

Heather Blasdale Clarke

The traditional areas of research for dance historians have typically focused on the elite forms of dance such as court dance and ballet. This occurred for many reasons, one of which was the availability of information, confining researchers to specific fields. With the explosion of resources on the internet, a wide variety of other areas have become open to research. Nowhere is this more evident than in exploring dance in early colonial Australia. The comparatively modern date for the foundation of the colony in 1788 has ensured that it has one of the best documented histories of any emerging nation. However, given the circumstances of its formation as a penal colony, it was assumed that dance would have no place in the lives of the convicts and “lower orders” who formed the bulk of the population. Recent research has identified a number of unusual and unexpected places where evidence about dance was recorded. This has uncovered a wealth of information in both England and Australia.

The colony came into existence as a place to send criminals from the British Isles. From the early 1600s, Britain had routinely transported convicts to the American colonies, then with the advent of the American War of Independence, this avenue was closed. It became imperative that a new location be found to ease the pressure on over-flowing prisons and the decision was taken to transport convicts to Botany Bay. Not only did it provide a huge open-air prison with little chance of escape, but it afforded a strategic presence in the Pacific with many potential resources.

In establishing and maintaining the colony, the lives of convicts were closely monitored and this has led to a very distinctive set of records which are now readily accessible to historians. These fall into four main categories:

1. In England, the court transcripts of the Old Bailey, London’s central criminal court, provide “the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published”.¹
2. The medical journals of surgeon-superintendents on convict ships: many of these journals are digitised with a small number being transcribed.²
3. Police reports in the colony accessed through local newspapers.³
4. Various other references to ‘lower order’* dance in Britain and Australia. Amongst these are the works of Egan⁴, Dickens^{5,6}, Mayhew^{7,8}, the artists Gilray, Cruikshank, and Rowlandson, and accounts of dancing in the colony.

From these accumulated sources it becomes apparent that dancing was an essential part of the popular culture for non-elite people and that it continued to play an important role in their lives regardless of imprisonment, transportation, and relocation to the end of the world. The quality and nature of the sources vary considerably, and when combined, create a vivid and detailed image of dancing amongst non-elite people in the period between 1788 and 1840 which would not be available through a single source. The dates chosen for the research cover the arrival of the first convicts in 1788 thorough to the cessation of transportation to New South Wales in 1840. The following will discuss the different resources used in the research and their particular characteristics.

* At the time the colony was settled, the term ‘lower orders’ was used to describe those at the bottom of the social scale. Although not wishing to perpetuate a demeaning attitude, the phrase has been maintained for historical consistency.

Court Transcripts

The transcripts of the Old Bailey (Figure 1) provide evidence from the trials held in London’s central criminal court. This information is regarded as a “true, fair, and perfect narrative”⁹ and presents factual accounts relating to the everyday lives of common people.

The law protected all members of society, and the poor actively sought redress for crimes, particularly against theft. Witness testimonies detailed the places and events where crimes took place and reveal much evidence about the prevalence of dance as an important social activity. Although the reports are not strictly verbatim accounts as some of the information regarded as non-essential was not recorded in the period under study 216 cases were found which mentioned dancing.

An example of the type of evidence provided comes from the trial of three men accused of robbery. The fiddler, Richard Herring stated,

On the 25th of March I was at the Falcon with Gates and his son – there were [*sic*] a dance there; I did not see either of the prisoners at the house – I drank with Mr. Gates about eight o’clock; I did not see anybody else drink with him – there was about twenty people in the room; the dance was there.¹⁰

In another example, Thomas Hayley is accused of stealing a coat to the value of 20s from the proprietor of the Red Lyon, in Nightingale-lane. In his defence he declared,

I had been newly paid off, and spent all my money in the prosecutor’s house; this day in particular, I stopped during the whole day in the tap room dancing, and got drunk in his house, and fell asleep in a box, which was backwards, and I was awakened by two girls, and we had some gin, and then I went to sleep again.¹¹

The evidence in the trials describes people dancing in private homes, in the streets, dancing schools, licensed and unlicensed public houses, and at balls. People are commonly described as dancing by themselves as well as in groups. The size of gatherings ranged from two or three participants, a “small” dance with 24 people, and large events with 300 dancers. Participants included children, boys dancing together, a little child dancing on a stage, women and men, men dancing together, sailors, brick makers, male and female fish mongers, tambourine girls, opera dancers, dancing masters, and servants.



