It was Eric Morley’s baby,” says Peggy Spencer of the BBC’s original Come Dancing, which began in 1949. “He had Mecca dancehalls all over the country, and wanted to show party dances to encourage more people onto the floor. I owned a big dancing school, so he asked me to help.”

Party dances gave way to a structured ballroom competition by 1953. “It was purely amateur competitors – the idea was that Mum and Dad would be thrilled seeing them on TV, and we’d bridge the gap between dance and the public,” explains Peggy.

“Each area had finals to choose their representatives, and viewers got really involved. Dancers would go into the local bakery the next morning and hear ‘Ooh, you did well last night!’ – you were dancing for your area. And it shifted all the time: one year, Home Counties South had a brilliant team, the next London. We had great rivalries – everyone trying to top one another.”

It made for compulsive viewing, notes Anne Lingard, who judged twice. “People wouldn’t miss it for anything. There was industry backing, too, with highly respected judges like Monsieur Pierre, who introduced Latin dances to England. The panel changed all the time – it was a fair system, with a variety of voices.”

Come Dancing strongly reflected the ballroom world, believes Anne. “It was current competitors, many of whom were British, European or world champions – in contrast to Strictly, whose professionals are all ex-competitors.”

It also reflected dancers’ career trajectories. David Sycamore and Denise Weaver competed for Home Counties South under Peggy’s direction and later demonstrated as professionals, while Karen Hardy represented the Northwest with Mark Lunn and then performed with Bryan Watson.

“I was an avid fan,” Karen recalls. “Brilliant dancing, and you were allowed to stay up late! I loved that it was a proper battle – two couples fighting it out on the floor. And it was such an important platform for dancing. It made it mainstream and accepted.”

Rosemarie Ford, who presented the show from 1991 to its end in 1998, was incredibly impressed by the standard. “I had a dance background, so I knew what dedication it takes to get to that level – even more so fitting it in around work or school.”

Marianka Swain traces the history of Strictly’s iconic predecessor
Under the television spotlight at the RAH in 1997

Marcus and Karen Hilton and Kim and Cecilie Rygel

One girl had to sit a GCSE separately because she was doing the programme.

“I would go into a dream world watching great British dancers like Marcus and Karen Hilton – they worked so easily together, it was like watching one person. Everyone wanted to emulate them. And when Andy Ross’s band struck up, I could hardly keep my feet still. It was filmed as live, so there was no going back – if you fell, it stayed in. That element of risk was thrilling. Seeing couples progress, and who could bring something extra when it mattered, that was fascinating. You knew when you were watching winners.”

Another popular element was the formation teams. Initially, it was a struggle choreographing for cameras, which in those days were much larger and more static, recalls Peggy. “One producer said ‘You’ve got something wonderful on your hands, but you treat the front like it’s downtown – you have to think in the round.’

Peggy used popular music and mixed and matched styles, keeping the routines accessible. ‘I designed them so people could join in, or take them away and teach them. Strictly is lovely, but the routines are out of most people’s league. Come Dancing was for everybody; education as well as entertainment.’

That translated into business for studios, though the effect wasn’t quite as dramatic as Strictly, believes Shirley Ballas, who coached on the show, “perhaps because it didn’t have the celebrity glamour. But it was still a great ambassador for ballroom. People might look back now and think it’s old-fashioned, but then it was exactly right.”

The Come Dancing look

Those costumes were all our own – that’s what was happening in the ballrooms. There was no wardrobe department. “Shirley

‘In those days a girl would have just one frock, even the top dancers.’ Anne

‘I know the ‘Sheila’s mum sewed on 300 sequins last night’ line has become a bit of a joke, but that’s what we were doing – and lots of my students still have mums helping them sew on sequins!' Karen

Sadly, the advent of non-partner dances such as disco contributed to the show’s decline. “We clung on, but they reduced the number of programmes, then placed it late at night,” says Rosemarie. “It got moved around for things like the World Cup – even I lost track of when it was on.

“But maybe it needed that break before having a rebirth. It’s wonderful seeing dancers back in the limelight and getting recognition for their hard work and talent. It’s a hard slog being a dancer – you need that pat on the back sometimes.”

Peggy was asked to judge on Strictly, but felt they needed someone younger with new ideas. However, she’s proud of Come Dancing’s contribution. “It inspired so many dancers of that era, and it still does.” Karen adds: “It stood the test of time when other shows came and went. Getting to see those legends of ballroom performing was extraordinary.”

Rosemarie handed the baton onto her Generation Game co-presenter. “I take credit for Brucie getting Strictly! We did a quickstep routine for the end game, and then performed it on Come Dancing – and he got the bug. For me still, there’s something really special about dancing with a partner, and I’m so thankful to the show for broadening my ideas about ballroom. It brought pleasure to millions of people, and its legacy lives on.”

Readers remember

“I loved Peggy Spencer’s Penge Latin team, and my home town Blackpool always looked its best.” Elizabeth Jones

“It championed Old Time dances that seem to be dying out – Military Two Step, Lilac Waltz, Tango Serida, Saunter Revs.” Tracey Walsh

“I watched it in the 1970s with my ballroom-mad father, and I always remember the description of the dresses – useful before most people had colour TV! Yards and yards of net.” Jasmin Schelts

“Donnie and Gaynor did a rumba that was so raunchy I’m surprised they allowed it in that era.” Maxine Court

“I named my two fish after Donnie and Gaynor – I loved them!” Anna Downing

The 1997 Come Dancing contest at the Royal Albert Hall – Britain against the rest of Europe

The Come Dancing’s creator Eric Morley receives a CBE from Alicia Markova