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Origins of Sydney Branch

The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, Sydney Branch was registered by the Society in February 1952, having made application in November 1951.

The history of Scottish Country dance in Sydney is not well recorded. One could speculate that it would have been known at least from the days of Governor Macquarie as, at that time, it was a popular pastime in Scotland and many of the officers of the NSW soldiery were of Scottish origin. His wife, Elizabeth, was a Campbell and cousin of the Countess of Breadalbane, so they could well have danced *The Braes of Breadalbane*, published by Skillern in 1795. Governor Macquarie was also known to favour country dance, rather than the newer dance forms then coming into vogue.

In the early days of the 20th Century, there was still significant Scottish influence in Sydney and the Sydney Morning Herald shows many notices of dances run by the Burns Society, the Highland Society and similar organisations. For example, the following was in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 19th June, 1933:

“On Saturday night the first annual dance of the Burns Anniversary Young People's Society was held at the Christ Church Hall, Pitt Street. Scottish country "square dances", including such old-world dances as the quadrille, eightsome reel, haymaker's Jig, Circassian circle, and Highland schottische, were enjoyed by the guests. An old Highland custom was followed in beginning the programme with a grand march, headed by office-bearers of the society.”

One family involved in these types of event was that of David Gillespie in Vaucluse. He was born in Stirling and moved to Sydney from Rockhampton in 1914, being involved in the manchester trade and developing into a significant local business personality. His obituary (in 1938) said he had a great love of music, and played the violin. The folk lore, folk music, and folk dancing of Scotland held a strong fascination for him. He took a keen interest in the affairs of the Highland Society. He did much to advance Scottish Masonry in New South Wales.

His wife, Jean, was an excellent pianist and there were seven children – 3 sons and 4 daughters. The family frequently held parties on the tennis court, where scottish dancing 'in the traditional style' (according to daughter Jean) was performed to their playing.

In 1930, the family made an extended trip to the UK where two of the daughters, Margaret and Jean, became involved in the Scottish Country Dance Society in London, where they danced in demonstrations. The picture shows them in a demonstration at the Grotrian Hall, London, in 1932.



They also danced in Glasgow, in Miss Jean Milligan's Class. Miss Milligan encouraged them to undertake the tests for the Society Teaching Certificates and they were successful in both the first Certificate (for teaching dances in Book 1) dated May 1932 and in the 'Full' Certificate dated January 1933. Jean was 19 at the time.

The Society Bulletin of 1933 noted that *"two young Australian ladies ... had declared their intention to begin a Scottish Country Dance Society Branch in Sydney on their return home."* In 1934, the Bulletin recorded *"The Rose Bay Scottish Country Dance Circle (Sydney, Australia), started by Miss (Jean) Gillespie, has affiliated with the Scottish Country Dance Society"*. A photograph from 1934 shows nearly 50 people as the first S.C.D. Group at Rose Bay in 1934.

In 1936, the group participated in a Folk Festival at the Australian Hall and, in 1937, they played a big part in the International Folk Festival held in Sydney Town Hall.

In 1937, the Folk Lore Association of NSW was formed and the Rose Bay Group was an active member and had a large part in the Folk Festival held in the Sydney Town Hall over two nights, which was certainly the first large display of Scottish Country Dancing in Sydney. The group needed more young dancers and called on the Scout and Guide movement to take part. There was a good response of Rovers and Rangers from the

Associations which included Dorothy Rosemond and George Wells.

A large number of sets danced 'Glasgow Highlanders' and 'La Tempête' from Book 2. They also danced a number of Scandinavian dances.

The question arose as to what the dress would be. The kilt, etc. was not readily available, but all was not lost – there were friends in pipe bands and with a little persuasion the Sydney Thistle Pipe Band loaned kilts and other gear – and so dressed in borrowed gear the men presented themselves decked out like true highlanders complete in the kilt, large horse hair sporrans and the plaid as well. Dancing pumps were unknown to in those days so the footwear had to be white sandshoes. The ladies danced in white dresses, but as sashes were not available a bunch of tartan was worn on the shoulder and of course white sandshoes and bobbysox.



At some time the ladies wove their own tartan sashes and Dorothy Rosemond has provided one to the Branch Archives (2007).

They danced to the music of the Thistle Pipe Band, but that caused another difficulty – not having danced to a Pipe Band before there was uncertainty in knowing when to start dancing. This was overcome by the Pipe Major raising his right leg slightly after a four bar introduction, which gave the signal to start dancing.

It was after the Festival that the Rose Bay Circle became the Sydney Scottish Country Dance Circle.

The war interrupted further Folk Festivals, but the Circle continued dancing throughout, sometimes with as few as 8 on the floor.

In 1945, there was a Women's Health Week 'Dancing on the Green' on the lawn in Macquarie Street near Parliament house, where the Scottish Dances were *Waltz Country Dance*, *Dashing White Sergeant* and *The Eightsome Reel*.

In 1946, Jean London was appointed official representative of the Scottish Country Dance Society in Australia.

Folk Festivals were again held in Sydney Town Hall in 1946, 1947 and 1948. In 1946, the Scottish Dances were *Oxton Reel*, *Reel of the 51st Highlanders (sic)* and *Dashing White Sergeant*, in 1947 *The Tempest (La Tempête)* and *The Dashing White Sergeant* and in 1948 *The Ninesome Reel*, though the Scottish Dancers participated in many of the dances from other countries. It was noted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1946 that an Australian, who was one of the prisoners from the camp where the Reel of the 51st Division was developed, was present and an 'enthusiastic' dancer in Sydney.

George Wells had become one of the people sharing the teaching of the group and, after his return from the UK in 1951, persuaded them to apply for Branch Membership. The Branch Minutes record a meeting held on 17th February 1952 to discuss the reformation of the Sydney Scottish Dance Circle. It was noted that application had been made and would be approved by the RSCDS Management Committee on February 23rd.

The Inaugural Committee was: President, Mr B.W. Hetherington, Joint Secretary/Treasurer, Miss Willis, Mrs London as Director and Miss Purdie and Mr Wells as Instructors. Class Fees were 2/- (20c) per night for members and 3/- (30c) for non-members and casuals. The Annual Membership fee was 5/- (50c)

Sources: Jean London Photo Album (Branch Archives), Jean London speech in August 1983, George Wells notes Sydney Branch history, Sydney Morning Herald (National Library of Australia), history notes by Heather Clarke in 1991 (given to me by Jan Wilson, but see also www.colonialdance.com.au).