

# Cracking Chestnuts—Christmas Hornpipe

by David Smukler

## Christmas Hornpipe

Duple proper

- A1 Couple one balance twice with lady two  
Those three circle left once around and all fall back to place
- A2 Couple one balance twice with gent two  
Those three circle left once around and all fall back to place
- B1 Couple one down the center, turn alone  
Return and cast off
- B2 Right and left through, over and back

Here's a dance to try out for the holidays. It is easy to dance. (The only tip we will offer is to steal a little time from the end of the right and left so that you are ready to balance on the beat at the top of A1.) A similar sequence of figures appears in many nineteenth and twentieth century dance manuals. It is given various names—Vinton's Hornpipe and Christmas Hornpipe are the most common, but it has also been called Thunder Hornpipe, Oyster River Hornpipe and Shunster's Hornpipe. The version above is sometimes called Half Moon. The titles generally refer to particular tunes. Vinton's can be found in the book, *New England Fiddler's Repertoire* by Randy Miller, and Christmas Hornpipe appears in the classic collection, *Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes*. Many other hornpipe-style tunes are equally suitable.

A dance sequence is not a fixed, immutable entity. Many dances have been modified over the years to adapt to changes in clothing, dance styles and preferences, very young or very old dancers, new music fashions and so on. Christmas Hornpipe has weathered many such changes. Some of its versions are triple minor. These often begin with the lady balancing with gents two and three, rather than in a group with her partner. Another cousin is the dance Pop Goes the Weasel: a ring of three balances just once, circles halfway, then pops the lady under an arch formed by the two gents and back to her place. This can leave the gents out of order, but the rest of the dance fixes that anyway.

The way that Christmas Hornpipe is commonly done across the ocean in England is duple proper, but borrows an idea from the triple minor version. It begins as follows:

- A1 Lady one balance to gent two (4), and then to gent "three"  
(that is gent one of the next minor set) (4)  
Those three circle left once around and all fall back to place (8)
- A2 Gent one balance to lady two (4), and then to lady "three" (4)  
Those three circle left once around and all fall back to place (8)

One appeal of this odd version is the fun it generates in A1. The active lady is likely to have trouble getting the attention of her "gent three," who will be occupied watching his partner having a similar problem.

A major modernization of the dance took place in the 1980s. Ted Sannella and Tony Saletan, while planning for a holiday event, decided to use the old dance, but made several significant changes. They changed the dance from proper to improper, sped up the circle, allowed couple two to go down the hall (four in line) with the ones, dropped the right and left through, and changed B2 to a sixteen count swing for couple one. Ted later further modified the end of the dance in order "to bring the whole set together before the final swing." Here's the result:

## **Christmas Hornpipe**

(Ted Sannella and Tony Saletan variant  
from *Swing the Next*)

Duple improper

- A1 Active couple balance the lady below, circle three to the left twice around (16)
- A2 Active couple balance the gent below, circle three to the left twice around, then open to a line facing down and inactive lady join the line (16)
- B1 Go down the hall four in line (actives in the center), turn alone (8)  
Return, cast off with a hand cast (8)
- B2 In long lines, go forward and back (8)  
Actives swing in the center (8)

We enjoy these adaptations. Although the old-fashioned right and left has its charms, a partner swing is also great fun. Note that it is well worth making the dance improper if you intend to add the swing, as the dancers are bound to end their swings improper anyway, by leaving the lady on the right and gent on the left as they face down to start the dance again. Ted also specifies a hand cast in order to support a smooth flow from the line of four into the long line.

To join in the spirit of a tradition that is simultaneously malleable and respectful of its heritage we feel it is not inappropriate to include a brand new version of Christmas Hornpipe here. The following variation is an attempt to borrow back the English version of the dance, but in a way that we hope will create less chaos. Do be careful, however, as you get near to either end of the set.

## **Christmas Hornpipe**

(David Smukler variant)

Duple proper

- A1 Gent one down the center and take hands in a three person ring with lady two and lady one from the next set (a shadow) (4); balance the ring (4)  
Circle left one time (6) and gent one fall back to place (2)
- A2 Lady one down the center and take hands with gent two and the next gent one (a shadow, who has just returned to place and remembered to face up) (4); these three balance in a ring (4)  
Circle left one time (6) and lady one fall back to place (2)
- B1 Couple one down the center; the same way back, and cast off
- B2 Right and left through, over and back (two ladies remain connected for the next A1)

So now, in a column about chestnuts, you have seen a dance that was never danced before 2005! We have learned of a few New England dance communities where Christmas Hornpipe still appears regularly on the program during the month of December. Whichever version you prefer, we heartily recommend this practice to you. Let's make some sort of tradition traditional!

## **Sources**

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*“Careless Sally” is the ninth dance discussed in the Cracking Chestnuts series, and appeared in the CDSS News, issue #187, November/December 2005. The column also is posted on [www.davidsmukler.syracusecountrydancers.org/](http://www.davidsmukler.syracusecountrydancers.org/).*