

LIFE & TIMES"

Saturday 19th February 2005 10am-5pm
at Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regents Park Road, London NW1 2AY

A chance to hear four people who have made significant contributions to the documenting of traditional culture in Britain and Ireland talking about their life and work.

Paper 1: Keith Chandler:

Introductory comment. Recent articles in *Folk Music Journal* have re-examined the work of several folklore scholars of the first (pre-1914) revival -often in a critical light. One of the complaints is that these pioneers were often reticent about their backgrounds, and their motives. All today's speakers have therefore been invited to give a short account of themselves, before starting to talk about their research.

KC - early life & influences.

Born in Reading (Berks) 1949. Neither parent had any interest in folk music - though KC's maternal grandfather was an ex-sailor, who sometimes danced the Sailor's Hornpipe at family festivities (to the embarrassment of younger family members). KC grew up in a close on a council estate, where traditional children's street games were still played. From age of 8 became a great collector of various things - particularly American comics. Longish periods of ill health kept him from school, but gave plenty of time for reading. Stayed at school until 16, leaving after poor results in GCE exams.

Apprenticed to a printing firm in Reading, he attended day release classes at London College of Printing. Morning classes were technical, afternoons, English and General Studies. KC played hookey in the afternoons and went to the movies, or to 2nd-hand shops looking for rare American comics. Also joined the nearby Walworth Public Library, which had a large record collection. At this time KC had fairly broad musical tastes (liked Hollywood musicals, and still has great admiration for Julie Andrews!). But he also borrowed American and Irish Folk music records from Walworth Library.

In 1970, a friend persuaded KC to go to a folk club. He started off as a blues enthusiast (hinted that he was once a performer in this idiom), but soon became introduced to native British traditions. Picked up 3 Topic anthology LPs cheaply (sale bargain), and his ears were opened. But his real awakening came after hearing Fred Jordan at a festival around 1971 - shortly afterwards he went to Bampton and saw Francis Shergold's Morris team.

KC also very impressed by Bob Cann playing melodeon at Newton Abbot festival. Shortly afterwards, at Sidmouth Festival, KC attended a beginners' Cotswold workshop and heard Roy Dommet lecture on the history of Morris. Heard the limited edition "English Country Music" LP (Reg Hall, Daisy & Walter Bulwer, Scan Tester, etc.), and became involved in the subsequent ECM revival (along with Rod Stradling etc.). Danced with various Morris sides, and gave away his Tony Rose and Dransfields LPs.

Went to Lancaster University as a mature student in 1976 to read History, but switched to Independent Studies option in Yr 2, (dissertation on the history of Morris dancing.) Visited Bampton regularly, and became friendly with Freda Palmer and Son Townsend - two villagers whose family had been involved in the Morris for several generations. They encouraged other villagers to talk to KC about their memories of the Morris, and to pass on family lore.

KC also carried out similar researches on the other surviving traditional Cotswold sides - Abingdon, Eynsham, Chipping Camden and Headington (Bob Grant, Headington's Archivist, very helpful). KC says that Chipping Camden's Morris tradition, as we now have it, was resurrected in 1896, by an incomer from the village of Longborough, who put together all the fragments that a few old blokes in Camden could remember, and filled the gaps with bits of his own Longborough tradition.

KC has published two books on the history of Cotswold Morris [*Both are highly regarded: one is a 'History', the other a 'Gazetteer' which tabulates the data from his researches. MAS*] Both now available in Word format on CD. To achieve this he carried out over 1,000 recorded interviews, as well as going through a great deal of archive material in local libraries and record offices. Local newspapers a good source. Notes in passing that many of the village dancers and musicians can be tracked because they appear in court frequently - usually either drunk & disorderly, or poaching.

And there is still more stuff to be found. Recently, KC discovered the diary of a man who had danced with a Morris team in Marsh Gibbon [*Oxfordshire? MAS*] in the early 19th century. Full of fascinating information about when and where they danced, where they got their bells and ribbons, and for how much, and what they earned for dancing. KC's advice is "Keep looking!"