Copyright © 2019 Heather Clarke.

The text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The copyright of the images remains with their owners and they may not be reproduced without their permission.

Published on-line 19 December 2019

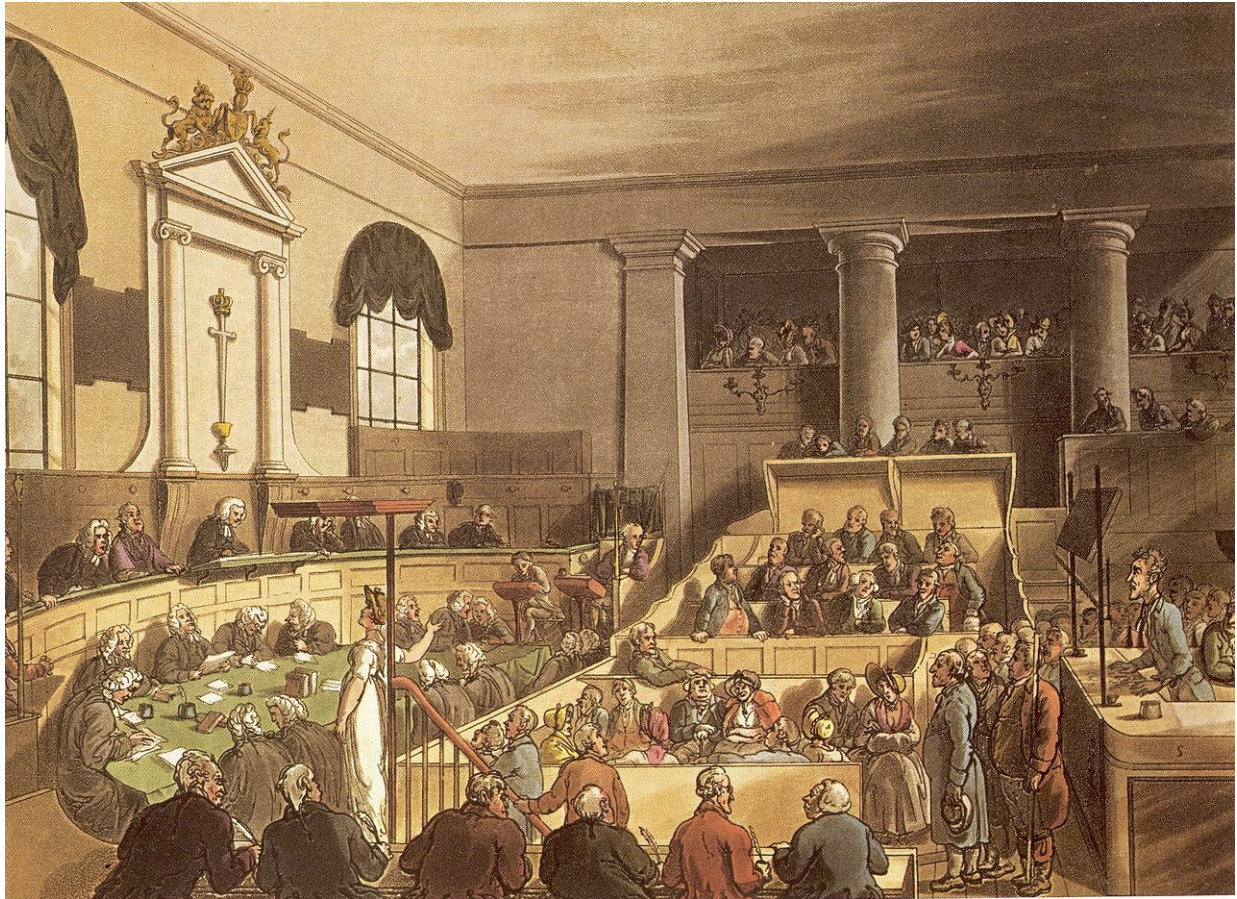


Figure 1. Courtroom of the Old Bailey. Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus Pugin (1808).

