

A Beginners' Guide to the Class Feis

For those who are new(ish) to Irish dancing!

So you've heard that there's to be a 'class feis' and you're wondering whether to take the plunge and go for it – but what exactly *is* a class feis? Come to think of it, what is *any* kind of a feis? If you want to know, read on.

First, you'll find all sorts of useful information for beginners on the website:

<http://www.mcghanlees.com/>

[Note that we've used 'she' throughout this guide to make writing it simpler, but we have some excellent boys in the Academy, including a current World Champion – so it could just as easily be 'he']

So What is a Feis?

'Feis' (pronounced *fesh*) is an Irish word that simply means 'festival'. The plural is 'feiseanna' (pronounced *fesh-a-nah*) but you'll often hear people talking about feises. It doesn't really matter as long as everyone knows what you mean.

As well as being a lot of fun and great exercise, Irish dancing is also a highly competitive 'sport'. You don't *have* to compete to enjoy dancing, but most dancers get a real buzz from pitting their abilities against others of their own age in open competition. A feis is the place to find out how good you really are.

An 'open feis' is an event in which dancers from different schools compete against each other. A 'class feis' is restricted to dancers from a single school. Apart from the adjudicators and musician, there will only be McGahan Lees dancers and families at the class feis.

The Dances

Modern Irish dancing includes a number of different dances: the reel, light (or soft) jig, single (or hop) jig and slip jig are all 'soft' or 'light' dances, while the heavy jig, hornpipe and 'set' dances are 'heavy' dances and are danced in shoes with hard toe and heel tips. Dancers start off with simple soft shoe steps and progress from there to the harder routines and heavy dances.

By the time of the class feis, the children will have spent time in class going through the dances that they know and getting prepared for an exciting day.

Grades

Every Irish dancer starts off as a Beginner or Novice. If a dancer wants to compete, she will sooner or later be ready to go to an open feis and dance against others of her own age and grade. As she improves, she should start to get placed in competitions and be awarded medals and trophies. With hard work and practice, she should place in the top three at some stage, and will automatically move on to the next grade – Primary – in that dance.

In order to progress from Primary to Intermediate Grade or from Intermediate to Open Grade in any particular dance, competitors must actually win a competition in that dance at an open feis.

Open grade (nothing to do with ‘open feis’) is the highest standard, with dancers taking part in ‘open championships’, and maybe even national and international competitions. Along with a number of current and past World Medal holders, the current McGahan Lees Championship Class includes *two* current World Champions, Caroline Gray, U13 and Stephen Brennan, U19. The Championship Class dancers will be giving a short display during the Class Feis. As you watch them, remember that they started in the same classes as your own dancer!

So What Goes On?

Many schools hold a class feis during the year. The McGahan Lees class feis is always a lot of fun. Everyone should go away with at least one award if they do the dances they are capable of, and there are a lot of really excellent trophies and medals up for grabs. It really is a great way for less experienced dancers (and parents!) to learn about feiseanna.

At a normal feis, dancers in Beginner, Primary and Intermediate grades compete against other dancers in their age group in each of the dances – the reel, single jig, slip jig, etc. These are called ‘solos’, and medals are awarded by the adjudicator to the winner, 2nd, 3rd placed dancers and so on.

Most grade competitions also include a ‘trophy reel’. This is exactly the same dance as an ordinary reel, but a trophy is awarded to the winner rather than a medal. It provides another competition to have a go at.

In this year’s Class Feis, those who qualified for the 2006 World Championships have been excluded to give up-and-coming dancers an opportunity to take centre stage. However, the qualifiers will be on hand all day to offer advice and to help those who need it.

Those who are able to will take part in one of the ‘Premiership’ competitions. The younger age groups will dance a ‘Premier Reel’, while the two older groups will dance a Reel, and a Heavy Jig or Hornpipe.

If you are in doubt as to which competitions to enter, *please ask*.

What Should We Wear and Bring?

