

How To Choose And Care For Dance Shoes

Introduction

All beginners to Scottish Country Dancing are permitted to dance in trainers, plimsols or similar lightweight shoes for the first 3-6 weeks of their dancing journey. After which, they are strongly encouraged to invest in proper dance shoes, which are lighter and more flexible than trainers – a bonus for improving footwork. Once shoes have been bought, they need to be looked after to get the best from the shoes.

How to choose your dance shoes, where to get them, and how to care for your shoes is a topic not often covered in class. This guide aims to cover these topics.

Types of Footwear

The type of footwear required for Scottish Country Dancing differs for men and women. Men wear ghillies or ghilli-brogues. Ladies wear either “unblocked ballet flats” or “pumps”. These shoes are made from very lightweight leather with no heel or arch support. The soles are often suede or a similar synthetic material. The heel is completely flat, with dancers relying on their own foot strength for support and lift.

For those with existing foot, knee or ankle issues, and those wanting more heel or arch support “Jazz shoes” or “dance sneakers” are recommended for both men and women. Examples of each are given in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1 Dance Shoes for Scottish Country Dancing (L-R: Men's Ghillies, Ladies Ballet-Flats/Pumps, Dance Sneakers, Jazz Shoes)

Some men wear Ghilli-brogues (a type of low-heeled work-type shoe with no tongue – see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brogue_shoe for example), although this is not common.

If it's your first time buying dance shoes, always try it on first – or make sure the company has a good returns policy! A guide to what to look out for is given below.

Where to Purchase Shoes

Most reputable dance shoe shops on the high street will sell either ballet-flats or Jazz shoes. However, not all will be able to give advice tailored to Scottish Country Dancing as they are unfamiliar with this dance form – you may need to show them a youtube video first!

Men's Ghillies need to be bought from specialist Scottish Country Dance or Highland Dance shops.

The following are well known Scottish Dance Shops in the UK:

- [RSCDS Leeds Branch Shop](#). Please note this shop is run part-time by volunteers. Order online or at a Leeds Branch Dance.
- [James Senior Shoes \(St Andrews, Scotland\)](#) A dedicated Scottish Country Dance shop for bespoke fittings.
- [Thistle Shoes \(Glenrothes, Scotland\)](#) A dedicated Scottish Country Dance shop for bespoke fittings.

Other countries may have their own specialist shops.

Ladies' Shoes (unblocked ballet flats and pumps)

Whether you choose single-sole or split-sole "unblocked ballet flats" or pumps will depend on your foot shape and personal preference. Most beginners will opt for the single-sole for their first shoe, and consider other options later.

Black shoes are generally worn for classes, dances, competitions and most demonstrations. Other colours may be available (e.g. blue, red, white) and are generally bought to go with outfits for social dances, balls or specific demonstrations.

Whichever you choose, when you try on the shoe, remember the following:

- If you order via a ballet/high street dance shoe shop you may have to specifically ask for black. SCD and highland shops will have black in stock as standard.
- Start with your normal shoe size and try on a pair. Try on the shoe with thin insoles in, or whilst wearing two pairs of thin socks. A correctly fitting shoe should be a bit on the tight side when new whilst wearing thin insoles plus a thin pair of trainer socks or tights. The leather will stretch quite a bit with use.
- Try 3-4 steps of skip change, pas de bas and strathspey setting/travelling, rather than just walking in the shoe when you try it on. Or skip/jump and point your toes if that's all you can remember of the steps. It should not be loose or painful.
- The elastic provided to keep the shoe on (either around or over the top of the foot) should not be over-tight, or cutting into the ankle or too close to the toe. Some shops will sell you the shoe with the elastic only sewn into one side, or separately, leaving you to sew the other side adjusted to your own comfort.
- The arch of your foot should be very slightly supported in the full-sole option
- The edges of the split-sole shouldn't dig in when pointing your toes.

Gents Shoes (Scottish Ghillies)

Black shoes are the order of the day (I have yet to see Ghillies in any other colour). Ghillies usually come with laces of the correct length, but if you need to order replacement laces, make sure you get the correct length by measuring the old ones.

Information on how to tie Ghillie laces is given here: <https://www.scottishcountrydancer.com/laces> this includes different options for those with high arches/flat arches, etc. Importantly, the spare ends of the laces should not easily come undone or be in a position to trip dancers, or restrict movement which is why the bow is often tied part way up the lower leg, rather than at the ankle.

When trying on Ghillies, these normally come with a very thin insole but you can pay extra for a thicker neoprene insole or orthopaedic insoles if required.