In Ackermann, R., Pyne, W.H., William, C. *The Microcosm of London: or, London in Miniature*, Volume 2. Methuen and Company, London, 1904.

Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old_Bailey_Microcosm_edited.jpg

Music was generally provided by the fiddle though some accounts listed the organ, or fifes and drums. People reported the duration of dancing as ranging from a quarter of an hour, five or six hours, the whole day, or all evening until twelve. It seemed dancing could occur at any time, with records noting a starting time of twelve o'clock in the day, nine at night, and four in the morning. One account mentioned a dance starting at nine at night and continuing until four or five o'clock in the morning. Occasionally, a dance is identified by name: a Scotch reel, country dances, a reel, and a jig. Percussive step dancing was a popular form for the 'lower orders' and this is apparent with individuals dancing on a board or on the shutter of a cellar. It was also noted that some people danced without shoes or stockings.

The transcripts provide an insight into the dance practices of ordinary people living in London and by extension, other cities in England at the time. This is the first time this resource has been studied for this type of data, yielding a significant amount of information.

Medical Journals on convict ships

Convicts travelling on the First Fleet (Figure 2) were relatively well looked after. For many, the provision of regular meals and a place to sleep were new experiences after a lifetime of extreme poverty.

However, after the First Fleet, the conditions on some convict ships were deplorable and it became apparent that

action was needed to ensure adequate care of the transportees. With this aim, surgeon-superintendents were appointed on every ship to tend to the convicts' wellbeing. This improved the health of convicts to such an extent that commercial vessels carrying immigrants began to adopt the same routines of cleanliness and organization. The surgeon-superintendents on convict ships were required to keep a journal detailing the health and treatment of passengers, convicts, and crew, as well as the regimes employed to maintain their good health. These records afford a comprehensive chronicle of daily life with proof that some surgeons actively encouraged the convicts to dance on a regular basis.

Surgeon superintendent Gilbert King in charge of 280 male convicts aboard the *Eden* in 1836 wrote,

I encouraged every kind of innocent amusement and recreation; and the singing and dancing which we had every evening when the weather permitted, had, I am confident, a salutary tendency not only as a physical, but moral prophylactic.²

The surgeons who supported dancing considered it to be an activity beneficial for the emotional, mental and physiological well-being of the convicts. They reported that it gave convicts "tranquillity of mind"¹², and noted that there were fewer arguments and fights below decks when dancing was allowed.



Figure 2 The convict ship “Marquis of Cornwallis”. F.B. Solvyns, 1793. Courtesy State Library of New South Wales

Not all surgeons commented on dancing, making it difficult to ascertain if the practice was widespread: it is possible that as it was sufficiently commonplace as to not be reported. In one case, the surgeon Thomas Braidwood Wilson, who was entrusted with the care of convicts on eight ships between 1822 and 1836, considered dancing as a disagreeable activity connected with “depravity and crime”¹³ and not to be tolerated on board ship.

To date, a fully comprehensive study of the medical journals for references to dancing has not been undertaken. The current research found ten surgeons, with a combined total of fifty voyages, who promoted dancing for convicts on a daily basis whenever the weather was favourable.

Police Reports

The colony was largely an open-air prison where the majority of convicts were housed within the community. Many convicts were assigned as workers to private individuals and this allowed them a degree of freedom, including time for relaxation. A French officer visiting in 1825 remarked on “the excessive leisure enjoyed by the convicts”¹⁴ and Commissioner Bigge, who was sent to assess the state of the colony in 1820, complained of the large number of public houses where dancing was one of the chief entertainments of the lower orders.¹⁵ As was the custom in England, public houses were major venues for dancing, and many had special ‘long rooms’ devoted to the purpose. These dance halls, commonly known as ‘hop shops’¹⁶ proliferated

in the colony, and in Sydney there was estimated to be one public house on every block.

