

Devonshire Fiddling 100 years ago



Devonshire and fiddle music are relative strangers to each other. This becomes rapidly obvious whenever folk musicians in the County gather for a session. They love their squeeze-boxes and the memory of Bob Cann still drives the rhythm forward. The free reed instrument, though, is a relative newcomer and the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, collector of folk songs and many other unconsidered historical trifles tells us a little about Devonshire fiddlers of the 1890s when he was actively collecting folk songs.

Baring-Gould knew at least two fiddlers. Peter Isaacs was introduced to him by Miss Bertha Bidder of Stoke Fleming. Isaacs earned his living by repairing saddles and harness on the farms of South Devon. Though lame he lived on the road, sheltering in farm outbuildings as he made his rounds and picked up songs and tunes as he travelled. Baring-Gould paid Isaacs a small wage to collect tunes for him but the arrangement does not appear to have been particularly successful since Baring-Gould's manuscripts only record two tunes as having been provided by Isaacs; a version of 'General Wolfe' and 'Follow my Love'.

The other, and even more interesting fiddler was William Andrews of Sheepstor. Baring-Gould first visited Andrews in 1890 with his musician colleague Henry Fleetwood Sheppard. On this occasion they were not very successful in obtaining anything of interest from him. Baring-Gould went back, though, in 1892 with his other collaborator Frederick Bussell. This time the magic worked and Baring-Gould writes: 'his shyness was broken down and we spent two hours with him, noting down his old airs. We might have got more but the Rector kindly came in and insisted on our going to tea with him. We could not refuse and then had to hasten to catch our train to return and, as we passed, more than an hour after having left the old man, we heard him still fiddling'.

Baring-Gould recognised that the old man had a valuable store of old tunes. Andrews explained how, when he had played for dances in the farm houses of the area, all the young folk sang as they danced and the 'burden' or refrain served to mark the turns in the dance. Baring-Gould was therefore puzzled that he wasn't able to remember more than a few lines of any song. Andrews supplied the explanation saying that he 'minded his viddle more than them zingers' and so never really listened to the words of the songs that he was playing along to - a sentiment with which many present day folk musicians would be sympathetic.

In his cottage at Sheepstor the old man had a rack in the ceiling that was full of music including a number of ancient church music manuscripts as well as secular tunes. Luckily, he lent one of his manuscript tune books to Baring-Gould and from this 21 tunes were copied. These can now be found in volume 14 of the Rough Manuscript that Baring-Gould donated to Plymouth Library. This small collection is the only known record of traditional fiddle

playing in Devonshire at the end of the last century. One of Andrews' tunes, though, was given new life by Baring-Gould who reconstructed a set of words from the old man's telling of what the song had been about, remembered from when he had played along to it years before. This song was 'Old Adam the Poacher' which can be found in the 1905 edition of 'Songs of the West'. This is a strange little tune of unusual construction. As Baring Gould wrote 'One would like to know what was the dance performed to it'. No matter - it is a beautiful little tune and a wonderful memory of the man who was one of the last of the traditional fiddlers of Devonshire.

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