



## ***Memoria Saltationis: The Memory of Dance - 5 June 2020***

### **'How our grandfathers danced': embodying cultural memories in nineteenth-century England**

Theresa Buckland  
Professor of Dance History and Ethnography  
Centre for Dance Research  
University of Roehampton

'How our grandfathers danced', a satirical cartoon illustrating contemporary social dancing in 1891, contrasts a cultural memory of a physically and socially active generation on the dance floor with the listless, sedentary attendees at a similar event.

At the time, there was frequent regret expressed at the perceived loss and decline in dancing in England from that of earlier generations. Often construed as a symptom of national degeneration - physical, cultural and moral - that threatened the maintenance and stability of British civilization, late Victorian social dancing was believed to be at its worst among the privileged young elite and the urban lower orders.

Social commentators and dance pedagogues looked back with nostalgia to a supposedly more sophisticated and polite society of the late 1700s and early 1800s that practised minuets and quadrilles with decorum. This rhetoric of degeneration ran in parallel and often intersected with a second cultural memory – that of cultural primitivism which embraced a notion of artless, more bucolic dancing supposedly prevalent in the mediaeval and Shakespearean age.

Both cultural memories served contemporary purposes of society and nation. Victorian fascination with the cultural past, harnessed to a progressive social agenda, helped to drive movement towards the re-enactment of past dances drawn from both the contexts of court and country. Both approaches relied upon memories of dancing – one based upon a collective memory and identity among the higher and aspiring middle classes that would eventually shift further back in time, moving from embodied memory to reconstruction of dances from archival sources; the other moving from inspiration for dancing based on centuries-old drama, literature and iconography towards dances harvested from the embodied memories of the rural lower class. Memory in these instances of dance is never singular but signals and embodies notions of the cultural, generational, racial, and atavistic.