



Traditional Song Forum Meeting, 25th June 2005 held at Postlip Hall, Gloucestershire

Meeting Report

There was a good attendance for the meeting throughout the day with a number of people coming specifically for the talks in the afternoon. A number of regular attendees were among the 28 people who sent apologies but among those who did come were a number of new faces.

Member's activities

The meeting started with our usual round-up of what the people present had been doing.

Doc Rowe reported that his archive was now in a good state and that he was hopeful of getting Lottery funding to improve the facilities. He is, though, finding that maintenance of the archive takes a lot of his time. He has been involved in the production of the 'Folk Archive' exhibition created by Alan Kane and Jeremy Deller that is currently touring the country. Doc also talked about his worry that official concern about public liability is driving the 'manhood' out of many traditional customs with crowds being separated from the action and risky activities being curtailed. There is also the question of licensing of collections and the way in which this is negatively influencing traditional events

Paul Wilson continued this discussion with reference to the Minehead Hobby Horse where there are now three active teams. The police did intervene in 1999 on 'safety grounds' and the subsequent resolution of the situation relied heavily on precedent. Paul also described the activity of the Wren youth group 'Hocus' some of whom have just completed 10 years of singing together. The group has used traditional songs (notably from the Baring-Gould manuscripts) as a basis for their repertoire but have felt able to question the values expressed in the songs and to re-interpret them. Hocus have visited Italy and Germany as well as performing at a number of festivals in the UK. This will be the last year for many of the group as they go off to further education but they will leave a permanent record of their work in the CD 'Cast Threads Away'.

Paul talked about other aspects of Wren's work using traditional song in the community and education. He observed that many teachers remain unaware of the rich heritage of traditional song. They are currently working with 15 separate groups around Devon on a regular basis as well as short-term projects. He also talked about Brian Holland, a very fine melodeon player that they have been bringing to the attention of a wider public.

Marilyn Tucker talked about other aspects of Wren's work. They now have a staff of 8, of whom 7 are directly involved in work in the community. They see an important part of their mission to be re-investment of traditional song in the local community. They do, though, have a global vision and aim for 'world music right up your street'. Recently, for example, they worked with a group taking songs from other cultures and then re-interpreting them in their own context. They have also worked on a project that brought children together from Primary, Junior and Special schools for a concert at Exeter University.

Yvette Staelens emphasized the importance of Social Context and Cultural Identity in placing traditional song. She gave the example of her own children understanding that their own great-grandmother sang for Cecil Sharp. Her own work has developed from her interest in the social context of Sharp's female singers. She finds that getting together and talking to the older generation is particularly important to doing this successfully. Yvette is currently running a Museums Masters programme at Bournemouth University and is hoping to bring more elements of 'Intangible Culture' into the course and integrate her research into it - but there is, of course, no framework for such teaching at present. Yvette is also involved with the multicultural festival 'The Tribe of Doris' where she teaches traditional English song and other aspects of indigenous culture.

Harry Langston shared some thoughts on the use of Information Technology to make material more widely available, based on his experience of working in IT in education at a regional level. He gave the example of the 'South-West Grid', a resource which makes a wide range of materials available to children (and their teachers). There is an opportunity for folk organizations to use the technology to make material available to a 'non-folk' audience using the technologies.

Gwilym Davies revealed that he will be joining the ranks of the retired by Christmas and will then be able to focus more on the work of folk song collection and research. He has been involved in a project recently with Forest Tracks to compile a double CD of performances of songs from the Hammond and Gardiner collections.

Shan Cowan talked about her work with children with special needs which has demonstrated that music is a very effective way of engaging with children who are at an early stage of development. The material she has been using is often based on traditional song as well as new ones that she has written. There is a lack of material designed for this group and Shan is now working with 'Wren' on a project (funded by 'Awards for All') to write and record a CD and associated material for teachers and parents working with children with special needs.

Martin Graebe confessed to having slowed down a bit on the work with Baring-Gould in the last few months. This has been, in part, due to work on the CD 'Parallel Strands' that he and Shan released recently which is a mixture of songs from the Baring-Gould manuscripts with some of his own. Re-jigging the websites for TSF and the Sabine Baring-Gould Appreciation Society has also taken a significant amount of time. There has also been a steady flow of enquiries to deal with from members of the public from both sites. Some interesting research has continued, though. Some of the minor characters in the Baring-Gould story are proving to be of interest. Charles Spence-Bate, the Plymouth dentist who introduced Baring-Gould to the singers in South Brent turns out to have been a leading expert on Crustaceans and worked on samples collected by the 'Challenger' expedition. Martin has also continued work on Baring-Gould's visit to Iceland as a young man in preparation for his own visit later in the year and to complete an introduction to a reprint of Baring-Gould's book on Iceland.

Jackie Patten talked about her work with a local museum on their 'People at War' project and about helping people find their creativity. She and Bob are very keen to see the material they have collected going back to the community from which it came. They recently discovered another Cornish Wassail and 'Darky Day' near Truro. They are hoping to resurrect the Chittlehampton carols.

