The Fiddle in Southern England

Chris Bartram

Contents

Introduction 2
Recordings 6

The Tunes
Trinity Church 7
The Greenwood Tree 7
Shave the Donkey/Sally Luker 7
Captain Wyke's Dance 8
The Wantage Hornpipe 8
The Dorset Hornpipe 9
Rig-a-jig 9
Untitled Hornpipe (Morpeth Rant) 9
The Liverpool Hornpipe 10
Untitled (version of L'pool Hpipe) 10
Schottishe Number One 11
Schottishe Number Two 11
The Coleford Jig 11
Cabbages & Onions 12
The Breakdown 12
Woodland Flowers 13

The Fiddle in Southern England

Chris Bartram

'Well, I've always said and I'll always stick to it - I've played a good many instruments - but I say, for the Morris dancing, you can't, and you never will beat the fiddle. You'll never beat the fiddle on any instrument you'd like to mention. The fiddle will beat all other instruments for that kind of dancing.'
William ' Jinky' Wells, 1868 - 1953.

'Traditional fiddle music? From Southern England? Don't make me laugh! We don't have a fiddle tradition! Go and learn the violin!' Somebody, who should really have known better, said that to me in the mid 'sixties when I first started to get interested in playing the instrument. Fortunately, I'm a contrary individual, and I didn't take any notice of him!

In 1970, I wrote an article for 'English Dance and Song' which brought together my thoughts at that time. A few years later, there was a revival of interest in our traditional dance music, and a few people got the message. But, sadly, many musicians and bands preferred to learn their music at second-hand from other revivalists, rather than absorb the styles and techniques of the tradition bearers. Perhaps that was understandable, as it has never been particularly easy, despite the efforts of a few dedicated people, to find recordings of Southern English fiddle players. Even when recordings are available, they're never in glorious hi-fi digital sound, and it's also usually necessary to listen through the effects of age and lack of practice. What is clear, though, is that, as in most parts of Europe, Southern England had, and has, its own vernacular violin style, which has very little to do with the classical violin tradition. Twenty-six years later, I'm still sad that more people aren't aware of this! What I'd like to do here is talk briefly about the social background, some of the old players, their technique, instruments and repertoire.

It's been said that the fiddle was probably never an extremely popular instrument in England. However, that's a simplification which wasn't helped by John Timpany's 1970's pamphlet 'From out of his knapsack he drew a fine fiddle' EFDSS c1975. From probably the middle of the eighteenth century, when it began to replace the various whistles, until the latter part of the last century, when it was largely replaced by the 'free reed' instruments, it was our primary dance instrument. It was possible, in the 1820's, for a fiddle player to make real money. At that time the daily rate for a labourer was about 1/8 a day (in the old money) whereas there is evidence that a good fiddler could make 10/6 a night playing for servants' dances at big houses, and nearly as much playing for morris! It's difficult to date, and I'm not altogether sure that there's much solid evidence, but there does appear to have been a fairly rapid decline in the fiddle's popularity in the 1820's and '30's. Flora Thompson in her book 'Larkrise', writing about the old village fiddler at Juniper Hill in north Oxfordshire, mentions that his instrument was finally sold to pay for living expenses during the lean years of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Even at the end of the century, when Jinky Wells brought his first proper instrument, a pawnshop fiddle would cost more than a week's wages.

The decline can also be, at least, partly related to the to the demise of the old church bands. There were other reasons, too. The fiddle isn't a particularly easy instrument to learn, and, unlike Ireland and Scotland, where nationalism, at least partially, made the instrument respectable with the middle classes, and led to the development of ways of playing the old music using violin techniques, in Scotland these were brought to a peak by James Scott-Skinner. In England that didn't happen. Some fiddle players reinvented themselves as violinists, playing a 'dance band' or semi-classical repertoire, and adapting their techniques to suit, many others simply gave up. This seems to have happened rather quickly between 1900 and 1920.