Everyone has been prepared for the class feis. They will have told what to wear and how to do their hair. If they can’t remember, or if you have any questions, email webmaster@mcgahanlees.com and we’ll point you in the right direction for help. You will find useful tips on curling hair (for girls) on the website, and an article on going to your first feis.

You will need your dance shoes, of course. A useful thing to remember is a large safety pin. Each dancer wears a large competitor number while they are dancing, and this needs to be pinned to their skirt or shirt. Bring plenty of drinking water too – dancers who are just 10% dehydrated apparently lose a huge proportion of their

available energy/muscle power. It's nice to have a juice or glucose drink too, but steer clear of sugary or fizzy drinks, which aren't necessarily suited to dancing ...

And if you forget that safety pin? Just ask someone!

How Will We Know What to Do?

Competitive Irish dancing is not normally taught at GCSE level, so very few people know what to do at their first feis unless they danced themselves. But don't worry – all of the other parents and dancers remember their first feis – it was probably a class feis just like this one, and not that long ago. The great thing about a class feis is that Frances, Guy and the more experienced dancers and parents are on hand to give advice and assistance when needed, and nobody need feel embarrassed or out of place. No question is too simple to be worth asking.

When You Arrive

It helps to arrive in good time. (There's a map to the venue on the website. See below.) It's no fun having to rush and getting yourself and your dancer stressed before she dances. You should have a copy of the class feis details which tell you where your dancer will be dancing, but if you aren't sure, just ask. After a while you develop a sixth sense for these things ...

When you find the right place, grab somewhere to sit. There should be enough seats, but please put bags and other gear on the floor if there are people standing. If you are a spectator rather than a dancer/helper, please don't block doorways and aisles; some of the competitors will be too young and shy to say 'excuse me'!

You will need to collect a competitor number for your dancer. There will be a desk somewhere where these are allocated. If you can't see it, just ask!

Etiquette

It isn't always possible to be completely still while people are dancing – you may have to change shoes for your next dance – but do try to give everyone the same respect as you would expect for your own child. Keep as still and quiet as possible while people are dancing, and only move into or out of halls between dances. If you need to use aerosols (hairspray, etc), please use them outside the halls as they can cause problems for those with asthma or allergies.

An important thing to note is that the use of cameras, video recorders or any other photographic device (such as mobile phones) is forbidden while competitors are dancing on stage. (It is fine during award ceremonies and during the display.)

Other Stuff

Refreshments will be available all day, including a barbecue, with hot dogs and burgers, sandwiches, cakes and biscuits, and hot and cold drinks.

The Friends of McGahan Lees parents organisation has a number of costumes available for hire on a first-come, first-served basis, but please bring a set of black clothes to wear in case you don't manage to get one that fits.

There may also be second-hand costumes and shoes available for sale, along with other dancing goodies.

Ask for Help!

An important feature of the McGahan Lees Academy is the strong sense of identity. McGL dancers are actively encouraged to help and support each other – even if they are rivals in the same age group – and the class feis is a good place to see this in action. The championship dancers will spend most of the day helping those who are less experienced, and particularly the ‘littlies’.

The class feis is an excellent opportunity for getting to know other McGahan Lees parents and dancers, and a great place to start out in competitive Irish dancing. Do come along, and if you aren’t sure what to do, just ask!

Website

In case you didn’t already know, the Academy has a comprehensive website, attracting over a high number of hits from dancers and parents all around the world. It carries a lot of information for beginners and their parents, including a complete method for curling hair, notes on ‘feis etiquette’, etc. You will also find a map to the venue, Hylands School in Chelmsford.

Point your web browser to:

<http://www.mcgahanlees.com/>

We hope you come along and join us for a really fun day. The important thing is for all our dancers to do their best, and for everyone to enjoy themselves. It’s also a brilliant way to learn about feiseanna and how to find your way around. We hope to see you there.

And remember, if you don’t know something, can’t find something, or don’t have everything you need:

Just ask!