They were also involved in getting the Oddcombe Carolers to the Sheffield Festival of Carols. The history of the Carolers is that in the 1850s the church choir was replaced by an organ and so they migrated to the Primitive Methodists. There has been a tradition that the carols were not to be sung outside the village (luckily not now kept). The last new carol sung is from the 1860s. A CD of the Oddcombe Carolers is now available.

Derek Schofield told us that he is now the sole editor of English Dance and Song

Mary Humphries told us about her gratitude to Malcolm Douglas for his help in getting her version of Lizzie Wan together. Malcolm pointed her towards a source for a version of Lizzie Wan collected from a servant girl called Charlotte Dunn near where she lives by Ellen Bull. Initially she was worried about the quality of the notation, because of the unusual time signature but she is very happy now with the way the song works. She is now looking at other songs from this source including versions of 'Catch Me If You Can, and 'Seven Nights Drunk'

TSF Business

Subscriptions:

Doc Rowe reported that, as usual, a number of members were in arrears and a number of people put their hands in their pockets. We also recruited some new members at the meeting

Forum Focus

The three presentations in the Forum Focus session covered a wide period in the history of folk song,

Derek Schofield's talk was titled '*I'll sing you a very pretty song*' - The legacy of Percy Grainger's song collecting in Lincolnshire in 1905. He gave us a useful overview of Grainger's work, starting with the kindling of his interest on 14th March 1905 when he heard Lucy Broadwood talk about collecting English Folk Songs. A month later he heard Joseph Taylor sing *Creeping Jane* at the North Lincolnshire Music Competition and this led to his 'Folk Fishing Cruises' through Lincolnshire in the coming years. He was an early adopter of the phonograph and we are fortunate, as a result, to have some outstanding recordings of Joseph Taylor and other singers. He played some of his recordings to the Folk Song Society in December 1906 and he was elected to the committee of the society. Cecil Sharp invited Grainger to contribute the section on Lincolnshire songs to the Novello series. Grainger used the songs he collected in his composed works. Each section of his 'Lincolnshire Posy' is intended to be a musical portrait of the singer from whom Grainger collected the song - a pleasing demonstration of Grainger's interest in the singers.

Gwilym Davis gave us a talk called '*Across the Blue Mountains*' which described his much more recent experiences of collecting from singers in the Eastern part of the USA when he was working there for 6 months in 1998. He got in contact with a number of folklorists and obtained introductions to a number of singers. Gwilym talked about a number of these and played us extracts of their singing. Particularly impressive was the singing of Colleen Cleveland - a fine singer who learned her craft from her grand-mother Sara Cleveland, from whom Kenneth Goldstein had collected 200 songs in the 1960s. An article which covers the substance of Gwilym's talk can be found on the 'Musical Traditions' web-site http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/blue_mts.htm. This includes some of the photographs that Gwilym showed and clips of some of the songs, together with their words.

Nick Groom talked about the work of Bishop Percy in his presentation '*The Lost Songs of Merrie England*': an introduction to Percy's *Reliques*, the pioneering collection of old English songs and ballads. Percy was born in 1759 and died in 1811 having been Dean of Carlisle and later Bishop of Dromore. He was an avid antiquarian and book collector (he owned a first edition of Shakespeare) and is credited with the translation of a Chinese novel into English from Portuguese which was the first English novel to have an index. He helped Samuel Johnson with the preparation of his great dictionary. His 'Reliques of Ancient English Poetry' was started in 1761 and appeared in 1765. It included 168 ballads of which 47 came from the so-called 'Family Manuscript' which has never been satisfactorily examined. Percy also had a large collection of broadsides and all of his material came from written sources. Percy had no qualms about editing and rewriting ballads and came in for a lot of criticism. Nick gave us a particularly vivid picture of Joseph Ritson's virulent criticism of Percy and of Ritson's own peculiar lifestyle (and death!). Percy's *Reliques* is, of course, an imperfect collection but it is of great interest and has been very influential. He invented the notion of 'fits' in ballads, for example - an idea taken up with great success by Lewis Carroll. It was a significant milestone in the Gothic revival in Britain. Percy's papers were bought by Francis Child and are now housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. There is still work to be done to understand it and there is also an opportunity to re-look sympathetically at Percy's other work including 'Loose and Humorous Songs' which Nick considers would benefit from re-editing.

Thank You to all three speakers, particularly to Gwilym Davis, who stepped in at very short notice to replace Katie Howson, who was unable to attend.

Thanks also to John Shorter and the residents of Postlip Hall for their outstanding hospitality and for letting us share their beautiful surroundings and lovely weather. We are also grateful to the organizers of the English Country Music Weekend for allowing us to intrude on their event. It was nice to see some new faces, as well as many familiar ones.

During the weekend as a whole there were a number of song concerts and other presentations, including one by our distinguished Treasurer, Doc Rowe. The sun also shone on a couple of performances by the 'Marshfield Paperboys' who joined us out of season but to a great welcome from the crowd. And then, of course, there was some great music and good beer. For those of you who missed it - sorry. We had a great time!

Martin Graebe