To understand the decline of the church bands, it's necessary to understand a little bit of ecclesiastical history. There was a hiatus in the music of the Established Church sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century. By the 1830's the 'Oxford Movement' was attempting to nudge the Church of England towards what would finally become Anglo-Catholicism. It didn't succeed completely, but one of its major successes was to completely change nature of music in the English Church. The old psalm settings, sung either without accompaniment, or to the church bands, were seen as an anachronism, and it became increasingly trendy to sing hymns. Although the non-conformists had started to write their own music a century earlier, the established church took a while to catch-up. Hymns Ancient and Modern, with many hymns from non-conformist sources, was first published in 1861. This made the new music accessible to the majority of parishes. Although some of the old church bands hung-on for a while after this, the pressure was to get rid of them. The reasons were two-fold. Firstly, the old bands weren't really acceptable to a society in which the daughters of the better-off were learning the pianoforte, and bringing prepackaged

notions of musical correctness, even to remote areas. Secondly, there was the aspect that the bands were often not composed of the sort of people that would come to church unless they were playing something! There are a myriad of stories about the old bands, and the way in which they'd frequently disrupt services. In the 1860's, in Exeter, a band was dismissed for throwing nuts and orange peel onto the congregation during the sermon. In some ways the structure of the bands was reflected by that of the bell ringers, who were, and in many cases are, not regular members of the congregations. As an aside, I remember the problems at Stratton, North Cornwall, in the 1980's, when a new incumbent decided that the ringers should be drawn from the regular congregation......

`It took time, but the old bands were eventually replaced by the robed choir, and church organ. Deprived of their vital place in the society, their reason to continue practising, and often their instruments, the old bands stopped practising, and eventually died. When asking the question 'What now is the reason of the discontinuance and disappearance of the folk song?' in his introductory essay to 'Folksongs of the Upper Thames', Alfred Williams, of all the folksong collectors of the early years of this century, closest in his origins and upbringing to the tradition, mentions the decline of the church bands. 'Another factor was the advent of the church organ and the breaking-up of the old village bands of musicians. That dealt a smashing blow at music in the villages. Previous to the arrival of the church organ, every little village and hamlet had its band, composed of the fiddle, bass viol, piccolo, clarionet, cornet, 'the horse's leg', and the trumpet or serpent. They were played every Sunday in church. But they did not belong solely to the church. All the week they were free to be used for the entertainment of the people. The musicians had to be continually practising, and much of it was done in public. As a matter of fact, the villages were rarely without music. And the need of the band kept the wits of the performers fully alive. They laboured to make and keep themselves proficient, and the training they took both educated them and exerted an unmistakable influence upon the everyday life of their fellows. But when the organ came, the village band was dismissed from the church. Their music was despised. There was no further need of them, and the bands broke up.For while the fiddle sounded at the inns and farm feast, and was soon heard no more.'

In the few parishes where the old bands were retained, their functions and composition changed. The archaic wind instruments; boxwood clarinets, and serpents; the fiddles, and bass strings were dropped. Gradually the bands became the ubiquitous village brass and silver bands we know today. Happily, in some places, notably in the South-West, remnants of the old traditions survived well into the twentieth century. Not primarily in the churches, but in family and social groups. Stuart Biddick, the grandson of the wonderful 'cello player recorded by the BBC in the classic 'Boscastle Breakdown' session in the winter of 1943, is an extremely fine classical organist who still plays his family dance tunes on the piano, and, in the right circumstances, still sings! Some of the children of Harry Dangar, one of the players on the Boscastle recordings still know their family music. Even if they don't now play instruments, they are still able to talk at length about the old times. I was lucky enough to be introduced to their music by the late Charlie Bate, who was playing most Saturday nights at my Uncle Bernard's 'local', the 'Ring of Bells' at St.Issey, when I was in my mid-teens.

Traditional music, even more than traditional song, needs a reason to exist. Once people got out of the habit of step-dancing on a Saturday night, usually as a side effect of WWII around the Vale of White Horse, the reason to keep-up practice faded. The same was true of most of the old country musicians. 'Pop' Steers, who I remember playing his melodeon outside his cottage in Wantage when I was walking home from school, (we used to throw stones at him!!) had a band which played for miles around in the '20's and 30's. He told me how the coming of the wireless and the 30's radio bands with their new dances, like the foxtrot and the quickstep, led to the end of any reason to play for anything than his own amusement. The same happened in East Devon to the fiddle player, Fred Pidgeon. In Sussex, Scan Tester, best known as an anglo-concertina player, but also a fiddle player, ended-up playing all sorts of music in his 'local' on Saturday nights, after having a successful band which attempted to move with the times during the inter-war years. Scan told Reg Hall of the numbers of fiddle players in the Ashdown Forest in the years before the Great War, and there is no reason to suppose that any other part of southern England was different.

