

Bridge of Athlone

(British Isles/Ireland)

While Irish in origin and named for a historic bridge in the town of Athlone, the Bridge of Athlone is a dance popular throughout the British Isles as part of their céilí/ceilidh/community dance repertoire.

The tune *Bridge of Athlone* appeared in 1927 in *The Roche Collection of Traditional Irish Music*, but the dance may predate the tune. One source suggested that, although Irish, it was modeled on English country dances, and popular in the early 1900s. An early appearance of a description is in Elizabeth Burchenal's book *National Dances of Ireland*, published in 1924 (where it says the dance is a 56-bar pattern). However, the dance is not always connected with that tune, and varies in length in different versions. What is common to all the versions are the two "bridge" figures, which were included in the shorter 32-bar version of the dance originally taught at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in the 1950s by Una Farrell and published in *Let's Dance!* in 1952.

The version now most commonly done, at least in the British Isles, is the 48-bar version presented here which ends with a swing. This version was published in 1964 in the *Community Dance Manuals* as a 5-couple set. An Irish dance caller suggested that, if you have live music, you can do it with the "whole hall" and adjust the pattern to take "as many bars as you want."

Meter & Music: 6/8 meter Irish jigs, counted as two beats (or steps) per measure. For the 5-couple version, 48-bar tunes played five times through are best.

Suggestions: The *Bridge of Athlone* played by Orange and Blue; the newer EFDSS Community Dances CD set *The Bridge of Athlone* played by Boldwood; New England Dancing Masters, Listen to the Mockingbird CD *Blarney Pilgrim*; or the Martha C. Riley collection of English Country Dances for Children on cassette.

Video: A search on YouTube for "Bridge of Athlone dance" will yield multiple results showing children and adults dancing recreationally, with interesting variations and accommodations made for the ability and age of the dancers, as well as performances with stylistic interpretations.

Formation: Longways set of 5 (or more) couples. Traditionally, when facing partner across, M have L shoulder towards the music/caller/top of the hall and W have their R shoulder towards the top of the set.

Steps & Styling: Walk. A basic one-step-per-count walk, as used in square, contra, English country, and ceilidh dancing.

Gallop or Slip Step. M's ftwrk is described; W use opp ftwrk. Facing ptr and holding hands across, step R to R (ct 1), step L next to R (ct 2), lift or hop slightly on L to give energy to the next step (ct &). Repeat as necessary for the dance. Can be done with opp ftwk in opp dir. If continuing the step in the opp dir., the last step becomes a touch.

Buzz Step. Rotating CW, step R in front of L (ct 1); step L to L (ct &). Step repeats exactly. Can be done with crossed hands (ptrs' R hands joined and L hands joined immediately underneath) or in ballroom pos.

Note: the original Stockton Folk Dance Camp and *Let's Dance!* instructions suggest that the traditional Irish "sevens and threes" footwork and promenade steps be used, but this is likely only done now in performance, not in social dance settings.

Meas 6/8 meter PATTERN

INTRODUCTION. Length will depend on the music used.

I. LINES FWD AND BACK; CROSS OVER, MEN ARCHING.

1-2 Joining hands with neighbors along the lines, walk 4 steps fwd twd ptr.

Bridge of Athlone – *continued*

- 3-4 Retaining hands with neighbors, walk 4 steps backwards.
- 5-6 The line of M raise joined hands high to form arches, while the line of W release hands. All walk fwd 4 steps, W walking under the arches, passing R shoulders with ptr.
- 7-8 Continue walking fwd to opp side, M drop joined hands and all turn R half-way to face across the set.
- II. LINES FWD AND BACK; CROSS OVER, WOMEN ARCHING.
- 1-8 Repeat actions of Fig I except the line of W raise joined hands to form the arches and the M walk under. All end in starting place. Do not rejoin hands.
- III. TOP COUPLE GALLOP DOWN THE CENTER AND BACK.
- 1-4 Top couple, joining hands across and using a Gallop or Slip Step, move down the set between the remaining dancers to the bottom of the set. Other dancers stand in place.
- 5-8 Repeat meas 1-4, with top couple using opp ftwk to move back to the top of the set.
- IV. TOP COUPLE CAST TO BOTTOM, MAKE ARCH, OTHERS FOLLOW AND GO UNDER.
- 1-4 Top couple releases hands and all face the top of the set (M face L, W face R). Top couple separates and walks down the set behind the current line of dancers. Remaining dancers follow the top couple each on their own side, turning away at the top to walk down the set.
- 5-8 When the top couple reaches the bottom of the set, they turn to face each other and join hands across and form a high arch. As each of the other couples arrive at the arch, they walk under the arch twd what was the top of the original set.
- V. TOP COUPLE UNDER BRIDGE, FIRST WOMAN, THEN MAN.
- 1-4 All couples except the top couple join hands across and hold them high to make the bridge. The top couple release hands and the W walks up the set under the bridge, while the M walks up the set outside, behind the M's line.
- 5-8 When the top couple reaches the top of the set, the M ducks under the bridge and walks down the set under the bridge, while the W walks down the outside behind the W's line. The top couple end back at the bottom of the set on their own sides.
- VI. ALL SWING.
- 1-8 Ptrs swing using Buzz Steps and return to place on the sidelines, M with L shldr to the top of the hall, W with R shldr to the top of the hall. The former top couple is at the bottom of the set and there is a new top couple.

Sequence: Repeat dance as noted until the music ends.

Note: Dancers should be flexible during Fig. IV and V when more than the designated counts/measure are needed to complete the figure as described. As a result, sometimes the final figure (swing) will need to be abbreviated so the dance can begin on the correct phrasing. In addition, during Fig. V, as the man goes under the arch toward the bottom of the set, the couples forming the arch can begin their swing early, as soon as the man has walked beneath their arch.



Women prepare to walk under the arches formed by the men in Figure 1.