

Feet FIRST

Dancing is a fun and friendly way to get active. **Rachael Healy** hears more about its benefits from some keen dancers

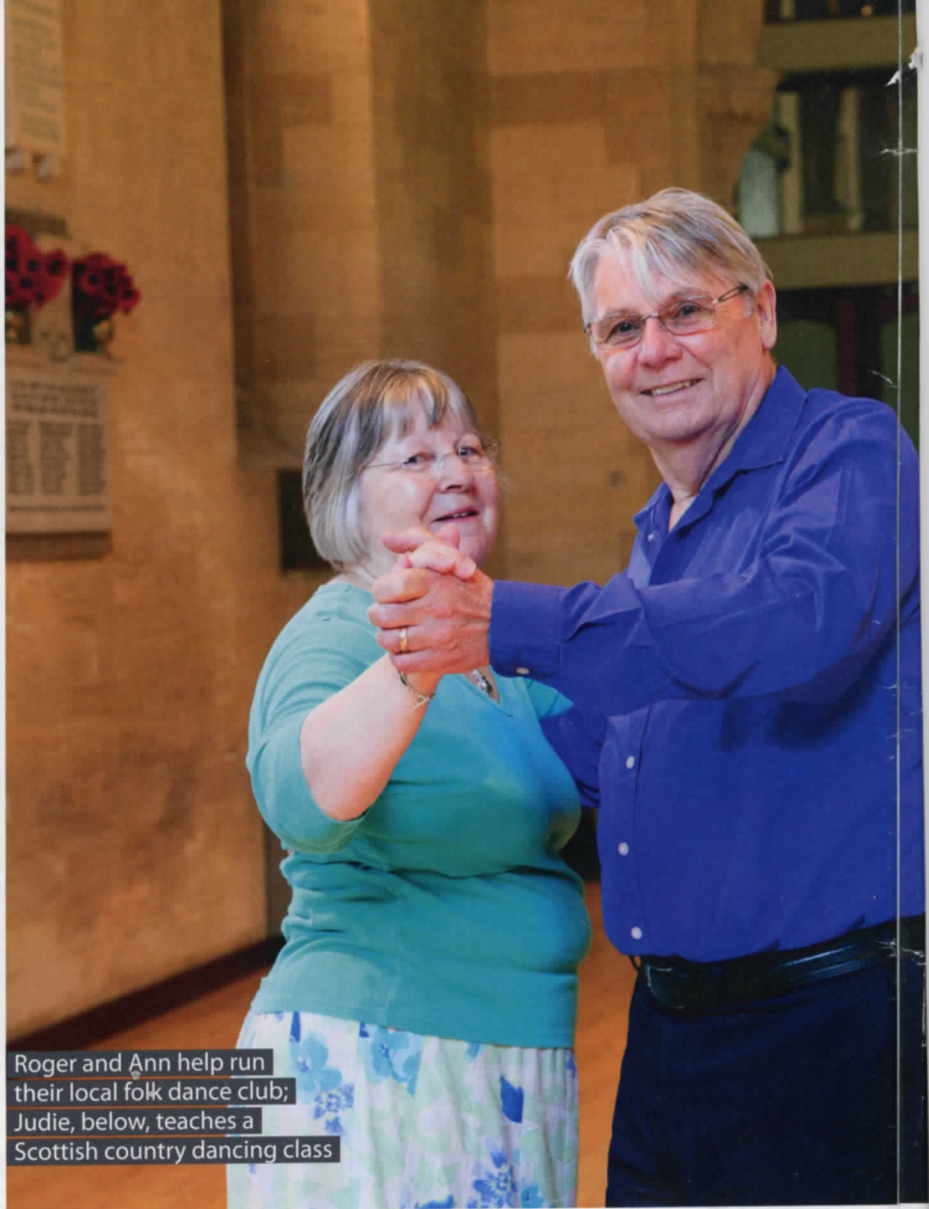
Roger Polden and his wife Ann love dancing. The couple are both 70 and help to run weekly sessions at the Westbury Folk Dance Club, as well as attending regular festivals.

Roger has been dancing for 30 years and Ann for 23 years. "We go to dances all over the country," says Roger. "They are always very friendly. As for folk festivals, they're very happy places. It's like a family; everyone joins in. It's a good way to make friends."

Dance teacher Judie Seymour has seen strong friendships form in her classes too. She's been leading Scottish country dancing sessions in Weymouth for almost 10 years.

"I have watched friendships form in my class year on year," says Judie. "It gives me great pleasure to think that no one need be lonely while there's a country dancing class somewhere near – and there usually is."

As well as the social benefits, dancing can help to keep your heart healthy, maintain flexibility, and keep your weight under control – see box, right, for more on the benefits.



Roger and Ann help run their local folk dance club; Judie, below, teaches a Scottish country dancing class

Because there are so many styles of dancing, and it can often be done at different levels, it's suitable for many ages and abilities.