KC now describes himself as a social historian, rather than as a folk-lore collector. He wants to try and humanise the tradition carriers - to see them as whole people, not simply as sources for tunes and choreography, as many of the collectors of the first revival were inclined to do.

[This concluding observation may have some truth in it, but I think it's somewhat overstated - there's evidence that Sharp & co did try to see their informants "in the round", not just as "carriers" of songs, tunes and dances. There's an echo here of E P Thompson's famous remark in the preface to The Making of the English Working Class about rescuing working people of past ages from "the enormous condescension of posterity" - though none of today's speakers actually quoted, or mentioned Thompson by name. MAS]

Paper 2: Doc Rowe

[Note. This was a short and informal paper. Doc agreed to stand in, at short notice, for a booked speaker who was unable to attend. MAS]

DR says that the focus of his research is NOT the "Calendar Customs" beloved of old-time folklore scholars - because he believes such things don't exist. He prefers instead to talk about "Seasonal Events", which must be seen as integral parts of a larger cultural framework.

DR remembers being made angry by BBC "Folk" broadcasts of the 1950s like "As I Roved Out". This was because they presented sound-bites from elderly people as "fossils" - last surviving fragments of a dead or dying tradition. But DR, growing up in Devon, knew that similar oral traditions and dialect stories were still flourishing in his family and neighbourhood ("but nobody ever asked us about them").

DR resents the fact that collectors tended to dig these "fossils" out of their strata, and then display them as isolated exhibits without respecting their original context. DR stresses the importance for the oral historian of taking advantage of chance meetings with people whom one would not have thought to be "sources" or "tradition carriers". Many of his most helpful informants were people he met casually on buses or in pubs.

An old man who appeared to be either drunk or dotty once came up to DR as he was ordering a drink at the bar, and said to him "I used to be King George!" After some conversation, and a few more drinks, DR got most of a previously uncollected mummings' play from him. A woman he met on a bus while going to Abbot's Bromley to see the Horn Dance (DR that is - the woman was going there to visit family) put him in contact with people whose family had been associated with the dance for generations.

DR also described a very productive trip to Padstow. He'd taken some old photographs from the local museum, and made a set of enlarged copies of them. (The originals had been rather roughly treated, and exposed to too much sunlight, and were in danger of being irretrievably damaged.) When DR brought his enlarged and improved prints back to the museum, a local man happened to recognise a relative in one of them, and asked if he could borrow it to show another family member.

Soon, DR's entire set of prints were going round the village from house to house and pub to pub. Locals who had been unable (or had never bothered) to identify people in the museum's small and faded originals were crying out "Oh look! That's my Granddad!". In a short time, virtually everyone in the village knew DR by sight, and many doors were opened to him. People gave him previously uncollected stories about the history of the Padstow May Day celebration. Others dug old photographs out of dresser drawers for him to copy, clean up and enlarge for them.

As a result of this two-way traffic in pictures and stories, DR has assembled a much more accurate (he thinks) version of the history and social context of the Padstow May activities than is available in the standard

books. His advice to other scholars is to do likewise. [*Moral: "Ask not what the villagers can do for you, but ask what you can do for the villagers!" MAS*]

Paper 3: Simon Evans

SE became involved in folk while growing up in Kent during the late '60s/ early '70s. His musical tastes included various kinds of Pop & Rock -eventually Fairport and Steeleye Span led him into Morris dancing and Mummers' plays, via Tolkien, and an enthusiasm for "ruralism". Was told firmly by those who claimed to know that "the Tradition" was to be preserved, not meddled with.

These "experts" thought Kent was too urbanised, and too cosmopolitan for any traditional folk culture to have survived. SE found this incorrect. There were still old men around in the '60s/'70s who could remember doing Mummers' plays in the early C20. SE got a considerable amount of information from two of them in particular. But they disagreed sharply about the content of the play, each claiming that his version was the correct one. SE found that one had acted in it around 1910, and the other around 1926 - they had never performed together. Conclusion - the play had evolved! Tradition not fixed but fluid!

