

Whirlaways SDC

It was on the 27th August, 1954, that Whirlaways opened its doors at Bernays Institute, Stanmore Broadway. Wally Spratt was one of the most popular callers of his day, with claim to teaching squares as far back as 1945. He already had a thriving club at the Kodak building in Harrow, The KRS.

The opening night had been well publicised, resulting in a full house. Music for the evening was provided by a very popular band of the day, Laurie Clarke's Square Four. Guest of Honour was Mildred Buhler, who declared the club well and truly open. Mildred soon had everybody on the floor, promenading into sets. She kept everybody on their toes, with a very lively session of calling. Accompanying Mildred was a young caller from Dublin, Declan Kennedy, and he gave us a very lively rendition of Hot Time.

As was the style in the fifties, there were a large number of guest callers for Wally to call on. They included many of the popular callers of the day, Jimmy Morris, Jack Unwin, Eddie Hall, Jack Smith, Len Janka, Viv Canon, Pete Sansom, Tony Pears, and of course, the grand old man of square dancing himself, Wally Spratt.

It was a great start to a club that was to become one of the country's leading clubs. Because of its location, many people referred to the club as Stanmore Whirlaways. This annoyed Wally intensely, as he always insisted that it was just Whirlaways. The club's second major event occurred on New Year's Eve, 1954. It was a bright and very cold evening for the last night of the old year, and the hall was packed to capacity. Music for the evening was provided by Laurie Clarke's Square Four. A party atmosphere prevailed and Wally himself was in great voice, and of course, he had good support from all the callers present, Jack Unwin, Eddy Hill, Rod Ditchburn, Tony Pears, and a popular club member, making his calling debut, Alan Ward.

The evening ended with everybody joining hands for Auld Lang Syne. There followed one final call from Eddy Hill, who claimed that he was calling the first dance of 1955. One wonders how many other callers throughout the country were making that same claim.

By 1955, the Whirlaways, though still less than 6 months old, had risen to become one of the country's leading clubs. In February, the club changed its venue from Stanmore to Harrow. This further emphasised Wally's insistence that the club should be known simply as Whirlaways, without any prefix. The opening night at the new hall was well attended. With Len Benedick on accordion, supplying the music, and a large number of guest callers; a great evening was had by all. In March, they celebrated with a Saturday dance. Guest of Honour was Tommy Cavanagh, with music supplied by Len Benedick on accordion. With a whole host of guest callers for Wally to call on, the dance was a great success.

Perhaps it was inevitable that a certain amount of rivalry would develop between the club and Jimmy Morris's Woodberry Down. At first, the rivalry was friendly, but unfortunately, the two callers had a falling out, and the rivalry became a deep rift. On the Whitsun weekend at

the end of May, both clubs held a dance on the Saturday. If that sort of thing happened today, it would probably prove disastrous for one club or the other. Such was the happy state of square dancing in 1955 that both clubs reported a sell out. As I was present at the Woodberry Down Jamboree, I can certainly verify the fact that 20 sets danced to the calling of Jimmy Morris and other top line callers.

Whirlaways also reported a very large crowd, with all tickets being sold five weeks beforehand. This, Wally Spratt claimed, was a record for this country. Dancing was to the music of Tommy Cavanagh's Western Music. Guest of Honour was Mildred Buhler. In addition to Wally, dancers danced to the calling of Mildred Buhler, Tommy Cavanagh, Nell Webb, Jack Smith, and Alan Ward. Back in 1955, summer was not generally regarded as a closed season. It is true to say that a few clubs did close their doors for the summer, but the majority remained open. Whirlaways was one such club. While they enjoyed a successful summer, they were busy planning for their first birthday dance to be held in September.

Whirlaways opened their doors and celebrated their first birthday on September 10th, 1955. All tickets were sold well in advance. Mildred Buhler, who had declared the club open the previous year, was again guest of honour, and music for the occasion was provided by Tommy Cavanagh's western music.

It was Mildred who opened the evening, with a very lively rendition in her own inimitable style. As was the case in the fifties, there were a large number of guest callers present, all of whom obliged with a call. It was a very memorable evening, and a fitting way for the club to mark its first year.

Throughout the fifties, the club continued to flourish and retained its position as one of the country's leading clubs. This was due to the popularity of caller, Wally Spratt and his hard-working wife, Cora. In addition to his work with the club, Wally was, in turn, secretary and president of the B.A.A.S.D.C. Also, together with another very popular caller of the day, Jack Smith, Wally was responsible for the organisation of those fabulous Treetop weekends that we all enjoyed from 1955 to 1959. Incidentally, how many former Treetoppers out there know that the owners of Treetops holiday camp were appropriately named Mr & Mrs Plant?

Throughout 1956, the club was involved in a number of activities, including visits to the American air base at Newbury, and the Circle Eight club.

Wally, a very outspoken character, was no stranger to controversy. His long running feud with Jimmy Morris's Woodberry Down lasted until Jimmy announced that he and his wife, Beryl, were leaving for the States.

In November, 1959, Wally was involved in further controversy. A round up was held in Paris, and a large group of British dancers and callers attended. These included top name callers of the day, Colin Walton, Robin Rumble, Jon Vear, John Smith, and Len Janka. On the same day, the Lariat square dance club, run by a well known caller of the day, Max Stern, held a dance. The dance was sparsely attended, and Wally, who was involved with the dance, blamed the round up. At a

later 4 meeting of the Association, Wally demanded that, in future, home dances should be supported ahead of foreign dances. Needless to say, the motion was defeated on the grounds that people have to be free to make their own choices. There was a threat for a while that Wally would take Whirlaways out of the Association. I was always good friends with Wally, but, as one who attended the Paris round up, I had to agree with the Association. After a great deal of arguing and persuasion, Jon Vear and I managed to persuade him to keep the club in the association

It was in the summer of 1961 that Wally Spratt announced that, although he still intended to be involved with square dancing, he was giving up calling. On 10th June, 1961, Whirlaways held its final major dance. The Labour Hall was packed to capacity, and music for the evening was provided by Len Benedick and his electric accordion. With Wally in great voice, and a whole host of guest callers to call upon, it was a very memorable evening, and a fitting ending to a great club. Wally continued in square dancing as a dancer and in an advisory capacity until his death in the early eighties. Although he was involved with other clubs, it is for this one club that he will ever be remembered — the Whirlaways.

Tony Pears
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