

Artists and Artisans

The work of the South Riding Folk Arts Network

In opening it is interesting to observe that in the 19th century teams of morris dancers would settle territorial disputes and conflicts in timing with fists and sticks. After these short but bloody battles the team left standing claimed the right to dance at that place and time. Gradually the habitual losing sides disappear from history whilst others survived into the later years of the century. In those days payment for dancing was often in beer or even donations towards costume in kind. Dancers could make a months wages in Whitsun week alone. Such practices, though effective in their day, seem inappropriate nowadays.

The South Riding Folk Arts Network, originally SRFN, was created in 1995 to act as a clearing house and advocate for the coordination of events and dance-outs. The quarterly newsletter given free to a variety of outlets, ranging from pubs through to public libraries and schools, allowed the work of individuals, clubs and larger bodies to be celebrated. The newsletter allowed publication of dates for events thus avoiding clashes of interest. This is not to say that hand to hand combat was still the order of the day at that time. The organisation grew initially out of necessity. It was also founded on the principle that it would serve the grass-roots of the folk movement and that its constituency would be the ordinary citizen. I shall not dwell here on a historical perspective but rather focus on a selection of actions which were initiated by the organisation and which can be seen to have current effects in either the local or wider community. These have come about because of a concerted effort within the SRFAN to widen links with national and regional bodies which have in turn served to inform and broaden the organisation's impact both regionally and nationally. Currently SRFAN has an ongoing dialogue with, the English Folk Dance & Song Society, Folk South-West, the Folk Arts Network, Association of Festival Organisers, the Morris Federation, the Sword Dance Union, Maltby Comprehensive School, Hope Valley Rail Partnership and the Sheffield Industrial Museums Trust.

The paper before you will describe two of these and outline the work of the organisation as a publisher of folk materials for the general public and the folk community.

Kelham Island

This partnership grew out of a mutual need between the network and the Sheffield Industrial Museums Trust. In 1994 John Hamshere, the new Director wished to make better use of large hall which held the 'stored' collection. In Feb 1995 SRFN undertook to stage a Charles Parker Exhibition and is looking for a venue. The exhibition was a relatively small scale affair which incorporated a multi-media display created by Birmingham Libraries, holders of the Charles Parker collection. The museum cleared the space and the exhibition was mounted using a large event organised by SRFN as a launch party. The whole event was a success for both partners. Later that year Martin Jones arrived as Operations Manager and invited the Network to organise some musicians to play at the annual Christmas Market. This proved successful for both parties as well as for the individuals and groups who participated. The result of this was a joint project known initially as the 'Mayfest' before this title was usurped by Sheffield Council for another event. By May Bank Holiday 1999 thanks to the efforts of Martin Jones and Ron & Jenny Day of SRFN this event had grown into a three day a mini-festival.

SRFN has been involved in these events since that time. The relationship is now such that SRFN has become the museum's reference point for traditional arts input and performance both at Kelham and at Abbeydale. The museum has provided a base and rehearsal space for several groups during this period. On the back of the Mayfest, SRFN and the museum developed and hosted 'The Folk Factory', a one week summer school which ran in two successive summers. Ron Day of SRFN has developed a package which is included in the Corporate Hospitality folio offered by the museum.

Through the SRFAN, the Sheffield Folk Festival negotiated the use of the museum site as their main venue.

Throughout 2004 / 2005 SRFAN and Museums Trust worked on developing an outline

plan for the exhibition hall. This project aims to create a multi purpose arts venue in the Kelham Island site. In 2005 the Museums Trust agreed to be registered office for SRFAN.

This relationship has been instrumental in giving the network a sound footing on which to take initiatives. We are able, as an organisation, to make judgements on events requiring significant space knowing that we have a partner who is open minded and supportive of our aims. When we examine the aims and needs of the Industrial Museums Trust we can see that they parallel our own. It is not that either organisation is actually dwelling on the past but rather both are intent on developing the future audience for the materials which we purvey. This is aimed by a historical perspective which links Sheffield's past industrial organisation with its past musical organisation. This is a city of small workshops and cooperatives. The famous, 'Little Meisters' of the Cutlery Industry have had their exact counterparts in musical groups and public houses. The Blind Fiddlers of the Regency period operated like a group of cutlers and sought partnership and endorsement in a public house and its landlord. The mutuality of interest is a prime mover in the life of a city which traditionally lacked mass labour in the way that Lancashire and the West Riding industrial practices were organised. It is not surprising, therefore to note that Sheffield has a respected history of music making on a small scale. Nor is it surprising that the precision of cutlery making found its way into amateur music so that even Sir Thomas Beecham used local musicians when visiting the city on his concert tours. Museum and Network reflect this link between industry and music in a uniquely local way.

