**Fugues Class, October 2025.** Rod Downey

The Region decided to try something new this year and hold a class where advanced dancers experience the challenge of fugues. We had around 3 sets of dancers, and their principal challenges were to have precise phrasing and teamwork. The following are some notes I made on the dances we did, plus some other (hopefully informative background) notes.

These are not dances you would generally find on a social programme, but provide a challenge for those who like such things.

**Fugue** (pronounded “fyoog”) is a term coming from music, it is a technique of music construction for a fixed number of voices or parts. There is usually a main theme and then various echoes of this through the composition, generally done contrapuntally. This term was widely used to denote any Baroque music in the ”canonic” style. The simplest version of such a style you might have met is a round in singing, such as [Frere Jacques.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZPqYuKwiag) In that form, each voice sings the same song, only having differing starting points.

In Scottish Country Dancing various devisers have made dancing fugues. They might be canons (which are the dancing equivalent of rounds in singing) or “proper” fugues where only the theme is pervasive in the dance. Canons tend to be simpler, as only one voice (sequence) needs learning. Whilst there are fugal elements to several early (even 18th Century) dances, such as [The Bob O’Dowally](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/11400/), and [Lochiel’s Awa’ to France,](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/3887/#cribs) (the second one being an 8 by 48 Strathspey we strangely never do…), the devising of fugues likely originated with the book, [The Waverley Fugues](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/publication/150/) in 1963 by Hugh Foss. [Hugh Foss](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Foss) was a musician, deviser of dances of great ingenuity, and famously a code-breaker at [Bletchley Park](https://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/) during WW2. Up until quite recently at Bletchley Park they would have a Scottish Country Dancing “Hugh Foss Day”.

The RSCDS has some canons in its collections such as [The One O’Clock Canon](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/972/) and [Farewell to Balfour Road.,](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/18272/) but only one “proper” fugue, [Fugal Fergus.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/10566/) I wanted to avoid *Farewell to Balfour Road* as it was on the Lower Hutt Annual Dance, and wanted novel dances for the group. Hence the collection below. I kept the day fluid as I had to see how people coped with such unfamiliar dances and challenges. (The did well.)

**The Day**. I began with trying to get the dancers to learn a simple song called [Grasshoppers Three a Fiddlin’ Went.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lRbSnF04tKE) Then sing this as a round. The idea was to make them realize that they are on their own (except with partners who can help) and must maintain their own phrasing. I suspect I am much worse at teaching songs than dances…

[The Dundee City Police Jig.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/361/) (John Mitchell) This was our first dance and it is a canon. To my knowledge it is the first canon in SCD. It was written by John Mitchell (1931-2012) who devised many interesting and highly original dances. Examples include [Wallace’s Revolution](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/6910/#cribs) (a rotating dance), and [Caddam Wood](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/3197/) (where you lose your partner). He also invented many novel formations. His 828 dances are all written in books and leaflets called *Whetherly.* Many were not danced in his lifetime and some did not quite work as written. His daughter, Alison and Victor Lehman, the tutor from Heidelberg have tasked themselves with reconstructing accurate versions and re-publishing. If you go to SCDDB, and type “Whetherly Book”, that will take you to links for all the books to be downloaded. *The Dundee City Police Jig* is a straightforward canon which is highly enjoyable, and is based on variations of set cast and cross.

I then played some of a recording [Ana Vidoviċ playing J. S. Bach - Partits in E-major,](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK-CRj-XL-E) so that the group could hear the first voice and development in fugue. Then we launched into *Fugue Land.*

[Rob Roy](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/8838/). (4 by 32 R Hugh Foss) This is one of my favourite fugues from *The Waverley Fugues,* and the theme is set turn cast and dance up. The hard parts are the phrasing of the half reels of three into the full mirror reels of four. Excellent for teamwork.

[Copycat Fantasia.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/9460/#cribs)(8 by 32 S) (John Drewry). This is a relatively easy fugue based around set, cast to the foot of the set, and several bars later, cast, cross and dance through the foot of the set. The key challenges are phrasing (since e.g. if the first man is too slow he will collide with the setting third man, but then the first couple must really slow down.) John Drewry (1923-2014) wrote over 790 dances and many of them are favourites. He wrote only three fugues to my knowledge.

