



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Stewart Richards

Curator's Corner By Mike Searle

BOOK REVIEW

David Sutcliffe, *Cecil Sharp, Collector of Folk Songs and Dances: A new biography*

SALES INFO ETC TO BE ADDED

Bridgwater and the surrounding district played a significant part in what was called the Edwardian Folk Revival, providing nearly a quarter of all the folk songs collected in Somerset by Cecil Sharp between 1903-16. Sharp was a London music teacher and tutor to some of the children of the future George V – including the future kings Edward VIII and George VI. He was an influential member of the newly formed Folk Song Society, whose goal was to collect and preserve them.

Fellow musicians like Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Peter Butterworth wanted to find and use English folk tunes from the countryside, hoping to start a renaissance of English musical identity.

Although having indifferent health, (including Asthma), from aged 43 he would take his bicycle by train to the area he was to research and cycle round the lanes visiting singers he wished to interview. He took photographs and made background notes about many of them: he was a pioneer of Oral history. Overall he recorded 4,600 folk songs and tunes in England and over 1600 from America, 185 singing games, 86 Morris dances, 179 country dances, 15 sword dances, 60 folk shanties and 21 folk carols. They were all recorded in 160 field notebooks over a fifteen year span. As well as the *Folk Songs from Somerset* series, (1904-1909) he was also involved in writing a number of books aimed at getting folk song and dance into schools.

In Bridgwater town itself, Sharp found many songs including 43 sea songs from old sailors but out in the country districts the songs were more pastoral or 'traditional'.

He collected a total of 195 folk songs from 40 singers in Bridgwater between 1904 and 1916. Some songs were complete with words and tunes, while others were merely fragments or interesting variants. Of these songs, 16 were published in the 5 volume series of *Folk Songs from Somerset* (1904-1909) and a further 82 songs have been published elsewhere. The Bridgwater songs alone represent almost 12% of Sharp's total Somerset song collection.

Sharp toured the wider Bridgwater area (roughly the old RDC area) by bicycle on 9 separate field trips and interviewed 50 singers, collecting a further 207 songs and publishing some in *Folk Songs from Somerset* series.

SPRING FAIR REPORT

Of the 195 Bridgwater folk songs collected, 43 (22%) were songs about the sea – press gangs, battles and drownings. Included were 11 shanties (work-songs to raise anchor or hoist sails). Of the 40 singers, 4 were sailors and 3 were quay labourers. The sailors were Tom Griffiths, aged 78, a Trinity pilot for 40 years; Henry Rapsey, aged 64; Henry Bailey, aged 71; and Richard Olding, aged 69. The clear majority of the new Bridgwater singers were men (158 songs from 26 males). Others were brickyard workers (9 of them). Whether they sang as they worked in their handcrafting of bricks and tiles is not recorded.

In fact the man who contributed most songs (49) to Sharp was John Barnett (or Jack Barnard, as he was recorded in a later census). John was a stone-breaker and road labourer, aged 45. He had been crippled since birth and was actually illiterate but had a fantastic memory and a repertoire of 150 songs in all. John lived in West Street and introduced Sharp to a number of singers in that district.

Sharp met 5 of his singers in the Union Workhouse in Northgate and collected 21 songs over 5 different visits. Two singers were formerly shoemakers (George Radford 76 and William Mantle 72). A third Robert Dibble, aged 85, a former brick-worker, gave 6 songs to Sharp and died within weeks of his visit.

Like the men, the female singers were of a mature age, the oldest being 85. The only occupation noted was for Mrs Ellen Jarrett, aged 54, laundress of West Street. She sang 9 songs for Sharp. Near to her in Halswell Lane lived Mrs Elizabeth Porter, aged 49, a brick-maker's wife. Her daughter Lily (aged 11) sang 2 children's songs for Sharp – *Jenny Lengle & Three Dukes come a riding*.

It was Sharp's practice to write to the vicars of any new parish that he wished to visit and ask them about likely singers. This was surprisingly effective. Many clergymen in those days did visit their parishioners in their homes and might indeed know of one or two people with reputations as singers. Sharp's friend the Revd Marson of Hambridge [§] might also have secured introductions on his behalf. In the second volume of *Folk Songs from Somerset* Sharp particularly acknowledges the help of the Revd A. H. Powell & the Revd W. Warren (vicar and curate respectively of St Mary's church Bridgwater). Warren was also the Workhouse chaplain.

Over the last four decades, Sharp's work has attracted heated debate in the field of cultural politics, with claims and counter-claims regarding selectivity, appropriation, bowdlerisation and racism.

Whether or not Sharp achieved his own objectives remains an open question but he did reveal an aspect of Bridgwater's cultural life that is still available to us today via his (digitised) notebooks and the photographs that he took of his singers. Most importantly some of the Bridgwater songs are still being sung and reinterpreted by today's musicians.

David Sutcliffe has also created a comprehensive web site: <https://cecilsharpspeople.org.uk/>, where the biographies of singers can be read, and which has links to digitised pages of Sharp's notebook pages, which have now all been placed online: see <https://www.vwml.org/vwml-about-us/vwml-projects/vwml-the-full-english>. This is a most important resource for local and family historians.

He is also the author of 2 brief accounts of local folk songs published by the Blake Museum;

https://www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/index.htm_files/Bridgwater%20Folksong%20trifold.pdf And

https://www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/index.htm_files/Bridgwater%20RDC%20Folksong%20trifold.pdf

Together with the material available online, this book is a most remarkable achievement, for it is most lucidly written and most thoroughly illustrated and referenced.

§ He met Rev Charles Marson first in 1889, when they were both in Australia. Marson, a Christian Socialist later became Vicar of Hambridge, South Somerset. He helped Sharp edit the first three volumes of *Folk Songs of Somerset*.

David Sutcliffe has also written his biography: *The Keys of Heaven The life of Revd Charles Marson, Socialist Priest and Folk Song Collector*, 2010. This is available in the Museum shop.

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