Publications

The activities of the Network are underpinned by our publishing company, SRFN Publishing. We have published a range of books over the course of our history, two of which I will remark upon later. These books include, in addition to our quarterly magazine and the Local area folk directory, two major tunebooks, a book of local songs, two small volumes on tunes and country dances, two small volumes on dance research and locally collected songs, a reprint of the dance research and a further volume on another dance tradition, a major instructional manual on Concertina Repair, a book of tunes written by local children, a further book of settings used in the SRFN sessions and a CD collection assembled from the local professional folk musicians. In the pipeline are a publication of the four part arrangements used in the Generations Project, a video DVD of traditional sword dancing and a 'iSpy' guide to morris dancing. All of these will raise funds for the network but all will involve major risk.

The publishing idea grew initially out of our expertise gained in creating the magazine and developed at speed. The following illustrates the basic concept.

The region contains many musicians and dancers but these used a basic 'national' repertoire of tried and tested melodies which had been published by the English Folk Dance & Song Society in the 1950s and 60s. In 1996 Liz and I had discovered and purchased a manuscript notebook of traditional music which had originated somewhere in the West Midlands. When preparing this for publication a local manuscript collection came to my attention, that of Joshua Burnett of Worsbrough near Barnsley. Burnett's collection contained a local repertory including such tunes as the Worsbrough Hornpipe, Hesley Hornpipe, Sheffield Rant and Sheffield Hornpipe as well as the unusual and important 'Hornpipe by James Knight, a blindman'. The latter led to the discovery of an extraordinary musical culture and community which flourished in the Regency period in the town of Sheffield. This group, 'The Blind Fiddlers of Sheffield' has been the subject of papers delivered at conferences and seminars at Nottingham and London Universities. These opportunities have afforded the network a platform for work in research of local customs and traditions.

Two tunebooks were published using several unpublished manuscript collections of tunes with local or regional origins. The process of making this project work fell to myself and Liz. Setting and design were done by creating a master in two computer programmes thus ensuring a unique design and layout. We had covers printed electronically then developed a system of printing to demand using spiral binding and photocopy. Paper choice is important in this process and the result was so distinctive and effective that a publication some time later, by another organisation exactly mimicked the design of Tunebook one. These books have enjoyed a wide distribution and tunes from them may be heard around the country. The Network then set out to

popularise this repertory in the local area.

The SRFAN session developed out of the imperative to give the region a repertoire which would stand alongside that of other regions. The Wessex material from Thomas Hardy's notebooks was becoming popular in that area and Sussex had benefited from the publication of the notebooks of Michael Turner and William Mittel. Lancashire and the North West were developing a similar regional musical identity and the South Riding tunebooks were brought out into an era of increasing politicisation in traditional music. The local fiddler Dave Shepherd of Blowzabella fame once remarked that, when touring abroad the band were often asked to play something from their region. For most musicians in this situation this was interpreted as 'play something English' the most popular response being 'Walter Bulwer's Polka' from the Norfolk musician. A regional repertoire implies much more than that. There are now a small number of musicians whose repertoire consists solely of the idiosyncratic but virtuosic South Riding Tunebooks tunes. This does not appear to be a stumbling block but rather reinforces the strength of this region's unique repertoire.

In the wake of the publication of the tunebooks a music session was created to popularise and disseminate this repertoire amongst local musicians. The session, which was initially held on a Wednesday at the Red House on Solly St. attracted a wide range of musicians. By the time of its move to the Uppertorpe Hotel in October 2005 the numbers had reduced but the format also changed. This venue was chosen because, at a time of hiatus in the fortunes of the Red House, the tenant of the Uppertorpe Hotel advertised for a session. The pub has a small local regular trade and these are appreciative and enthusiastic, on the whole experiencing live music in this context for the first time. The tunes from the collections are heard in a variety of settings in the city and elsewhere since people move on to other locations. It is something of a surprise to walk through a town in the southern counties and hear a tune being played for a dance team which can only have originated in this collection.

