

Leicester Gaytimers (now Charnwood Squares)

I will probably be taken to task for saying this, but Leicester Gaytimers actually had their origins in London. Len Janka, founder and original caller for the club, had, for a number of years, been co-caller with Jimmy Morris at Woodberry Down S.D.C. In November 1955, Len broke away and formed his own club, Kilburn Gaytimers. In March 1956, Len inexplicably left London for Leicester. On September 29th, a new club opened its doors, with Len as caller. Although there have been some doubts it now seems certain that the new club was Leicester Gaytimers.

The opening night at the church hall of St John the Divine was well attended and at the graduation night ten weeks later, sixty people received their bachelor of square dancing diplomas. The club later moved to the adult school at Churchgate, and increased its membership dramatically. Former club caller and now club president, Dave Woolerton, writing in the October 1981 magazine, stated that the club was happy and successful, with ages ranging from 16-60. At least 15 couples met at the club and eventually married. Dave also states that on at least one occasion, two double-decker buses were needed to take dancers to a Saturday night dance.

In 1959, advanced dancing sessions were introduced. Besides being a very fine caller, Len Janka was a brilliant dancer and choreographer. In June 1959, the club's demonstration team won the all England competition with a great display of dancing. The competition was sponsored by Derby City Council, who retained the cup that they presented. Up to 1981, the competition had never been held again, which, as Dave Woolerton pointed out at the time, meant that the club were still the champions. Perhaps that is still the case? Over to you, Dave.

Len Janka, was without doubt, one of this country's greatest callers, and was the driving force behind Leicester Gaytimers. It was, therefore, a great blow when, in late 1960, Len's work took him away from Leicester at very short notice; almost a rerun of Len's sudden and inexplicable departure from Kilburn Gaytimers. As a result, six of the more senior members of the club formed a committee, and, using their own funds, purchased from Len a large quantity of records and a set of PA equipment. They also drew up byelaws that turned Gaytimers into a true club.

With no experienced caller in Leicester at that time, the club enlisted the services of a Nottingham caller, Ralph Meakin. As Ralph was a very good caller and teacher, the club were very pleased to have obtained his services. Unfortunately, Ralph's fee was dictated by the cost of his train fare from Nottingham, and was an expense the club could not afford for long. Another leading caller, Jim Lees, offered to conduct a caller's course for club members. This was accepted and Ralph's services reluctantly dispensed with. Unfortunately, the course failed to produce a regular caller, although some of the students continued to teach.

Dancing to called records became the norm for the next eleven years. In the early seventies, the club was

fortunate to obtain the services of two of the country's leading callers, Dave Clay and Harry Preston. Dave and Harry alternated with each other on a once a month basis. It wasn't until June 1972, when Dave Smith agreed to call for the club fortnightly, that a regular caller was found. Unfortunately his studies prevented Dave from calling for the club after June 1974. Once again, however, the club was fortunate in obtaining the services of a very well known national caller, Bill Pead.

Bill had been calling since the mid fifties. During the sixties, he was co-caller with well known national caller, Arthur Broomfield, at Circle 8, Brixton. Bill and his wife, Sue, settled in Leicester in the seventies.

Another very well known caller that the club had calling for them was the late Johnny Maunders. Johnny was one of the finest young callers in the country in the fifties and sixties. His untimely death at the age of 41 was a sad loss.

It had been hoped at one time that Johnny would become a regular caller, but unfortunately, his work frequently took him away from Leicester.

The Gaytimers had something of a nomadic beginning from the opening night at St John the Divine Church hall, to a picture house, which was also a cinema and restaurant, to the YWCA (perhaps it was the smell of fish and chips from the restaurant that caused that move). There followed a further five moves before the club finally settled. I was always under the impression that club chairman, Dave Woolerton had called for the club on a regular basis, but Dave informs me that is not the case. I have to say that I find that very surprising. I remember dancing to Dave's calling way back in the sixties. He struck me as being a very good and competent caller.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, Leicester continued to flourish. There were numerous functions (far too many to list). These included skittles evenings, one night stands and hoedowns for outside organisations, and the oasis weekends 1977-1979. The Leicester and Leisure exhibition was a great shop window for them, and provided the biggest number of beginners.

