

Fiddling for England – A Musical Journey

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Introduction

Students of traditional music speak of ‘continuity and change’ as agencies in the formation of their area of interest. Even a cursory examination of well known ‘source’ fiddlers in England reveals a surprising lack of either of these factors in some of the most vaunted cases. William Wells of Bampton made his own fiddle from a rifle stock and a corned beef tin and was entirely self taught. A close friend of Walter Bulwer revealed to me that, “Walter had a classical training”, then added conspiratorially, “but we don’t know who did it to him!” Bertie Clarke of Bampton was similarly endowed. Michael Turner of Sussex was self taught from an 18th century textbook. Perhaps unsurprisingly most traditional fiddlers in England seem to be solo performers for the greater part of their performing lives. There are a host of others whose credentials of ‘source’ seem to hold little credence, unless, of course, the distinction itself is inappropriate? I shall now describe what I would suggest is a fairly typical account of how, regardless of classification, an English fiddler comes to be.

One thing should be made clear at the outset. Like many traditional musicians I never intended to make the journey which I am about to describe. Musically, I seemed to be starting from a place where there was no evidence of inheritable instrumental musicianship, although my paternal grandmother’s family were celebrated singers in their village of Settrington, in East Yorkshire. The events I shall describe are, to me, seminal points in my becoming a fiddler in the English tradition.

Singing was the starting point for my musical travels thanks to a mother and maternal grandmother who delighted in noise. From them I learned to entertain the family with old songs from the Edwardian music hall. Another source of musical experience was my aunt Angela, only nine years older than myself. She owned a wind-up gramophone. Together we listened to Guy Mitchell, Doris Day and others now forgotten. We sang songs from musicals like ‘Calamity Jane’ and ‘The Pyjama Game’ and thus I acquired my first instrument, a voice. At, or around the age of 9, I auditioned for, and was accepted into my junior school choir. Here, thanks to the BBC’s ‘Singing Together’ series, I learned of ‘Polly Oliver’, ‘The Skye Boat Song’ and other material imbued with, to my young ears, an ‘exotic’ nature.

Thus equipped I was easy pickings for the church youth club leader while in my early teens, who asked, “Can you sing?” to which I replied candidly, “Yes”. He then thrust into my hands a guitar whose neck was so bowed that it required two hands to hold the strings down on the frets. “Learn to play that,” he said, “you’re singing in the Youth Service in three weeks time!” Thus my first engagement with a real instrument was tinged with panic. The church service, I sang and played ‘Michael Row the Boat Ashore’, came and went leaving me with a reputation for being ‘cool’ thanks to my ability on a new guitar which had been purchased at some cost as a birthday present. It was around this time that I began to appreciate the musical influence of my parent’s close and elderly friend Oswald Kenningham. He brought classical music into our house in the form of LP records and books. Despite the developments in popular music at the time these largely passed me by. I had become a performer rather than

a spectator. By the age of fourteen I had been 'headhunted' by the church choir and thus obtained what is arguably the finest musical education one can receive for free. English church music lies close to the heart of the English folk tradition. My first love remained my guitar, my second was whichever was current of the many female admirers my music brought. All of which was a powerful confidence booster.

By the time I entered secondary school I was a believer that music was something one 'did'. Music lessons were mainly listening to recordings. On one occasion Mr. Crickmore, our music teacher, played us 'The Dowie Dens of Yarrow', a folk song sung by Ewan MacColl. This was followed by Ailsa Cameron singing something equally dark. When the lesson ended I was left, feeling as if the hair was standing up on the back of my neck. I can't say what spoke to me beyond the voices and the words but I became a searcher after traditional music. In this I was aided and abetted by my friend Ian Bell, a year older than me and also a guitarist. We formed a folk group and collected together a repertoire of traditional songs. During our sixth form years we played wherever we were able. It was around this time that Ian got hold of an old flatbacked mandolin. Which we strummed in a desultory manner until one day I picked out 'Peggy Lettermore' which I knew from a Dubliners album. Now I was a mandolin player. It never occurred to me at any time that I might be a bad mandolin player. Those following the thread will by now have noticed the links are fitting into place. The mandolin has the same tuning as the violin. It could only be a matter of time now when I would emerge a fully fledged English fiddler. Alas no, the group broke up and Ian went off to university in Leeds vowing to become a Rapper dancer. I was unable to find out what that was but apparently his hall of residence was famous for it.

