

These dances are unashamedly about flirting. They mimic the ritual of courtship



Dance scene: Films about Jane Austen, above, and adaptations of her novels have given country dancing a boost: Annabel Simms, inset

Flirt on the floor

Annabel Simms takes to country dancing, the original speed dating



My first country dance class was in a shabby, echoing church hall. I eyed my fellow participants and my heart sank: they were middle-aged women with a pathetic sprinkling of men, a few weedy younger ones among them. There were no Mr Darcys, as I'd hoped for, and not even a Mr Bingley.

As we walked through various sequences, which weren't as easy as they appeared, everyone seemed to know what to do except me. They reminded me of children's games: holding hands in a line with one couple raising their arms to form an arch through which everyone passes, for example. I wondered how grown people could bear to make themselves so ridiculous.

Then our teacher switched on a recording: 17th-century music played on the flute and drum – hauntingly beautiful but with an irresistible dance rhythm – filled the hall and suddenly everyone was weaving themselves into a constantly changing and flowing pattern in perfect time to the music. It was a joy to watch. It wasn't such a joy to

perform, as I was always one step behind, but I instantly made up my mind to learn how to do it properly so that I could be a part of it.

"Country" dancing was first made fashionable at court by Elizabeth I and remained popular in aristocratic and then bourgeois circles, until it was superseded by couple dances such as the waltz and the quadrille. Its "gay simplicity" and the bewitching tunes, ranging from slow and stately to fast and witty (with mischievous names like "Ruffy Tufty"), made it the perfect occasion for socially sanctioned flirting.

Folk dancing is a more popular and accessible strand of the same tradition, but the older courtly dances are now enjoying something of a comeback and attracting younger people, especially in the US but also in Paris, mainly because of the worldwide success of the Jane Austen films, such as *Becoming Jane*, pictured above, and television dramas.

Unlike tango, salsa and ballroom dancing, English country dancing is co-operative rather than competitive. You dance with your neighbours as well as your partner and there is time

JANE AUSTEN'S FIVE BEST FLIRTING TIPS:

- 1 Maintain eye contact with your partner;
- 2 Smile at new partners;
- 3 Be guided by the music and your neighbours' movements;
- 4 Remember you are at a dance, not the gym, and complete each sequence with elegance;
- 5 Don't talk until your partner does (unless he's Darcy)

FIRST STEPS

What historic dances look like: www.hampshireregencydancers.org.uk has a YouTube dance clip

What they sound like: www.emusic.com/album/The-Broadside-Band-John-Playford-s-Popular-Tunes-Airs-MP3-Download/10592140.html

Best dance titles: Jennie, Come Tie My Cravat, Prince Rupert's March, Ruffy Tufty, Cuckolds All Awry, Upon a Summer's Day

Where to learn folk dancing: The websites www.efdss.org and www.setandturnsingle.org.uk include national listings; www.sicf.ucam.org/round (Cambridge University Country Dance Club) is open to everyone

Historic dance groups: www.dhds.org.uk and www.earlydancecircle.co.uk contain useful national and international links, including www.janeaustendancersbath.co.uk (Bath), and www.regencyassembly.co.uk (Birmingham)

What to wear: Anything that hangs in a flattering way, flowing trousers or a dress. Shoes with a soft sole so you can swivel prettily – the best and cheapest are Sansha Teacher's Shoes, the Diva (pictured above), www.sansha.com



for chatting between the steps, as Elizabeth Bennet tried to do with Mr Darcy in Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*. Most of all, you learn how to make eye contact with them, as these dances are unashamedly about flirting. They mimic the ritual of courtship: the prolonged gaze into your partner's eyes as you step around him, known as "Gipsy Eye"; the initial advance and retreat; the mirroring of the partner's movements (he moves to the left, you move to the right); the coming together in a "turn", the "promenade" as you parade down the set together, but also the moment of parting, when you "cast", that is gracefully separate, and promptly move on to a new partner who appears by your side on the next beat of the music.

In some circle dances a potential partner tantalizingly joins you and you take two steps together but then he moves on. The next beat brings you your new partner, on whom you smile afresh and begin the whole sequence again. It's the original speed-dating.

An experienced teacher recommended starting with folk dancing to learn the basics, before joining a group specialising in historic dances, where you can really hone your flirting technique. I've been hooked ever since that first dance.

OLIVER PRITCHETT

IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME

THE BATTLE OF FA

There's a bit of atmosphere. Visitors can sign at once – over the flat. We place the red carpet. front-line dispatch. bloody Battle of write this report are covered with which are suppo

“

The walk from of to an e new of

out different different are different to me. th white. My the walls f white to s white / m varieties - House Wh Tie. I could company of course p trousers. E in with Cr minutes of difference. I snow blind another po emulsion? I am ben Pavilion Bl would app icken? M Apple Gre I must c by the na bit of a s grand co Gameke Pantry G those o never b I start browse Unchar or Taffe Beige B (hair co defeat made have i will be