In addition to the many licensed public houses, a large number of unlicensed houses proliferated. A licence was required to sell alcohol and any public house without one was considered ‘disorderly’. After 1828 this was extended to include a special licence to hold public entertainments. One of the main reasons dancing was reported in police incidents was due to people congregating in ‘disorderly houses’.

Dancing itself was not illegal, but the circumstances surrounding it sometimes caused it to be reported in detail. The ‘lower order’ population, comprised largely of convicts and ex-convicts, was required to behave in a responsible manner and any transgression could be brought to the attention of the magistrate, these included: being out after curfew or without their master’s permission, insolence, disturbing the peace, obstructing the roadway, dancing on the Sabbath, being drunk and disorderly, or dancing in a state of nudity.

The Sydney Gazette (Figure 3) was first published in 1803 and provides many such reports of Police Incidents. The following account from 1832 provides a good example of the prevailing attitude towards disorderly dancing houses and the types of offences associated with them:

The defendant, who is proprietor of one of those public pests, and enemies to all good order, disorderly dancing houses, appeared to plead to an information

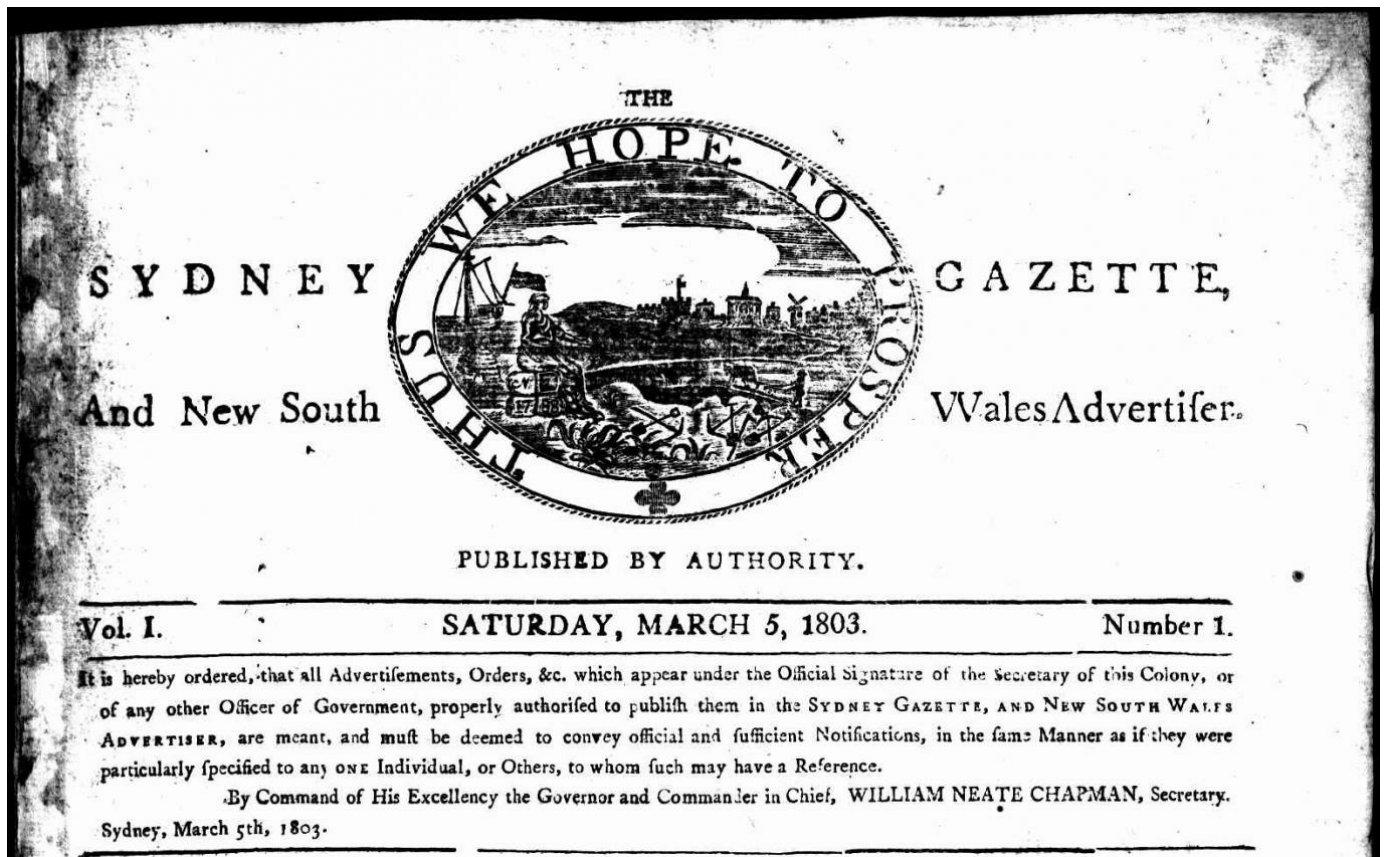


Figure 3. The first edition of the Sydney Gazette was published in March, 1803.
Courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

charging him with harbouring on the 12th ult, one Henry Tate, a prisoner assigned to Mr Steel; the said prisoner being at the time absent after the prescribed hours, without the consent of his master. The defendant acknowledged himself *guilty*, and was sentenced to pay a fine of twenty-six dollars, together with the costs of the proceedings.¹⁷

Unlike the factual descriptions in the Old Bailey Transcripts and the Medical Journals, the newspaper reports have a degree of complexity which necessitates interpretation. Often they are written in a satirical style where the journalist uses humour to titillate his audience, and with an air of condescension to demonstrate the writer's cultural superiority. Some accounts are interwoven with classical references (into the arms of Morpheus = asleep) and local personalities (Mrs Gordon, the matron of the Parramatta Female Factory). The information in all the reports needs to be carefully evaluated. In an example from 1833, the reporter states that the 'swells' are dancing a seraband [*sic*].