[Stroangassel.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/6360/#cribs) (8 by 32 R) (Hugh Foss) This was out of a collection of dances, mainly fugues, called the “Glendarroch Sheets.” Each of these dances seems based on a particular formation. I avoided the one based on petronella ([Auchencairn](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/276/" \l "cribs), too much setting), and the one based on advance and retire diagonally ([The Marquis of Huntly’s Farewell](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/4192/#cribs), too confusing), and did not have time for [The Fountain](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/2305/#cribs) (based on casting and figures of eight). Improbably, *Stroangassel* is based on back-to-back, and proved very challenging for the group. Lots of back-to-back “in tandem”, and a very exacting sequence. The end has a 4-person collective back-to-back which could have proven injurious, but was certainly hilarious. [Stroangassel](https://en.hory.app/mountain/275977-stroangassel-hill) is a stone circle of about 20 cairns just north of Dalry where Hugh Foss used to live. I like this dance and wrote a further development of this called [Stranfasket Hill](https://www.scottish-country-dancing-dictionary.com/dance-crib/stranfasket-hill.html) (a hill located near Stroangassel), which is very challenging. [Here’s](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/14538/#videos) the Leeds Dem Team performing it.

[Kristin and Rod’s Farewell Fugue](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/17353/). (8 by 32 S) (Terry Glasspool) This was given to Kristin and I in 1992, and I think probably I have the only copy. Terry Glasspool is a fine deviser of dances, and you’ll know him from [The Cranberry Tart.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/8448/) I did not have time to dance [The Cranberry Tartelette](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/8757/), which is a more complete fugue, and great fun. I plan to include Terry’s dance description of this dance in my upcoming book, *The Rata and the Wheki*, which can be [downloaded](https://homepages.ecs.vuw.ac.nz/~downey/dances.html) from my home page. The key point of this dance is the very precise two bar phrasing needed to dance it and the group did very well indeed. Some of Terry’s other dances you might like include [Gypsy Dreams](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/535/) (where he invented the Gypsy Poussette), [The Silver Square](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/4454/) (5C in a square set), and [Knight’s Heys](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/5151/).

At this point, everyone was a wee bit tired, especially mentally, so I finished with the RSCDS fugue, and for some, an old favourite.

[Fugal Fergus.](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/10566/) (8 by 48J) (Hugh Foss) This is the first and easiest dance in the *Waverley Fugues.* The basic challenge is the phrasing, especially in the men crossing inside of the ladies’ reel. Also, the direction and phrasing of the three half reels on the sides. This was a pleasure to watch from the sidelines.

**Final notes:** We did fugues which I regard as medium difficulty as fugues go. Ones I did not have time for from the *Waverley Fugues* included [Lucy of Lammermoor](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/3988/#cribs), and [Magdalen Murdockson](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/4065/#cribs) (my absolute favourite). Later ones in the *Waverley Fugues* and later ones in the Glendarroch sheets are often very long sequences and can take hours to teach, but are genuinely rewarding. I once went to a clsss taught by a very well-known teacher who devoted a whole afternoon to try to teach [Wing-the-Wind](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/10230/), with a strong advanced class. In the end, the group did not manage to get through it more than a couple of times. For the present class I also wanted to do [Waves on the Waimak](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/11067/) by Julie Leith and from the Canterbury Collection, which I had planned but ran out of time. Ditto some of my own fugues [Loralee Hyde](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dancevideo/3984/) (some familiar faces in that video), [The New York Fugue](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/19504/) and [The Wakefield Hornpipe](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/22232/#cribs), the last two being a wee bit tricky, given the time available. [Ian Brockbank](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/person/550/#dances) has some quite interesting and genuinely challenging fugues you might chase up. A group I used to dance with loved his [The Cotton Reel,](https://my.strathspey.org/dd/dance/8997/) for example.

Thanks also to Elaine and Kevin Lethbridge for providing much needed afternoon teas.