When you try on the shoe, remember the following:

- Start with your normal shoe size and try on a pair. Ideally wear the customary very thick socks when fitting the shoe. A correctly fitting shoe should be a bit on the tight side. The leather will stretch with use.
- Try 3-4 steps of skip change, pas de bas and strathspey setting/travelling, rather than just walking in the shoe when you try it on. Or skip/jump and point your toes if that's all you can remember of the steps. It should not be loose or painful.
- Use proper laces rather than elastic to keep the shoe on – the above link on tying ghillie laces goes into the pros and cons of each.
- The arch of your foot should be very slightly supported

Jazz Shoes (Men's or Ladies)

These are more suited to those who need a low heel to the shoe, who have wider than average (high-density) feet or need a little more arch support. They have a proper but thin sole and heel.

Most high-street dance shoe shops can advise on these as they are worn as practice-shoes for a wide variety of dance forms.

When trying on the shoe, wear a thin pair of trainer socks. Start with your normal shoe size and the shoe should fit well if you try some steps/point your toes etc. (the shoe will not stretch like ballet flats or ghillies due to the larger, sturdier sole).

The shoes don't normally come with an insole, but you can fit one yourself if required. Personally, I strongly recommend this to reduce the chance of impact injuries to your knees and ankles.

Dance Trainers (Men's or Ladies)

These are more suited to those with unusual size (length or width) feet, or who need general all round foot support. They are essentially thin-soled trainers with the arch-section made of a thin flexible material to allow pointing of the foot/toes towards the ground – something not possible in regular trainers. Most high-street dance shoe shops can advise on these as they are worn as practice-shoes for a wide variety of dance forms.

When trying on the shoe, wear a thin pair of socks. Choose your normal shoe size first and the shoe should fit well, being neither tight nor loose. Dance trainers should have inbuilt thin insoles, so additional ones shouldn't be necessary.

Insoles

Most dance shoes do not come with insoles as standard, these are bought separately (although suppliers of dance shoes generally will also supply insoles). The main reason insoles are needed is to provide shock absorption, particularly through the toe area and up into the ankle and knee, and to slightly support the arch of the foot.

Insoles MUST be worn inside dance shoes if dancing on very hard surfaces to prevent long term injury, and ideally should always be worn. However, if you don't want an expensive dance insole, or have special footwear needs, trim-to-size or orthopaedic insoles available from shops such as Boots and Superdrug may be a better option, provided your foot is comfortable and the arch slightly supported during dancing. You may need to trim the insole slightly smaller than usual.

Another advantage to insoles, particularly if you don't wear socks in your shoes (including if you normally wear tights), is that they will absorb sweat from your foot rather than the shoe itself. It is often cheaper to replace the insole than the shoe.

How to Look After Dance Shoes

Dance shoes need very little special care, however the following is advised:

- When you get home after a class or dance, make sure you take your shoes out of their bag to air. You don't want damp sweaty shoes either smelling or going mouldy! If you have separate insoles, take them out of the shoes to air as well.
- Invest in, or make a cloth shoe bag. Not only can you personalize this so nobody walks off with your shoes, it will also be useful to store your crib, bottle of water or fan and more breathable than a plastic bag if you do forget to air your shoes!
- Brush or scrub dirt and slipstock off the soles of the shoes after each class or dance. A build-up of dirt and compacted slipstock can cause shoes to be slippery and lose their grip on the floor – and no amount of additional slipstock (anti-slip powder) on the floor will solve that! I suggest using a firm toothbrush reserved for the purpose (you can carry it in your shoe bag), but some people use scraps of fine sandpaper to lightly go over the soles. If desperate, rub the sole of one shoe against the sole of the other.
- Replace insoles when they get too smelly or damp. Usually they will last you a full season if you attend a regular class. More frequent dancers will need to replace them more often.
- Don't wear your dance shoes outdoors as this will damage the sole, always arrive at your class/dance venue and then change your shoes. If you are dancing on grass or concrete as

part of a demonstration or festival, it is strongly recommended you use an old pair of shoes and not your new “best” pair, as the shoes will be wrecked by the time you finish. If you remember to smile and look up, nobody else will look at your feet either!

When to Replace Worn Shoes

There is no need to religiously buy a new pair of shoes every single dancing season. Depending on how often you dance you may need a new pair every term, or once every 2-3 years – perhaps longer if you use dance trainers or jazz shoes. Replace your shoes when they start going into holes, either in the toe or heel, or when the soles are so encrusted with dirt and slipstock that it can no longer be removed successfully.

If the elastic or laces break, new elastic or laces can be readily sourced, so this on its own is not normally a reason to buy new shoes.

Other Miscellaneous Advice:

Some miscellaneous dance-related advice worth noting:

- Don't wear a brand new pair of shoes to a social dance or demonstration. Take some time to wear them in first – either by wearing them round the house for several hours, or wearing them at classes for a few weeks before the dance. If the latter, take a second pair of shoes to change back into if the new shoes become too uncomfortable.
- Cut your toenails before dancing, especially if you are dancing hard. You will be grateful for the extra room in your shoes, and less likely to end up with black/broken toenails either due to the shoes or if you mis-step with your footwork and stub your toe!
- Wear a thin pair of clean trainer socks inside the shoes to absorb odours and sweat. Both your shoes and your feet will thank you.