THURSDAY.— William Ball, William Horden, and Arthur Parr, three of the Sydney swell mob, were placed at the bar, to clear themselves of the charge of vagabondism, which was made against them, they having been picked up in the street late overnight, dancing a seraband to music pulled out of a mouth organ.¹⁸

Although Spanish dances enjoyed a certain vogue in the early 19th century, it seems unlikely that three 'lower order'

vagabonds would be performing such dance in the street, and the journalist is perhaps employing a sense of the ridiculous in his description for the amusement of his readers.

Despite the conflated characteristics of some reports, a large amount of information is obtainable, describing where and when people danced, and in some cases, even more details. An important source of data comes from the trial of a convict who originally came from Norfolk:

Jeremiah Byrne, an itinerant, who is in the habit of splitting the ears of the groundlings at the two-penny hop shops on the Rocks*, was placed at the bar, having been taken out of one of those public nuisances at a very late hour of the night. A man named Brown to whom he is assigned, denied that he had his permission to be absent from home, and the Bench accordingly called upon him to know what he had to say for himself, "Why may it please your Worship" said, Jeremiah Byrne, "I'm a musicianer, and I plays on the flageolet, I can play, 'Bobbing Joan', 'Darby Kelly', 'Paddy Ward's pig', or 'Judy Callaghan' with any musicianer in the country".¹⁶

Jeremiah's account is invaluable as it reveals not only where he performed, but also the instrument he played, and the tunes he used for dancing. A number of other accounts identify tunes which convicts used for dancing and singing with a handful coming to the fore: *Paddy Carey*, *Judy Callaghan* (with a variety of different titles), *Off She Goes*,

* The lower-class area of early Sydney where a large number of dance halls were located.

and *Drops of Brandy*. At this stage of the research these are the tunes most commonly mentioned, however, further research may uncover more. To date, approximately fifty tunes have been extracted from Police Reports.