Kent also has a unique mid-winter guising tradition - its focus is the "Hoodening Horse", which goes from door to door, accompanied by mummers, musicians etc. SE found one elderly informant who remembered doing this in early C20. He said "I had no idea why we were doing it, or where it came from ...it was just something we used to do ... but the money came in handy for Christmas."

So, SE asks, is this "folk"? His own approach is not to go looking for "folk" survivals from the past, but to go out and see what is happening *now*, and only then to try and understand what it *is* and what it means.. His aim is to get to know the local people, and find out what they did, and how it fitted into their everyday lives. "Contextualise!" is his watchword.

During his early folk club days, DR and friends revived a local mumming play, and did their best to perform it in its "authentic" form. It was fun for them, but don't have much impact on audiences. "We were trying to breath life into a cadaver." Later, he worked with a theatre group, using the mummers' play concept as a basis for improvisation on contemporary themes. This was much more successful. Conclusion - tradition needs to be allowed to continue developing organically.

SE also talked about collecting songs in Kent. Played a tape of an 80-year old man recorded on the Isle of Sheppey singing a 2-verse version of "Died for Love". (Father comes home to find daughter hanging from a beam, note pinned to her breast saying she died for the love of a faithless "sailor boy").

SE has found versions of this song (often with many more verses) all over Kent. It is widely known (though recited rather than sung) among young people. But in their version the runaway "sailor boy" is often replaced by a "borstal boy" whose sweetheart is devastated when he is put away. An alternative version has the girl breaking off the relationship because the Borstal boy refuses give up his life of crime. SE has seen verses from this poem as graffiti on walls in tough housing estates in Kent. Has also found versions of it posted on the internet by people [*lovelorn teenagers? MAS*] who have adapted it to suit their own circumstances, and claim it as their own composition. Obviously it fulfils a basic need.

SE has made an extensive study of the traveller singing traditon. Knows several Gypsy singers who have large a repertoire, much of it not "folk". Played tapes of Ambrose Cooper, who sings modern Country and Western songs with guitar accompaniment [*but in his "own" accent. MAS*], and also sings "the old songs" with C&W style guitar accompaniment. To him, and his traveller audience, a good song is a good song, wherever it comes from.

SE talks of the importance of listening to informants without imposing your own categories (folk or non-folk) on them. Collectors who go to "source singers" with an agenda already drawn up tend to find what they are looking for. Singers quickly catch on to what the collector is after, and provide it. [*Epecially while the free drink keeps flowing! MAS*]. We know that Sharp et al filtered out music-hall songs and parlour ballads, even though their informants prized them as highly as the "folk" songs in their repertoires.

SE asserts that for the Travellers he knows, the distinction between "folk" and "non-folk" is meaningless. Songs are sung at community events, and are an integral part of a shared experience. A repertoire has grown up which satisfies the needs of performer and audience. A song's authenticity is not intrinsic to it, but is conferred upon it by the acceptance of the community. This acceptance validates the singer's repertoire, regardless of its origins. SE says that Ambrose Cooper sings traditional Gypsy songs, Irish songs C&W songs, Elvis songs, and anything else he fancies, but they all come out in the same accent, and in a homogenous style. He "makes them his own", and composes his own lyrics in the same idiom.

In conclusion, SE played a tape of two songs by Czech Roma singers - both accompanied on nylon- strung guitars. First is an old gypsy love song in what sounds like a very traditional style. Second is clearly recognisable as a 12 bar blues - composed by the singer, and telling a story of contemporary life, in his own language and "voice" Both sung in the same characteristic gypsy vocal style.

SE argues that authenticity derives from the *style* and the context of a song, not from the origin of the tune and lyrics.

Paper 4: Tony Engle (assisted by Reg Hall)

Getting started: "in the 1950s everything was in black and white". [*Yes, I can remember it well. MAS*] TE remembers liking instrumentals by the Shadows - "Jet Black", "Diamonds" etc [*Actually, to be pedantic, "Diamonds" was recorded by Jet Harris and Tony Meehan after they'd split from the Shadows. MAS*] but his life was changed after hearing the Liverpool Spinners singing "Dirty Old Town" on the "Forces Favourites" radio show. He discovered for the first time that there were songs about the "real world".