I was now eighteen years old, a singer of Irish songs and some bawdy Elizabethan material which turned out to be 18th century. I was almost totally ignorant of the nature or definition of traditional music but loved it with a passion. By a circuitous route I found myself in one of those folk clubs which arose in the 1960s and by an equally circuitous route was taken under the wing of one Michael Waterson who spoke of Joseph Taylor and Harry Cox, of Sam Larner and the Copper Family. I joined another group with Steve Gardham and Pam Brown, singing at the folk club and at barn dances between sets led by the late Kathy Mitchell. I was hearing English tunes and singing English songs. Then I joined the local morris team. As an aside, it is worth noting that morris dancing is probably the single biggest contributing factor in the survival, continuance and flourishing of the current English folk scene. I started with longsword dancing and then rapper, at last I knew what it was! I still carry the scars. Then I learned the Cotswold morris, that most elegant and graceful of traditional dances. This became an all consuming passion. I loved the movement, the tunes and the costume. I met dancers and singers and those who performed professionally, I knew no distinction between them. It was at this point that I was given my first fiddle. I scraped away and came up with precious little. Then the idyll came to an end. I left my home town and moved to college in Doncaster where there was no morris and where folk song meant Bob Dylan.

Starting a morris dance team in a vacuum is not the easiest of tasks. Fortunately drama students are keen to experience life and so our fledgling team began with a grant from the students union. We danced longsword and Cotswold morris to tunes

played by a music student who needed both the score and a music stand. Dancing out in a high wind illustrated to us that this was not the way to go. Our classical violinist was dismissed and I finally picked up the fiddle hacking out a semblance of the tune for the dancers to follow.

Throughout my college life I was seldom without my instrument. It came in handy in Doncaster pubs especially when the races were on. I could walk into a pub and order a half pint confident that someone would ask what was in the case and thus, inadvertently supply me with beer for the rest of the evening. Busking was a useful means of supplementing a grant which was pretty much non-existent and so my fiddle and I, like that of Burn's 'Rattling Roaring Willy' became the best of friends and had some similarly 'rattling- roaring times. I had drifted into a world of pub sessions which had nothing in common for what passes as such nowadays. These were gatherings around a piano and each person in the room would do their 'turn'. These comprised drag acts, music-hall songs and Sinatra type crooning. There was no 'folk' element in the proceedings and I was a token 'young person' among a group of retired and semi-retired people who comprised the regulars. Notable stars in this firmament were Howard, a window-dresser by day who was a female impersonator of some talent by night, and Charlie, a gay man with a penchant for singing music hall. Apart from Eva, the pianist, I was the only other instrumentalist. Either or both of us attempted to accompany whatever was being performed. During this time, like most of the English populace, I remained convinced that Irish fiddling was the be all and end all of the art. This meant that I had a low opinion of my own worth as a fiddler and thus had little reinforcement to provide impetus for improvement. The next milestone in my musical life occurred immediately after I got married.

In the summer of 1971 I arrived with my new wife to live in a flat in the town centre of Doncaster. At this time a friend announced that we should all go for a drink in the Park Hotel one Saturday evening. Unknown to any of us this was the night of the St. Leger and the Park Hotel was, as customary on that evening, full of Romany travellers. As we entered a man drew us to one side and began to explain a hundred and one good reasons why we should leave. I had spied the fiddler and the accordionist who were playing for an elderly lady to step dance. The crowd were clapping and cheering. Our self appointed protector pointed out a young man in a suit. "He killed his brother in law last week" said our new friend. "He always carries an army bayonet!" I smiled, not remotely intimidated by this obvious fiction. I moved over to where the musicians were sipping their beer. I spoke to the old fiddler. "That's a good sounding fiddle," says I, "is it old?" He eyed me with a look of disdain, "Do you play?" he snarled. I nodded. "Then play!" he said, thrusting the instrument and its bow into my hands. He walked away. The accordionist shook his head in disbelief. "Miss MacLeod and Tenpenny Bit?" he asked, I nodded again. Then glancing up I saw a young man standing on the low coffee table waiting to dance. I raised the fiddle and bow, he pulled back his coat and placed his hands on his hips looking for all the world like a flamenco dancer as he pulled his spine erect. I noticed the bayonet thrust through his belt. I began to play as if my life depended on it. We played, he danced, the crowd, at first silent began their clapping and shouts of encouragement. The accordionist shouted, "Irish Washerwoman?" I nodded and segued but after two bars hands reached over my shoulder plucking the instrument and bow from my sweating hands, the fiddler grinned at me, "Not bad, lad, but we play it in D" He swept into the throng and I slinked back to the wall sustaining a couple of enthusiastic pats on the back as I went. My wife Liz told me later that our erstwhile protector had remarked in

disgust, "I've travelled with them for twelve years and never been accepted but your husband's been accepted by them in ten minutes!" My next lesson had been learned, traditional music has a power beyond the effects of mere virtuosity. One doesn't need to be good, one merely has to be effective.