Another theme in the reports is the reference to dance as a metaphor. Dance was such a familiar part of life that it was frequently used to describe other activities. In England, if an offender were to be hanged, they were said to dance the ‘gallows jig’* as they jerked about in their death throes, and a mass hanging was known as a ‘sheriff’s ball’. In the colony, dance was also used as a metaphor for certain types of punishment, for example, if offenders were sent for a session at the treadmill, they were sent to the “dancing academy” to “practise their steps” on the “spiritual rectifier”. The first treadmill was installed in the Brixton Prison in 1817 and was adopted in the colony in 1823. It offered an alternative to flogging and was used for offences such as insolence. In England, it became a popular subject for comic songs including *The Everlasting Stairs!*, *The Stepping Mill!*, and *The New Dancing Academy!*

Other sources

In addition to the transcripts, medical journals and police reports, a variety of other sources were valuable in developing a clearer picture of dance for non-elite people in Britain and Australia. These included dance manuals, contemporary literature, illustrations, diaries, and anecdotes in newspapers.

Some dance manuals discussed the unruly habits of untutored people, describing their bad manners, poor posture, the noise of their feet, and general awkwardness. The

* Also the *Tyburn* or *hempden jig*, *Newgate Hornpipe*, or *Paddington Frisk*.

dancing master, Thomas Wilson, expressed his annoyance with dancers in the ballroom who used noisy hornpipe steps which he considered “very improper for a Country Dance; and [the] persons so using them must be ever considered, as being unaccustomed to good company and of very vulgar habits.”¹⁹ The percussive footwork favoured by the ‘lower orders’ clearly was inappropriate in the polite ballroom.

The theme of noise and dancing in descriptions of the non-elite also appears in literature of the period. The novelist Thomas Hardy in *Far From the Madding Crowd* writes about the “thunderous footing” at a country dance, and Charles Dickens gives a vivid portrayal of the dancing in a booth at Greenwich Fair which he describes as “primitive, unreserved, and unstudied” and the noise, “perfectly bewildering”.⁶ Other writers who made significant observations about ‘lower class’ dancing included Pierce Egan²⁰ and Henry Mayhew^{7,8}.

Although there are no illustrations of Australian convicts dancing, there are numerous images of non-elite people dancing in this period. The caricaturists Thomas Rowlandson, James Gilray, and the Cruikshanks portrayed all levels of London society and often drew images of people dancing.

Care needs to be taken when viewing these images which were created for satirical purposes and were certainly not intended to provide accurate graphics for dance historians. As caricatures they were intended to exaggerate the defects or peculiarities of the subject and cannot be viewed as reliable sources. Nonetheless, by gathering a substantial number of these images, distinct themes become apparent. A consistent theme is the depiction of ‘lower order’ dance falling short of the elite aesthetic; according to Jeremy Barlow in his work on images of Western social dance,



Figure 4. All Max in the East, a scene in Tom & Jerry, or, Life in London. Joshua Gleadah and S.W. Fores, London. (1822). Illustration by George Cruikshank (1792 –1878). Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

“rustic dancers” were viewed as being overly energetic and were often portrayed with “sharply bent knees and angular posture to denote exhibitionism and lack of decorum.”²¹ (Figure 4)

In the colony, dancing occurred in places other than public houses: it was noted in private dwellings, outdoors, at weddings, and in booths at fairs and race meetings; these were sometimes reported in the local papers. At the Easter fair of 1801, it was observed that “the recreative pastimes ... were carried on with much decorum and with no less festivity for three days, during which the ‘merry dance’ was kept alive in every booth.”²²

Although some accounts mention dancing simply as an enjoyable activity, often the anecdotes pass judgement on the abilities of the participants. A correspondent in 1803 suggested people might improve their dancing by observing the kangaroo:

[I] recommend some parts of the BUSH for an improvement in the talent of DANCING, as there much instruction might be expected from the assistance of the accomplished KANGAROO. This extraordinary idea insinuated itself upon my stepping into a house of HARMONY a few nights ago, in which an illegitimate descendant of Apollo sat moving his elbow to a group of caperers, whose motion rendered it difficult to determine whether he scraped to their dancing, or they hopped to his fiddling. I BELIEVE they were all human beings; yet am persuaded, that if they actually were so, they were indebted for their skill in the art to the Teachers I have herein taken the liberty to recommend.²³

By combining these varied resources, a rich and detailed picture of dance for the ‘lower orders’ has emerged. It has revealed information about the people, places, times and occasions when dancing occurred; details of the music, instruments, and dances; as well as capturing the prevailing attitudes of the time towards ‘lower order’ dance. The references given here are a small sample of the overall research and further study will continue to enhance our understanding of this aspect of dance history.

Embodied research

Within the doctoral research project, the information gathered through the archival research was used in an embodied process to examine the dances in a practical way. Using undergraduate dance students and members of local folk-dance groups we explored the dances, imagining how the ‘lower orders’ may have danced in the early 19th century. This utilised the tunes identified in the convict Jeremiah Byrne’s account – Bobbing Joan, Judy Callaghan, and Paddy Ward’s Jig – and the tune Paddy Carey which appeared in five convict references. Dance instructions were sought to accompany each tune, however, only Bobbing Joan was found to have set figures in Hime’s Second Collection of Country Dances for 1810. The other dances used formulaic dance figures of the period with attention paid to the time signature and nature of the tune. This provided a tangible outcome in identifying a selection of dances and tunes.

In re-enacting the dances, it was acknowledged that many elements were unknown, this included the types and styles of steps, and the degree of vigour with which they were

danced. As such the dance could not be reconstructed in an authentic way, but could be regarded as a retelling of how it may have looked, presenting an impression of the dance from the information currently available.

Significance

The workshops revealed evidence about the character of the dances and the reasons why they may have been significant in convict and ‘lower order’ life. Analyses of the dance workshops and focus group discussions highlighted the joyful nature of the dances, the sense of belonging, and connection to other participants. Drawing upon recent scientific advances in the investigation of the effects of dancing was meaningful in evaluating why dancing was one of the most popular forms of recreation.

A substantial body of contemporary scientific evidence has found that dancing is much more than a happy diversion, verifying that it has a profound effect on the emotional, mental and physiological well-being of the participants. It has been found that dance can greatly assist in reducing, resisting, and escaping stress for those in traumatic situations.²⁴ This would appear to be relevant in the case of convicts removed from friends, family and homeland, and taken to the far side of the world, often in harsh conditions. It is also consistent with the views of a number of surgeon-superintendents on convict ships. Dance was able to provide a temporary escape from the unhappy memories and stark realities which surrounded them. It encouraged a sense of belonging and community, binding strangers together with social interaction, and provided a way to cope with anxiety and suffering. It could be cathartic in releasing anger and fear, and empowering in the face of dehumanising conditions.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this article was to identify how records which were never intended for the purpose of dance research could be examined to reveal a significant amount of information. Through an investigation of court transcripts, medical journals, and police reports in colonial newspapers it was found that dancing was an important recreational activity for convicts and non-elite people in the late 18th/early 19th centuries in the British Isles and colonial Australia. Further sources were scrutinised for a greater insight and these included dance manuals, literature, images, and anecdotes in diaries and newspapers.

Another aspect mentioned briefly was the use of the accumulated archives to research the dances with an experiential approach. This yielded information about the mental, physical and emotional effects of the dances and combined with other recent scientific findings, demonstrated the benefits of dance for those in stressful and oppressive situations.

This research has challenged many of the stereotypes regarding the lives of early Australian convicts transported from the British Isles in the period between 1788 and 1840. It is also relevant for those with an interest in the dance practises of non-elite people in Britain at this time.