Already a jazz fan, he sold his Charlie Parker records to buy Joan Baez albums.. Then sold his Joan Baez albums to buy Dubliners albums. Then sold the Dubliners albums to buy Harry Cox albums. Soon became more directly involved in the music. "It wasn't enough to listen to it - you were so drawn to it that you had to do it!"

After 3 years working as a civil engineer, TE was hired as assistant to the head of Topic Records. Topic had started out as an offshoot of the Workers' Musical Association, which in its turn was an off-shoot of the Communist Party of Great Britain. (One of its earliest issues was a 78 rpm single of "The Song of the Tractor Driver" by the Red Army Choir.) Topic also began issuing records of British, Irish and American folk music, under the artistic guidance of Bert Lloyd. Bill Leader was Topic's recording engineer, but also involved in the musical direction of the company.

TE pointed out that Topic's finances had always been fairly precarious. For some time they were subsidised by a person he described as "an example of that anomalous, but very useful phenomenon - a rich Communist!" However, in an attempt to make them commercially viable, Gerry Sharp was hired to organise finances and publicity, with Bert and Bill still handling artistic policy..

In due course Bill Leader left Topic to found his own company. Apparently he was not entirely happy with the way that Topic's repertoire had developed under Lloyd's regime. He wanted to issue more "contemporary" folk material (Bert Jansch et al), and eventually did so with considerable success on his Leader and Trailer labels. Gerry Sharp became sole head of Topic, with Bert as advisor, and a staff of 1½. persons. - with TE becoming the "1" of the 1½ shortly afterwards.

TE learned about the record business the hard way, working as the company's general dogsbody for 2 ½ years. Then Gerry Sharp suddenly died of cancer, and TE became the chief. [*As far as I could understand from what he said - which was a bit unclear - TE eventually bought the company outright. At any rate, the rest of what he said implied that he had total artistic control and total financial responsibility from fairly early on. MAS*]

TE said, of his own artistic policy that "I don't necessarily like all the records I release - but I do believe that they all deserve to be heard." Somewhere along the way, he was asked to define what Topic's policy was, and eventually came up with the phrase "to give the people a voice". He then (he says) forgot about this phrase until he began to consider issuing an extensive anthology of British and Irish traditional music.

[*Enter Reg Hall, Stage Right. Reg has been involved in traditional music since the 1950s, and has strong opinions about it. He did not enlarge upon them here - perhaps because he assumed they were well enough known already? MAS*]

TE commissioned RH to gather material and write notes for a series of CDs of British/Irish traditional music & song. RH found the Topic archive a massive treasure house. It included not only lots of material recorded directly by Topic (in the studio and in the field), but also further material licensed to the label by the BBC, and by independent collectors like Mike Yates. Faced with this embarrassment of riches, Reg eventually persuaded TE to expand the project - again, and again, and again - until it became a 20 CD set.

TE dismissed the idea of issuing the CDs over a period of time. He calculated (rightly) that they would make a much bigger splash if released as a block. This tactic produced enthusiastic in-depth reviews in the broadsheet press and on the BBC. TE did not quote exact figures, but said the set had sold very well, broke

even financially, and is still selling. "I got orders for two more complete sets last week, which made me a very happy man!"

A bit more on the commercial side. TE points out that the chief difficulty for a record company of this size is getting the records to where potential customers can actually get hold of them. After struggling with outside distributors, Topic decided to do its own distribution - and now also acts as the distributor for a number of other small speciality labels.

TE said "We do not *sell* records - we *lend* them to shops. If the shops do sell them, they give us some of the money back. If they don't, they send us back the records." In recent years, mail order sales have become more significant - now through the Internet. TE also said (without details as time was short) that switching from vinyl to CD had been more traumatic for small labels than for the majors - but Topic managed to weather the storm successfully. The company is now faced with new and even more radical technical innovations like i-pods and internet downloads. Their impact is hard to predict, but Topic will still keep trying to "give the people a voice"..

The above was assembled from rough notes taken at the time, and from recollections on the train back to Newcastle. There are probably some errors and omissions - but not too many, or too significant, I hope.

Mike Sutton 24/02/05