtic instrument known as the hornpipe. It was a feature of many trades with the trade being imitated by particular movements in the dance, thus the hornpipe varied according to this. The dance had no previous connections with the sea but by the beginning of the eighteenth century it became popular with seamen, and the measure was changed to two-time.

From the sixteenth century, a sea dance was a popular feature in dramatic stage productions but it was in the nineteenth century that the more familiar form of the "sailors' hornpipe" was introduced. The dance was based on movements suggested by nautical duties e.g. hauling of ropes, rowing, climbing the rigging and saluting. The Victorian actor, T. P. Cooke, who specialised in nautical roles on the stage, made this form very popular. It is claimed that Cooke visited every port in England to learn all the various steps used in hornpipe dances and established this new style of the dance. He performed around the country and his version was well received.

The sailors' hornpipe continued to be danced even though the hornpipe's association with other trades declined. The dance became less common when fiddlers ceased to be members of the ship's company.