Through the ensuing years I played for morris and gradually, as a result, learned to play in time and at a constant speed. Stylistically I was percussive and loud. I sawed away hitting as many strings as I could in an effort to increase volume. I even went through a period of time when I flattened the bridge of my instrument down to a shallow curve to facilitate this effect. The resulting comments from a fellow morris musician explained the phenomenon as he asked, "Why don't you just buy a *****ing drum?" What I did not know, at this stage, was that I was emulating morris musicians of the past who resorted to the same tactics in order to overcome the cumulative sound of around 300 bells all ringing at once. The late Bertie Clarke of Bampton Morris, despite his classical training, similarly resorted to a series of squeals, and tortured wailings in playing for the morris. Clearly there is a collective unconscious at work in playing for this most English of dances.

During 1980 I sustained an injury which had a profound effect on my subsequent musical career. I found myself unable to dance or to play. During a long return to health I retrained at the London School of Contemporary Dance where I attended courses in contemporary and Historical dance. This experience placed me, over the next few years in the company of composers such as Alan Lisk, Eleanor Alberga and Barrington Pheloung. From them I learned of music technology and the use of computers in musical composition. Over the remainder of the 1980s I sustained an ongoing relationship with London Contemporary Dance Theatre and the world of art dance and music. By the early 1990s my fiddle had not seen the light of day for over ten years. It was in the first half of that decade that I was approached by an ex-student, David O'Garr who wished me to provide a soundtrack for a ballet he was producing. This would involve me playing and singing traditional material accompanied by more contemporary material from the hand of composer Michael Price. Dave and Mike also encouraged me to return to playing the fiddle.

By the mid-1990s my wife, Liz and I had become involved with the South Riding Folk Arts Network based in Sheffield. I had accumulated a number of manuscript tune collections dating from the 19th century and offered to publish a transcribed version of these as a fund-raising effort for the organisation. It was during this activity that I became aware of an English repertoire which was quite local to where I lived. I was amazed to see melodies in flat keys. Bb and G minor are common in the early 19th century and F major/ D minor was equally favoured. From this experience I accumulated a personal repertoire which remains unusually parochial.

I remained, in my opinion, a poor player and lacked any real insight as to how I could improve. A chance meeting with fiddler Alan Waller from Norwich was a seminal experience. Alan played in an idiosyncratic manner. He did not play in sessions but was a friend of many celebrated English traditional musicians of the past. He invited me to a private session of tune swapping and I complied whilst explaining that I wasn't a very good player. He laughed appreciatively when he heard me playing, "That's good old English style," he said, "it's a bit refined but English." I had

apparently arrived as an English fiddler. My self perceived lack of expertise was due to my attempting to measure my playing by a foreign standard, in this case Irish. Just as we in Britain all speak the same language we do have distinctive regional accents. This is equally true of our music, we share a repertoire but play it in distinctly regional manner. What became clear to me is that the English fiddler does not exist in isolation. No more or less than his/her counterpart in other countries. There is a tradition which informs our playing and it is that of our wider culture.

In this journey I have become a professional musician, this was, as stated, a course I never intended to pursue but for which I am eternally grateful. Through much of my musical life I have merely been expressing my own circumstances. The musician is a product of a life and, in my own experience, it is the process of living which creates the musician rather than any deliberate musical training. This process rather suggests to me that it is, in England at least, difficult to predict who will or will not become a carrier of the tradition. In the case of instrumental music we are mostly self-taught. This informal musical education creates idiosyncrasy and character in which the musicality is often subjugated by the needs of other agencies such as dancers. The tradition seems to be a confusion of eccentricities which are expressed through musical means. In contrast, formal training seems to produce people who can play but who have in that playing a homogeneity of style which, when examined suggests itself to be more of a repertoire than a tradition.

Paul Davenport 30th July 2005