Near Oxford, the old music survived where it was tied-up with the survival of the traditional morris. I was fortunate, as a spotty sixties teenage fiddle player, to learn about playing for the morris from the late Arnold Woodley, of Bampton. Arnold was related to the old Bampton fiddle players, Edward and 'Dick' Butler. He also talked of 'Gypsy' Lewis, who played for our Morris in Abingdon, and occasionally at Bampton, during the latter part of the last, and the early years of this century. I knew of a Tommy Lewis at second hand as the last person to play the fiddle in pubs in the villages around Wantage and Abingdon in the 1920's. I'm not at all certain that they were the same person.

'Jinky' Wells of Bampton was probably the best known of the old Morris fiddlers, to survive into this century, largely because of the high profile within the 'Folk Music Revival' which the Morris there has

maintained. Jinky first played for the Bam Morris in 1899. The story goes that the fiddler at the time, 'Dick' Butler, caught the neck of his fiddle between a drainpipe and a wall. It broke, and he walked-off in disgust! Jinky was fooling that year. He ran home for his home-made fiddle (made from a rifle butt and a corned beef tin) and so began a fifty-four year term as Bampton's senior musician and trainer. Recordings of his playing were made by James Madison in the 1920's, the BBC in 1937 and 1946, and he was also recorded by Peter Kennedy in the early 1950's, and the Columbia Gramophone Company (the recordings had to wait until 1998 to be released commercially, as part of the Topic 'Voice of the People' series!) in 1936.

Stephen Baldwin, of Upton Bishop, Herefordshire was a wonderful player. Almost unusually for a southern English player he had a direct family tradition: his father Charlie was 'collected' by Cecil Sharp. He was recorded by Peter Kennedy and Russell Wortley in the early 50's, and was the source of the Bromsberrow Heath (border) morris dance. His recorded repertoire contains many fine versions of hornpipes and country dance tunes, some of which have become 'standards' via Peter Kennedy's 'Fiddler's Tune Books'. Although Mr.Baldwin was in his 80's at the time he was recorded, he still had a good ear, and his technique wasn't too damaged by the years.

Another fine fiddle player, Fred Whent, came from the other side of the country. Suffolk. We are fortunate to have recordings of his playing. Keith Summers met and recorded him in the 1970's, just a fortnight before his death. Fortunately, Fred was in good form, and the recordings reveal some of the most exciting (and idiosyncratic!) playing to be heard from one of the older generation of English fiddle players.

Around the village of Stockland in East Devon, there was a tradition of fiddle-led country dancing which continued vigorously until the Second World War. Fred Pidgeon was the last of the players. Born in the 1880's, he learnt to play from Mr.Pym, the village fiddler, at the age of fourteen, and played for dances for miles around for the next fifty years. The recordings of his playing, made (again!) by Peter Kennedy in the early 'fifties, almost certainly don't do him justice. My friend Paul Wilson, once spent a week researching the fiddle and dance tradition around Stockland, and he recounts doorstep encounters with people who had happy memories of dancing to him. 'That wasn't Fred,' they said, when Paul played them the recordings. 'He was a much better player!'

I've heard similar stories in North Cornwall. Mike Webber, who learnt to play in brass bands from William Hocken, the fiddle player recorded by the BBC at Boscastle in 1943, told me that the recordings were made after Mr.Hocken had spent only a couple of days relearning the instrument after a twenty-five year break!

It's sad, but you can't listen to the old recordings, and expect to hear virtuosos. The fiddle, in southern England, was a functional instrument: what mattered to the old players was that people could dance to them. They weren't concert performers, they were dance musicians with a completely different set of standards. If you listen to their recordings, it's also necessary to learn to listen through the effects of age and lack of practice.

There are a few things that come through fairly clearly. The first is the driving rhythm. It comes from the bowing style which is usually direct, moving with the individual notes, and rarely employs slurs. The second major difference is that the tunes are treated quite simply. There's little decoration, just a few turns and mordants, and the occasional trill. The old players didn't use vibrato, and many, just like the old singers, tended to use natural scales. The more-or-less constant use of drones on the lower strings isn't unusual, particularly amongst morris players. It's possible to speculate that there might be a link back to far older ways of playing. I don't know. It certainly has the effect of adding a bit of volume when playing outdoors! Another aspect of the music which hasn't received much attention is the habit of some morris fiddlers of humming along with their playing. It may be idiosyncratic, but there are parallels in other traditional musics around the world.