In 1981, the club celebrated 25 very successful years with a highly successful dance. Gwen Manning and Dave Clay were the callers for this event. It was a great and memorable evening, and one that brought to an end an era, for on that evening, Leicester Gaytimers became Charnwood Squares.

The reason for the change of name was quite straightforward. Years ago the term "gay" simply meant happy go lucky, fun loving and carefree. No doubt that was what Len Janka had in mind when he opened both Kilburn and Leicester Gaytimers. Today, as we all know, the term "gay" has a totally different meaning. It was with this in mind that the club decided that a change of name was both advisable and desirable. I hasten to add that there was no question of discrimination, just simply to avoid any misunderstanding as to the club's activities.

As Leicester Gaytimers, the club had enjoyed 25 successful years. The question at the time, was would the club, as Charnwood Squares, enjoy the same

measure of success. Looking back over those 25 years, the answer has to be a resounding yes. During its long history, the club had quite a long list of callers. Many of these have already been named. Dale Chapman continued as club caller until 1988. Exactly why Dale left the club is not certain. A very popular caller, it is believed that he gave up square dancing altogether. He was succeeded by another popular caller, Robert Bird. Robert continued as caller until September 1989. Again, it is uncertain why Robert left, but he was apparently a pub landlord, and probably needed to devote more time to his business. During the mid eighties, the club had a twinning arrangement with a European club called the Charming Pioneers from Norderstedt. The two clubs visited each other in alternate years. This very successful arrangement continued until at least 1990, proving once again, without doubt, that square dancing is friendship set to music.

In late 1989, Charnwood Squares secured the services of Derek Bere, better known as Dirk the Shirt. Dirk became the regular caller, but this did present a problem. He was not available on the normal club night of Tuesday evening. On the evening he was available, Wednesday, the club's existing hall was not. This necessitated both a change of evening to Wednesday and a change of hall. The hall that the club moved to was Glen Pava Barracks, interestingly enough, a young offenders' prison.

The nineties was a period of great activity for the club, including very good social activities, barbeques, boat trips etc. 1994 saw a significant influx of new members and things were looking very promising until Derek Bere resigned early in 1995. The club was able to carry on with guest callers and dancing to tapes. However, it was felt that the situation required a regular caller and the club advertised accordingly. American caller, Walt Burr, was hired. At that time Walt was trying to make a living as a paid caller following his discharge from the US Air force. Unfortunately, Walt's fee was dictated by the distance he had to travel and it was something that the club could not endure for long so reluctantly, Walt's service was dispensed with.

Two local callers, Pete Durber and John Warren, took over the calling chores on alternate weeks. Dave Woolerton was also asked but he decided that he would only call if one or the other was unavailable. This arrangement stands to this day. By 1998 the club was experiencing severe financial difficulties and it was feared that it would have to close. A temporary solution was found where both callers agreed to halve their fees. Within a year, however, the club's hall was closed and the club's future hung in the balance. A new venue was found but proved to be very unpopular with club members.

In 2000 a new hall was found and is still in use today. Dave Woolerton states that the hall is probably one of the best in the country with a beautifully sprung floor but is, however, very expensive. The club was only able to meet the expense by meeting once a fortnight and the callers again halving their fees.

For two years the club's future was uncertain. Closure was prevented by the determined efforts of a few individuals and also the reintroduction of round dancing by Jean Preston. The club's membership was further

boosted by the closure of Stockade Swingers and Dancing Knights.

Since 2005 the club's finances have been just in the black but unfortunately the improvement in numbers has been eroded by age related losses. Dave Woolerton states that the outlook is much brighter than a few years ago. Like so many other clubs however, the future depends on the club's ability to recruit new members. This is a problem that has been present for many years. Even back in the fifties and sixties we were always searching for ways to attract new dancers.

Dancers are the lifeblood of the movement. The club, through many trials and tribulations, has existed for fifty years; its first 25 years as Leicester Gaytimers, its 2nd 25 years as Charnwood Squares. I have no doubt that in 2031 Charnwood Squares will still be around to celebrate 75 highly successful years.

Tony Pears
Nov 2006 – Jan 2007

PS The history of Charnwood Squares is proving an awkward one to write and I must thank Roger Walker for the potted history that he sent me. My main source of information however, has been David Woolerton. I owe a great deal of thanks to Dave for the trouble he has taken in compiling the club's history for me. Thanks Dave. I may write the articles, but the credit is all yours.