

Organising your ceilidh...

What is a Ceilidh?

It's an evening of active fun and socialising to usually English, Scottish, Irish or North American country-dances. There is someone - a 'Caller' – walks you through every dance before you dance it. You don't need any particular dancing skill - even two left feet will do.

There will commonly be two easy dances and then a quick sit down for a rest, then two more and so on in different formations - circle, squares, etc. Most dances are done with partners (of your choice, of course), with the odd dance being a 'mixer'; where you get to dance with several people in turn.

What to call it?

To get the idea over to those who are going to come, call it what you like. The word used most frequently by those who go regularly to these things is Ceilidh, pinched from the Gaelic, and pronounced "kay-lee" or "kay-lay". If you call it a Barn Dance, Folk Dance or English Country Dance people should still know what you mean. "Country Dance" may get confused with American country and western.

The best way to plan a Ceilidh or whatever is to go to a couple first and blatantly steal the best ideas for your own. Besides having a good evening out and maybe picking up some good ideas, you'll probably have to sell the idea to others anyway, and you'll have an easier organising job if you know what to expect.

You may have a committee who you'll need to help with jobs or just people to sell tickets to. Even if you're running a "compulsory attendance" ceilidh at a wedding reception or birthday, you'll need to give everyone the idea of them having a good time by joining in and dancing rather than by watching (and sometimes getting tipsy at weddings).

Where do I hold it?

Anywhere that's big enough. When you're looking in to venues, they usually tell you how many can fit (it's an insurance thing) – take at least 20% off the number and that's how much space you can have. Check out the costs and times available and don't forget to formally book the venue – verbal agreements often go awry.

The room will need enough space for dancing, a space for the band and a space for sitting. Wooden floors are the best and the more space there is, the better. Hopefully, there'll be space for all of those attending to dance at once, and a seat for everyone to sit down at once to get their breath back. Seats around the sides of the dance floor are best as it makes for a warmer atmosphere. The caller will find it easier to 'recruit' dancers too. If the dancers are in another room or space, the Caller may have problems getting enough people up for each dance.

You don't need a stage for musicians, but if you have one, it doesn't hurt, remember to leave plenty of room for them. The band will provide amplification and let you use the microphone for announcements, raffle prizes etc. They'll need at least one plug in easy reach. The Band must be under cover whether your dance is inside or out - a small drizzle could kill their equipment/them.

Country dancing can be done almost anywhere. Make sure that the floor's level, particularly if you are in a marquee. Any obstructions or loose carpets need sticking down. Dusty barns need sweeping out at least twice to save bronchial attacks.

If you're thinking of holding the dance outside, or in a marquee or a barn of any sort, then you've got special problems to consider, starting with temperature. Even in a hot English

summer, it frequently gets too cold to be outside much after 9.30pm, particularly for those sitting a dance out. So, start earlier, so that outside dancing can finish by then or sooner.

Booking A Band

To locate a Band, you could ask around amongst friends for Bands they've seen - you'll get a report on them at the same time.

Band prices vary and, like most things, you usually get what you pay for. Some events have the budget for a big band, whereas for others cost is important and they prefer the smallest number of musicians to do the job. I should be able to arrange something to suit. Make sure that you book your Band early enough - many of us get booked up over a year ahead!

The Caller

The evening will need a "Caller" to act as MC and teach the dances. Most bands have their own caller, or will find you one, alternatively, you can book a caller, who will organise a band as well for you. You pay just one fee to include both. Many wedding couples will arrange a DJ to follow the ceilidh, allowing them to 'cater for everyone', although it is mostly unnecessary as ceilidhs appeal to just about everyone once they've given it a go.

Tickets

How much should you charge for tickets? That depends on the cost of the hall, food, bar (if applicable), ticket printing and advertising like posters, and if you're aiming for a profit, or just to have a social evening. See what other ceilidhs in your area charge and what you get for the money.

Usually the band will need paying in cash on the night. This isn't because there's an Inland Revenue fiddle going on! Many bands don't run a combined bank account. So, unless you've specifically agreed payment by cheque when booking, make sure that you have enough cash to pay them, even if that ticket money you were expecting doesn't come in on the night. If the very worst happens, and you have to cancel the event beforehand, the band will charge a Cancellation Fee, which they'll tell you about when you book - they may have turned down other work to do yours. Many bands have a sliding scale, so give them as much notice of cancellation as you can.

Also, in the event of some unforeseen accident during the evening, you might be glad to find that your band carries adequate Public Liability Insurance. Although this is unlikely to cover 8" high heels – try to wear appropriate footwear!

Weddings

I personally love playing for weddings – everyone arrives expecting a good time to start with. A ceilidh with everyone joining in can be the nicest end to a lovely day, with everyone being involved together, no matter what side of the family and what age. It wouldn't be a ceilidh if everyone could do it perfectly – it's getting it 'wrong' collectively that helps make the night fun and break down the barriers.

Here are some tips. Everyone will take their cue from the bride and groom, so unless they and their friends and relatives are looking forward to doing at least the first couple of dances, maybe a ceilidh is not the right choice for your event.

The Bride will have to weigh up wearing her dress a little longer against the pleasure of being able to dance with her friends and guests. If she can't dance because of her long dress, many others may sit out with her. In that case, how about her putting on her going-away clothes early, for the dance?