

## Circle & Swing

Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup> 1955, was a night that the residents of Walthamstow will have remembered for many a long day, for this night marked the opening of Circle and Swing SDC. Although the opening night had been advertised well in advance, the 2 club's three callers, Pete Sansom, Ray Freeman and Pat McQuaid had catered for a maximum of sixty people. To their great surprise 120 people arrived. The boys had to dash out and buy whatever they could to cater for the extra 60 people. It was hectic and it was fun. Certainly a very memorable start to one of our greatest clubs. Oh, I almost forgot, I think square dancing featured somewhere during the evening. From its hectic beginnings, the club has hardly looked back, going from strength to strength.

The club's first major event occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1955, at the Caledonian Road Baths. Pete, Pat and Ray put on what was billed as their first attempt at putting on a dance and as a first attempt it was a huge success. Clubs from all over the country attended and many of the top line callers of the day made this a night to be remembered.

A week later a coach load of Circle and Swing club members attended Margate's Blue Star Club's Christmas party. This was another great night in this club's history. Unfortunately, it was slightly marred when, on the way home, and almost into London, Pat McQuaid suddenly leapt up and counted heads. It was then realised that two club members had been left behind, and, as we heard later, had hitch hiked all the way home.

Former Association President, Jack Smith, once described Pete, Pat and Ray as the energy boys. They certainly produced some supercharged ideas. One of these was the double dance held at Queen Alexandra House, Kensington, on Saturday, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1956. To this end the boys hired two different halls in the same building, with Eric Bowles and his Hoedown Music supplying the music in one hall, and Stan Symmonds and the Foot and Fiddle Band playing in the other. There was certainly no shortage of callers on hand to keep the evening moving with a swing in both halls, and with the dancers keeping up a shuttle service between the two halls, the atmosphere was electric. It was a novel idea, and one that proved a great success. Circle and Swing's success story was only just beginning, but already the first of many changes was in the air. Ray Freeman married and was called into the RAF for National Service and in 1956 was sent to Cyprus. He never returned to square dancing which was a great pity. Ray was a very good caller with a very likeable personality and I personally believe he would have been one if the greats.

Unfortunately we shall never know.

By 1957 the club was down to just one caller. Due to heavy demands on his time, the need to train callers to take over his first club, Foot 'n' Fiddle, his forthcoming marriage to his fiancée, June, and his planned departure for the USA, Pete Sansom handed over the reins at Circle & Swing, to Pat McQuaid. Pete, however, continued to be very active on the British square dance scene, and was heavily involved in the winter square dance festival in December 1957.

1957 was a very busy year for Circle & Swing. There were a number of events in which the club was involved, including the birthday round-up at the Caledonian Road baths and the club's second birthday dance at the William Morris Hall, both of which were huge successes. Throughout the year, however, the main focus was on the winter square dance festival. This event, which had television coverage, was the greatest event in which the club had been involved.

From all over England, they came to the Grange Farm, Chigwell in Essex, to dance to the music of the Foot 'n' Fiddle Band, and a whole host of callers, both British and American. Former PRO, Mike Arnold, recalls that Pat McQuaid was paid £100 by ITV for the weekend, a very tidy sum at the time. The cycle of change continued with the departure of Pat McQuaid to Canada, in March 1958. The new man to take the helm was, at the time, one of the greatest callers, Pete Wiggins. Circle & Swing club members were able to say farewell to Pat at the Association dance held at the Drill Hall, Albany Street in March 1958. Also leaving to return to the USA was another very popular caller of the day, Lucky Beason.

Pete Wiggins remained with Circle & Swing until May 1959, when Pat McQuaid returned to take control. Making his mark as a club member and very promising caller within the club at that time was a young man who was later to become one of the country's leading callers, Pete Skiffins.

Just after Christmas 1959, I was very surprised to receive a phone call from Pat McQuaid, asking me if, together with Jimmy Buckley from Southern Star, I would call at Circle & Swing's New Year's Eve dance. Pat, it seemed, had other pressing engagements (I think her name was Jill). I readily agreed and was quite pleased to be part of taking Circle & Swing from the fifties into the sixties. Like Pete Sansom two years earlier, Pat was finding that calling for Circle & Swing was making heavy demands on his time. In 1960 together with another well known caller of the day, Colin Walton, Pat opened Country Jumpers S.D.C. There was also his forthcoming wedding to his fiancée, Jill, and preparations for his return to Canada in 1961. Thus throughout 1960, Pete Skiffins was groomed to take over when Pat finally stepped down.

The summer of 1960 proved a very busy one for Circle & Swing. In June, there was a save the magazine dance which raised £10. While that may seem a paltry sum now, in 1960, £10 probably equalled £ 100 today.

