

Contra Dancing Comes to Paris

by John Sweeney

Laurette Tuckerman, an American living in Paris, had a dream; she wanted to dance her beloved contra dances in Paris. Laurette met me at a contra dance in London, run by the London Barn Dance Company at Cecil Sharp House, and once she knew I called contra dances, and lived a few minutes from the Eurotunnel, she took the first steps in making her dream come true by booking me to call in Paris.

We needed a small band that could play superb contra dance music, make an amazing, uplifting room-filling sound, and fit in one car with Karen (my wife) and me, plus all our PA and instruments. Gareth and Linda, the English Contra Dance Band, fitted the bill perfectly; even better, Gareth offered to drive!

Laurette managed to book a superb hall in the American Church in Paris, right on the banks of the Seine, with beautiful stained glass windows—you can see the pictures if you search Facebook for “Paris contra dance”—for May 31, 2014.*

So, band, caller, venue, date all arranged! What else do you need? Oh yes, dancers!

Laurette embarked on a massive campaign contacting all the American communities and dance communities of every type in Paris, together with general advertising through any media she could access, including, of course, the Internet.

The final piece of the jigsaw was funding; Laurette went dancing in America and persuaded the Country Dance and Song Society to provide some money to help cover some of the costs. Everything was now in place and we waited for the big day...

The plan was to run a two-hour workshop in the afternoon, followed by a buffet meal, then a contra dance in the evening. The biggest challenge now was to work out how much food her children and their friends should prepare since Laurette had no idea whether we would get twenty people or two hundred people!

Gareth and Linda stayed with us on the Friday night and we set off for the Eurotunnel just before 7 am. The journey went smoothly; we even found a parking space outside the church and had time to have lunch outside in the sunshine!

Before we had the equipment set up people started arriving! By 4 pm we had about fifty people to start the workshop. Most people stayed for the evening dance and more turned up just for the evening; in total about eighty people attended one or both of the sessions.

The dancers were a complete mix of ages and dance skills; some were Americans who had done some contra dancing, others were from the Parisian Irish, English and Scottish country dancing groups with some dance skills but no knowledge of contra, and, of course, lots of people who had never danced before. Though the majority were French they all had some knowledge of English so I taught and called all the dances in English, with the aid of demonstrations and occasional translations.

I had spent a lot of time planning the structure of the workshop; we started with easy dances to introduce the first-timers to contra dance concepts and basic moves, then built slowly on that foundation, adding more interesting moves with each dance to spice things up. We had more ladies than men, so we used coloured sashes to make it easy for me to make sure everyone was in the right place during the walk-throughs.

By the end of the workshop all the dancers were coping well with heys, ladies' chains, petronellas, right and left throughs, and waves in simple dances. After an excellent buffet we started the evening session. Building on the skills they gained from the workshop and with the help of the few experienced contra dancers we were able to dance a wide range of great dances such as Tica Tica Timing (diagonal 3/4 circles, ladies' chains and petronellas), Trip to Lambertville (tidal and ocean waves) and Butter (ladies' chains and heys).

The dancing was amazing! Karen danced every dance, helping the dancers get the feel of good contra dancing; she remarked that the dancers were growing in enthusiasm and confidence throughout the day, and that by the middle of the evening it was as good as a regular contra dance.

For variety I added some squares and circle mixers, then finished the evening by repeating a couple of the dances from the workshop so that the dancers could relax and enjoy the fabulous music. Throughout the sessions Linda and Gareth were smoking hot, filling the room with their wonderful music and inspiring the dancers to put everything into their dancing. The atmosphere was electric!

Laurette's dream had come true; she was contra dancing in Paris! Everyone agreed that it had been a great success and Laurette is already planning the next one, May 30, 2015.

* [facebook.com/events/629009663843375/](https://www.facebook.com/events/629009663843375/)