

SABINE BARING-GOULD'S FOLKSONG COLLECTION AD 1892

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The Rev. Sabine Baring Gould (1834-1924) was squire and parson of the west Devon parish of Lewtrenchard for over forty years. He is today best remembered for giving us the words to the hymn, Onward Christian Soldiers. Less well-known are his efforts to collect and publish traditional Westcountry folksongs.

Baring Gould started collecting folksongs as a result of a conversation over the dinner table. He was concerned that the oral folksong tradition, by which words and tunes had been passed on by memory for generations, was dying away. Thus he spent hours listening to local singers, such as James Parsons, 'the Singing Machine' and transcribing their words.

These efforts led to the publication, just over one hundred years ago, of his large collection of folksongs under the title, Songs and Ballads of the West. But the published version is only part of the story. Fortunately he also presented his detailed working manuscripts to the Plymouth Public Free Library. These manuscripts come in two main parts; first there are some fourteen volumes of rough drafts of words and music which were made in the field. Secondly, Baring Gould prepared a hand-written volume (dated 1892) containing fair copies of 202 folksongs.

Widecombe Fair appears as Song No.16 in Baring Gould's fair copy manuscript. He sets down the words as sung to him by W.F. Collier of Horrabridge in July 1888, and also gives several variants of the tune collected from singers at Horrabridge, Kingsbridge, Merrivale Bridge, Two Bridges, and from Miss F.J. Adams 'as sung by her mother in 1822'. This indicates that he was hearing different versions of the song; indeed his rough field notes name Tavistock, and not Widecombe, as the site of the fair this song has now made world-famous!

Reading

Sabine Baring Gould and H. Fleetwood Sheppard 1895 Songs and Ballads of the West. W.E. Purcell 1957 On ward Christian Soldier- a Life of Sabine Baring-Gould, Parson, Squire, Novelist, Antiquary etc. 1834-1924.

