

## A Note on Frederick Bussell

By Martin Graebe



One of Baring-Gould's frustrations as a collector of folk songs was that he was not a good enough musician reliably to note down tunes in the field. He could manage when working with a piano, as when he invited singers to visit him in his home at Lewtrenchard or when in the homes of some of his friends. To overcome this difficulty he enlisted the help of two capable musicians, Henry Fleetwood-Sheppard and Frederick Bussell, to go with him when he visited the old singers in their homes or at their work. Baring-Gould would then write down the words while Sheppard or Bussell 'pricked down' the tune. Baring-Gould describes one of these occasions as follows:

*"One wild and stormy day, Mr Bussell and I visited Huccaby to interview old Sally Satterly, who knew a number of songs. Her father was a notable singer and his old daughter, now a grandmother, remembered some of his songs. But old Sally could not sit down and sing. We found that the sole way in which we could extract the ballads from her was by following*

*her about as she did her usual work. Accordingly we went after her when she fed the pigs, or got sticks from the firewood rick or filled a pail from the spring, pencil and notebook in hand, dotting down words and melody. Finally she did sit to peel some potatoes, when Mr Bussell with a manuscript music-book in hand, seated himself on the copper. This position he maintained as she sang the ballad of "Lord Thomas and the Fair Eleanor", till her daughter applied fire under the cauldron and Mr Bussell was forced to skip from his perch."*

Frederick Bussell was the more colourful of Baring-Gould's two collaborators and spent more time out collecting with him than Fleetwood-Sheppard. Baring-Gould describes him as follows:

*'I had built a pretty cottage ... on the Lime Quarry Ramps, and this I let to a Mrs. Bussell, whose son, FW Bussell, was at the time at Magdalen College, Oxford; but having passed a brilliant examination for his degree he was elected fellow of Brasenose, the fellows of Magdalen rather despising him for his eccentricities. When congratulated on his success he dryly remarked: "Either the fellows of Magdalen or those of Brasenose have made a great mistake."*

*Bussell was a dandy, wore very showy ties, and had hot-house flowers sent him from London of the same colour as his ties to wear in his button-hole. He sang falsetto, and was quite unconscious of the amusement he provoked when singing "Dinah-do." At a concert the audience was convulsed with laughter, and his mother would look about her with glances of fury at those who dared to feel amusement at "Freddy's" squawks.*

*He had taken his Mus. Bac. and was an accomplished musician; but he said to me, "A good melody affords me no pleasure. What I love is a fugue or an intricate piece of harmony; it gives me as much gratification as working out a mathematical problem does a mathematician." He was of enormous advantage to me in collecting the folk-airs of Devon, and was ever good natured, obliging and ready to help in the matter.'*

The Reverend Frederick Bussell was born in 1862 in Buckinghamshire to a father of the same name who was vicar of Great Marlow. After gaining his degree at Magdalen College he became a fellow of Brasenose College in 1886. From the above passage we can infer that Baring-Gould knew Bussell when, as an undergraduate, he stayed with his Mother at the Ramps. Their acquaintance thus began some time before they started to collect songs together. Bussell became Vice-Principal of Brasenose in 1896, a post he held until 1913. His resignation came shortly after a marriage that, according to a letter written by John Buchan, who was an undergraduate at Brasenose at the time, surprised everyone. In 1917 Bussell left Oxford and accepted the Brasenose College living of Northolt in Middlesex. This living he resigned in 1925, being no longer able to survive financially in a parish where the expenses exceeded the income. After a short period as Rector in his own living at North Tuddenham in Norfolk he made over all his property to Brasenose in exchange for an annuity and retired to Worthing where he died in 1944

It is not, perhaps, a surprise that he was accounted as much of a 'character' in Oxford as he was in Devon. He had an unusual hobby - he collected church livings. This hobby was frowned on by the authorities of both Church and University, leading at one stage to a period of exile in France. His papers show, however, that this was a modestly profitable enterprise. Having, for example, bought Exbourne Manor and its living for £4,000 he sold it a few years later for £6,200. He appears to have owned some twenty different livings during his life.

The archive at Brasenose College holds a large collection of Bussell's papers, part of which was discovered in the attic of the coach house at North Tuddenham Rectory. Among these papers is a hand-written biography. Though he records his acquaintanceship with Baring-Gould in kindly terms his connection with the collection of folk song is dealt with in one sentence:

*"We had very pleasant times together, collecting songs all over Devon and Cornwall, the credit of which was annexed by a Mr Cecil Sharpe who rearranged them to very tame settings indeed."*

I am grateful to Mrs Elizabeth Boardman, the Archivist at Brasenose College (and folk enthusiast) for allowing me access to Dr Bussell's papers, for first showing me the quotation above and for copies of a number of articles on him. The copy of the Rothenstein portrait from which a detail is given above is part of the Brasenose archive. I would also like to record my gratitude to Mike Heaney who introduced me to Mrs Boardman.