There were two outings to the coast, Margate and Bognor. I would like to quote from the October 1960 magazine which reported those events. "A good time was had by all, except perhaps for our caller, Pat McQuaid, who was seen running around the beach, clad only in a bath towel as protection against the sun. (Yes, we did see it)". Exactly what they saw is not clarified. I think we'll leave it there.

In 1961 the wind of change again blew through Circle & Swing. In February Pat and Jill married and in October they left for Canada. Pat, I hear, has now left square dancing. In April 1961 Pete Skiffins took over as caller, a post he held very successfully for 4 years. Pete, as we all know, went on to become one of the country's leading callers and is still very active today.

Throughout its long history the club has been fortunate indeed to have had the services of some of the country's greatest callers, from the initial trio of Pete Sansom, Ray Freeman and Pat McQuaid, to Pete Wiggins and Pete Skiffins.

In 1965 Pete handed over to Alan Coombes, another very popular and very capable caller. Under Alan's leadership, Circle & Swing celebrated their 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was held on 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1965. The dance was very well attended. Alan Coombes and Pete Nugent shared the calling, and although he was not officially on the calling programme, Pete Skiffins was persuaded to share the calling. The dance was a great success, and a fitting end to a highly successful decade.

Under Alan's very capable leadership the club continued to flourish. In 1969 Alan retired for business reasons and Pete Skiffins returned to take over as caller. In the June, Circle & Swing dancers, along with other clubs, were able to welcome their former caller, Pat McQuaid, when Pat called at Wandsworth town hall on June 7<sup>th</sup> that year. The seesaw calling relationship between Pete Skiffins and Alan Coombes continued, when, in May 1970, Alan again returned as club caller. This 2<sup>nd</sup> highly successful spell lasted until February 1973, when Alan handed over to Norman Brodie. Norman's spell as caller was very short lived, eleven months.

Taking over a club as big as Circle & Swing was a major challenge, and popular callers like Pete Skiffins and Alan Coombs were hard acts to follow. Perhaps it was hardly surprising that, for a while, club attendance fell, but I understand that Norman rose to the challenge and that by the time he handed over to Ron Hepden in March 1974 the club was thriving.

On April 12<sup>th</sup> 1975 Circle & Swing celebrated what was billed as their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday dance, but was in fact, only their 20<sup>th</sup>. The dance, held at Leyton Town Hall, was a great success. Julia was the caller, and the price of 45p was a bargain. It was a great and memorable evening.

Ron Hepden, a very popular caller, had a very successful run at Circle & Swing, with the club continuing to thrive and enjoy immense popularity. In 1979, Ron handed over to yet another caller, Colin Carter. I feel sure that somebody will correct me if I'm wrong, but in the history of square dance clubs in this country, I don't think there has been any other club that has seen as many callers as Circle & Swing, although there was a spell in 1979 when the club had no regular caller. Three more callers, Philip, Trevor and Bridget, took over the calling chores. In 1980 Phillip stood down and Trevor and Bridget were joined by Terry Chapman, a caller of great renown, who became the clubs only caller in 1981. Under his leadership Circle & Swing continued to flourish.

The history of Circle & Swing spans fifty years. It would, of course, be impracticable to attempt to present the whole of that history and inevitably some has to be glossed over. In 1984/5 Eddie James heard that Circle & Swing was without Terry Chapman. He was invited to call on odd occasions and was so successful that he was invited to stay on permanently, and under his very capable leadership, Circle & Swing have celebrated three very important milestones, their 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> birthdays.

In 1994, Circle & Swing mistakenly held what they believed to be their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary dance. I very clumsily put my foot in my mouth by writing to the magazine and pointing out that it was only their 39<sup>th</sup>. It would have been understandable if Eddie had given me a rocket for not pointing it out privately. Instead he very kindly invited me to the actual 40<sup>th</sup> dance in April 1995. I was very pleased to accept and was even invited to cut the cake. It was a great evening. Paul Bristow, who was caller in chief for the evening, quipped that Circle & Swing had a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday last year and a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday this, so who will do the calling at next year's 40<sup>th</sup>.

At a later date, while on a visit to the States, Eddie met up with Pete Sansom. He extended an invitation to Pete to call at Circle & Swing, if he ever visited England. Pete was very pleased to accept and duly kept the date on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2000. It was a great and nostalgic evening with many former Circle & Swing club members turning out to dance to their former caller. Pete and Eddie together gave us a truly memorable evening.

From the original calling trio of Pete, Pat and Ray, to the present caller, Eddie James, Circle & Swing have been fortunate indeed to have had the services of some of the country's greatest callers. Eddie was recently featured in Hall of Fame, and is, without doubt, one of the finest callers on the square dance scene today.

From that first frantic and very enjoyable night of April 14<sup>th</sup> 1955, Circle & Swing has risen to become one of the country's greatest clubs, 50 glorious years.

Tony Pears  
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