Additional research continues in this area with the results available via the website <http://www.colonialdance.com.au/>

A full copy of the thesis *Social dance and early Australian settlement: An historical examination of the role of social dance for convicts and the ‘lower orders’ in the period*

between 1788 and 1840. Clarke, Heather E. (2018) is available at Queensland University of Technology <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/121495/>

References

1. *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*. Old Bailey Proceedings Online. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>
2. *UK Royal Navy Medical Journals 1817–1857*. Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2011. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/navalmedicaljournals/> or <https://www.fold3.com/browse/310/hvuN0B4xQ4WcXl8Uu2ol7oP4wLTc8ZWso>
3. Trove. National Library of Australia. <https://trove.nla.gov.au>
4. Hindley, C. (editor), Egan, P. & Moncrieff, W.T. *The true history of Tom and Jerry: Or, the Day and Night Scenes of Life in London from the Start to the Finish, with a Key to the Persons and Places Together with a Vocabulary and Glossary of the Flash and Slang Terms Occurring in the Course of the Work*. Charles Hindley, London, 1888. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43504/43504-h/43504-h.htm>
5. Dickens, C., *Pickwick Papers*. Chapman & Hall, London, 1837.
6. Dickens, C., *Greenwich Fair*, in *Sketches by "Boz," Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People*. John Macrone, London, 1836.
7. Mayhew, H. *London Labour and the London Poor, Vol 1–4*. George Woodfall and Son, London, 1851. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924092592751>
8. Mayhew, H. & Binny, J. *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of London Life*. Griffin, Bohn and Co., London, 1862. <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications5/prisons.htm>
9. Emsley, C., Hitchcock, T. & Shoemaker, R. *The Proceedings – Publishing History of the Proceedings. Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, 2019. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Publishinghistory.jsp>
10. Trial of John Barton, William Saunders and John Carter, 11th April 1833 (t18330411-23). *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, 1833/2018. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18330411-23>
11. Trial of Thomas Hayley, 6th December 1815 (t18151206-23). *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, 1815/2019. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t18151206-23>
12. Leyson, W. Surgeon's Journal: Convict Ship Henry Wellesley, in Willetts, J. (editor) *Free Settler or Felon? Newcastle and Hunter Valley History 1837/2017*. Retrieved June 16, 2018, from https://www.jenwilletts.com/william_leyson_surgeon.html
13. Wilson, T.B., *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World*. Sherwood, Gilbert, & Piper, London, 1835.
14. Riviere, M.S. Distant echoes of the enlightenment: private and public observations on convict life by Baudin's disgraced officer, Hyacinthe de Bougainville (1825). *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 2004, 41 (2), 171–185.
15. Jordan, R., *The convict theatres of early Australia 1788–1840*. Currency House, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2002.
16. Anon. Police Report. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (1803–1842)*. New South Wales, 6 December 1832, p. 3. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2209764>
17. Anon. Police Report. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (1803–1842)*. New South Wales, 14 January 1832, p. 3. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article2204471>
18. Anon. Police Incidents. *The Sydney Herald*. Sydney, 10 June 1833, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article12846998>
19. Wilson, T. *A companion to the ballroom*. D. Mackay, London, 1820.
20. Egan, P., Cruickshank, R. & Cruickshank, G. *Life in London: Or, Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorne, Esq., and Corinthian Tom, Accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in Their Rambles and Sprees Through the Metropolis*. Sherwood, Neely and Jones, London, 1821.
21. Barlow, J. *A dance through time. Images of western social dancing from the Middle Ages to modern times*. Bodleian Library, Oxford, 2012, p 25.
22. Anon. Sydney. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (1803–1842)*. New South Wales, 28 April 1810, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article627976>
23. Anon. *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser (1803–1842)*. New South Wales, 17 April 1803, p. 3. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article625518>
24. Karkou, V., Oliver, S. & Lycouris, S. (editors) *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*. Oxford University Press, New York., 2017