The Generations Project

In September 2002 the network initiated and coordinated a project based in Maltby Comprehensive School, Rotherham. The thinking behind this initiative was simple, place teenagers in a position of responsibility and they would have to be seen as responsible. The image of young people in this ex-mining community was at a low ebb and the plan was to change this. The plan was to teach them an activity of which they would have ownership and then send them into the five 'feeder' primary schools to teach their activity to the younger students. The chosen activity was the Yorkshire Longsword dance. There were a number of reasons for this which pertain to teamwork and local identity.

The project was conceived and coordinated by myself and involved drawing on the expertise of the English Folk Dance & Song Society as the national body for folk education. Diana Campbell-Jewitt the education manager of the society came to Maltby and worked with myself, Cath James (then secretary of SRFAN) and Jan Lloyd the Head of the school. Funding was obtained from the PTA thanks to Mrs. Lloyd's advocacy and Diana returned to the school to give classes in how to teach folk dance.

The team comprised a group of Y9 students who learned the basics, watched some films of longsword and then created their own dance during two weekly practices. The team first danced out at Christmas 2002 and were able to gain exposure thanks to their being invited to perform at the Kelham Island Museum's Victorian Themed Christmas Market. A later invitation for the team to dance at Whitby's Moor & Coast Festival in May 2003 was also followed by an invitation to participate in the Holmfirth Folk Festival on the following weekend. The result was that, by the time the team entered the first primary school they were already seasoned folk dancers. The students flourished under the festival conditions where they were received by experienced adults purely on the basis of their ability to perform the dances. This was a new experience for the youngsters.

An unexpected aspect of this project was the sudden and unprecedented increase in the expertise of the young musicians who accompanied the dances. It is no exaggeration to say that this project was the reason for the school's most successful GCSE results ever in music during 2005 with 100% pass and 68% grades *A to C.

The net result of the project by 2004 was that there were now two teams of dancers

from two of the primary schools and the local town council had adopted the project when the young people had danced to celebrate the turning on of the town's Xmas lights. This was to become an annual event. In March 2005 a team of seven dancers from the school participated in the Dancing England Rapper Tournament, a competitive Sword dance event drawing teams from around the world. The Maltby teenagers suddenly found themselves declared world champions. This was to have a profound effect on the community of their town who discovered the cameras of the BBC trained on them.

The project continues, the community hosts a sword team, three schools have teams and at least one parent now is a regular member of the Sheffield based 'Triskele' Rapper team.

The community has been able to use this project to enhance its status in local government where mention of the championship was made in the council at Rotherham. The ties between school and the town are stronger than ever before and the status of young people in the town has risen considerably. Obviously sword dancing is not a panacea for any community's problems but it does provide a positive focus on which a community can build.

Summary

These three activities represent a small part what the network does and how it seeks to interact with the community. The organisation is self funding, we don't do what we can't afford. This has led to some interesting innovations in production of materials for fund raising. Often we have been opportunistic in the creation of publications and on two occasions we have taken on publications for other bodies. This in turn has generated income whilst increasing the size of our portfolio of books and other materials.

Partnership is key to our operational procedures. We have no permanent employees and so the load is borne by the directors. Ron & Jenny have a strong contact base regionally whilst Liz and I have a similar base nationally. Next weekend, for example we will be involved in two important ventures. Ron & Jenny will be steering the musical and dance aspects of the Kelham Island Xmas Market here in Sheffield whilst Liz and I will be steering a concert, session and ceilidh, all supporting the launch of a local folk band's album. This event is a partnership between the English Folk Dance & Song Society, Wildgoose Records of Hampshire, and ourselves as representatives for the band, 'Crucible'.

2006 will be a busy year for us with several publications in the pipeline together with workshops in Longsword dancing, a Sword Dance competition and the usual host of activities such as Xmas Market and Mayfest. The network is making a difference to the lives of a great many people in the region and will continue to do so in the future. The music we endorse is bound up with participation and with community. It is not an easy path to tread. In this respect there is no tokenism in its approach neither does it attempt to win hearts and minds by succumbing to the media-driven views of community music. There is no political agenda in the work of the organisation, merely the wish to share and combine with others in the sharing.