Something for everyone

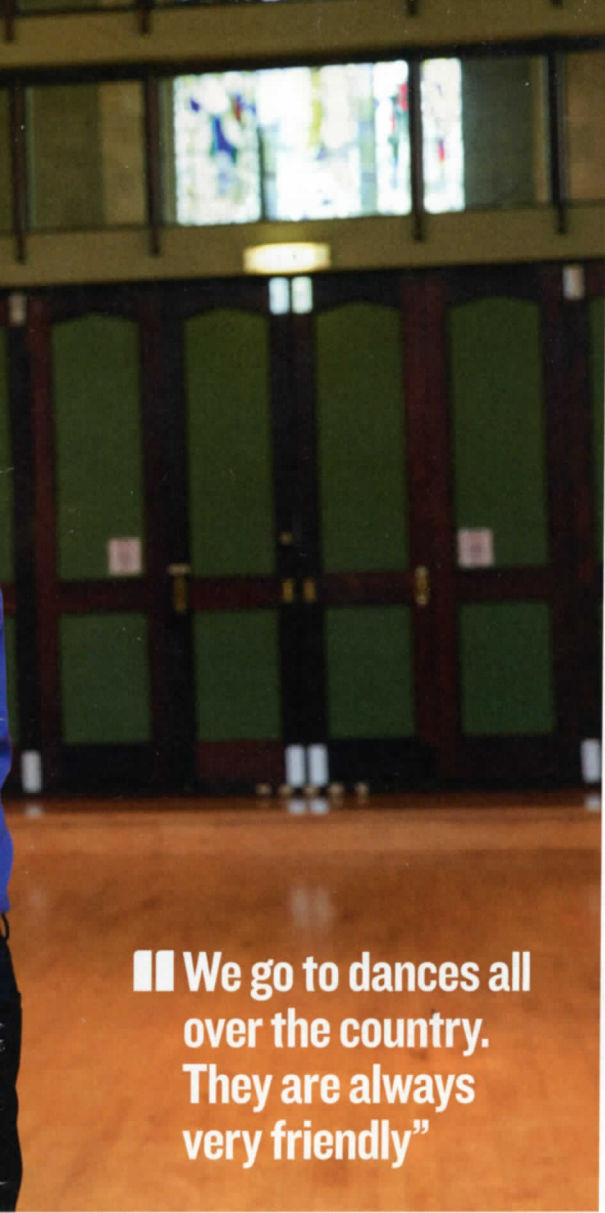
"Our class is a mixture of ages, fitness levels and health," says Judie. "A couple of our dancers have **pacemakers**[®] fitted, which hasn't stopped them dancing. One close friend had to have a triple heart **bypass**[®] and she is back dancing. There's a 93-year-old who dances at our local clubs at least twice a week."

Similarly, Roger says his fellow folk dancers range from age 10 up to people in their 80s.

Roger had to take a break from his hobby in 2008, following diagnosis and repair of an aortic aneurysm and



subsequent valve replacement and triple heart bypass. "I went to the gym once a week for the **cardiac rehab**[®], but I much prefer the dance evenings – you're there with people you know and they're all so friendly," he says. He didn't get back to



■ ■ We go to dances all over the country. They are always very friendly”

dancing straight after his surgery, but by 2010, he was back in action again. And as he explains, there are different styles and levels, so you can do what you feel able to.

“Sometimes we learn a special step, but we do a walking step most of the time. It can be similar to a ceilidh, only not quite so hectic – with more technique, style and composition.

“There are some very fast dances, but as soon as you know what they’re like, you don’t have to get up for those ones. There are also medium-fast dances and some slow ones. Of everything, I prefer the Playford style of folk dancing they did back in the 16th and 17th centuries. That is a more involved sort of dancing. You have to be very well-coordinated.

“But there’s no great pressure – as long as you enjoy yourself!” **HM**

Six reasons to start dancing

1 It can improve your memory
The Bronx Aging Study followed 488 people aged 75 or older, for 21 years. It found that dancing was associated with a lower risk of dementia.

death, compared with those who rarely or never danced. The study also suggested the social side of dancing, and the relaxation that comes with it, could be partly responsible for its health benefits.

2 But you don’t have to memorise moves
One of the best things about dance is its creativity – you’re free to interpret moves in your own way. Some varieties, such as ceilidh and barn dancing, have a ‘caller’ who shouts out moves to the crowd.

Other dances, zumba for example, have an instructor who stands at the front to demonstrate steps. It should be easy to find a class too – zumba is among the top five most popular exercise classes in the UK, and more than half of dance fitness teachers run zumba sessions.

■ Find a class at zumba.com.

3 You can do it in a wheelchair
The Wheelchair Dance Sport Association was set up in 2006 to get a greater range of dance-lovers involved with the sport.

■ Find out more at wdsauk.co.uk or call 0300 111 30 45.

4 It could protect you from heart disease

An Australian study, which pooled data from 48,000 British people, found that moderate-intensity dancing is linked to a lower risk of dying from **cardiovascular disease**^D. Dancers were found to have a 46 per cent lower risk of cardiovascular

5 You could learn about local history
Playford dances and Scottish country dancing are just two of the many folk dancing varieties. In Staffordshire, the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance is an unusual performance where Maid Marian and her men cavort with 1,000-year-old deer horns. Down in Padstow, the annual ‘Obby ‘Oss festival sees two colourful horses enact a dance battle on the streets. Varieties of clog and step dancing are found across the UK. In newly industrialised Lancashire, workers wore wooden-soled clogs in the textile mills. Their percussive potential was incorporated into dances at social occasions.

6 You might even get to use a sword
Longsword dancing and rapper dancing are two regional traditions, and may appeal to those who want something different. Dancers wield swords as they move across the floor. Some troupes now use wooden swords, but the moves are no less intricate and the dance ends with the swords intertwined in a star shape and held aloft to the audience. Most variations originated in north-east England.

■ Find a class near you at exercisemovedance.org/class-search or call 01403 266000.