General editor's foreword

The end of the First World War signalled the start of the dance craze as the young in particular celebrated their liberation from the shadow of destruction that had hung over them since 1914. From 1919 onwards public dance halls sprang up all over the country with the result that from the 1920s to the 1950s dancing came to be second only to cinema-going as a major form of popular culture. Allison Abra's book charts the evolution of this cultural form as experienced by dance professionals, the dance hall industry and the consumers. She shows how the dance professionals, comprising dance teachers, exhibition and competition dancers, and dance magazine writers, shaped the development of modern ballroom dancing in a standardised style that was proclaimed distinctively English in its restraint, refinement and gracefulness, purged of the wild abandon associated with Latin and black American music. She links this with the emergence of the dance hall industry, which provided the space for the expression of the new style. She analyses the criticisms of the dance halls as leading to sexual immorality, the undermining of respectable models of masculinity and femininity and the Americanisation of British society. But she also examines the arguments advanced in favour of dancing, which was said to promote health, fitness, beauty and youthfulness. Dance band music was not confined to dance halls and could be heard on the wireless and seen in musical films both British and American. Hollywood films in particular familiarised British audiences with American dance styles which they were only too keen to imitate. There was another dance boom during the Second World War when the dance hall was seen as a positive expression of 'The People's War'. This leads to two fascinating case studies. Allison Abra explores the popularity of the 'Lambeth Walk', purportedly a typical cockney movement, as the anthem of cross-class community solidarity in the lead-up to and early years of the Second World War. The same war witnessed an invasion of American

GIs and the popularisation of the jitterbug with its associated discourses of sex and race. The popularity of the jitterbug and later the jive paved the way for the rock'n'roll revolution and signalled the end of the dance hall era. Throughout her book, Allison Abra demonstrates that through dance the consumers were enabled to negotiate their way through gender relations, class tensions, foreign influences, issues of national identity and the impact of war. In so doing, she confirms the role of dancing and dance halls as an essential part of the cultural and social identity of the nation over four decades.

Jeffrey Richards