Words are a poor tool, when trying to describe music. Notation is a little better and I've transcribed, in some detail, the way in which I play the tune known in Bampton as 'Shave the Donkey' (in Abingdon we call it 'Sally Luker' and the rest of the world knows it as 'The Triumph'). However, by far the best way to get a handle on the music is to listen to the playing of the old players. But be warned, the old traditional fiddle techniques don't have a lot to do with those of the modern violin.

When I wrote my article in 1969, I knew nothing of conventional string techniques. Since then, I've learnt to play the double-bass 'properly' to a standard which allows me to play the classical repertoire. This, together with contact with violin players, some working at a very high level, has given me a much clearer view of the relationship between the fiddle and violin. Without wishing to speculate too much, many of the technical aspects of the traditional fiddle style of southern England appear to relate to the

violin techniques of an earlier era. Most of the old players appear, from photographs, to play in a 'drop wrist' style, rarely moving out of the first position, often supporting the instrument between the heel of the left hand and the collar bone. Shoulder rests were never used! I used to think that the old players never moved out of first position; that was certainly true of most of those players who were around long enough to be recorded, however, the evidence from manuscript fiddlers tune books from the nineteenth century suggests that many players could get into second or third or higher positions. There's also evidence that a significant proportion of those players could play in keys other than G, D and A. There was, for instance, a genre of Bb hornpipes. The conclusion which I'm drawn to is that the techniques employed by the generation of southern English fiddle players born in the last years of the nineteenth century are not some sort of degenerate sub-set of classical/romantic violin technique, but a survival of the techniques of the eighteenth, and possibly seventeenth, centuries.

The instruments used by the old players weren't usually the result of extensive selection. They had to make do with whatever they could get hold of. There's evidence of a tradition of vernacular fiddle making in southern England. I have an instrument on loan which was played until the 1930's by a traditional fiddler from a village to the north of Oxford. Made by Charles Harris in Oxford during 1823, it has a fruitwood back and maple sides, with inked simulated purfling. Unlike many violins of the period, it isn't a copy of a Strad., or one of the other Italian masters, and I wish it sounded or played well. It doesn't! It's a simple, and presumably cheap, locally made country fiddle, and is probably typical of the instruments available to traditional musicians in the last century.

Both Sam Bennett, the fiddle player from Ilmington and Jinky Wells played 'Maginni' fiddles. This is a name is given to a style of fiddle with a large body, and distinctive f-holes which predated the predominant Strad and Amati patterns. They were a popular choice for nineteenth century forgers! I have one with a label dated 1619, although I firmly believe that it was made about 270 years later! Sam's Maginni fiddle, which he brought from a Forest of Dean morris fiddler, and apparently liked because it stayed in tune in the rain(!), was at one time thought to be genuine.

In the absence of a 'real' fiddle, many of the old players learnt to play on a variety of home made fiddles. Jinky Wells' home-made rifle-butt and corned-beef fiddle wasn't unusual. The Dorset poet, George Barnes, talks in a poem about 'the humstrums sounding at every door'. The humstrum was a form of home-made fiddle - there's an example in the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester. Similarly named instruments were found all around southern England. At Sapperton, in Gloucestershire, the mummers were accompanied by a man playing the 'humpanscrump', another home made fiddle. Keith Chandler, in his book 'Ribbons, Bells, and Squeaking Fiddles' has a good description of a similar instrument, used to accompany the morris at Wyck Rissington, in the Cotswolds during the 1870's. It consisted of 'two tins fixed at either end on a strip of wood with a piece of whipcord stretched across from one tin to the other. A bow was used, but he (the informant) cannot remember how the notes were made. He says that 'there wasn't much of a tune about it, it just kept the dancers going.'

The southern English way of playing the fiddle wasn't usually a virtuoso exercise. The old fiddlers saw their task as a means to an end. If they could get people dancing, they were satisfied, and would get paid! Often, particularly in this century, they had no competition to give them the impetus to develop their technique. But, having said that, they were also keen to be seen as 'proper' musicians, and most cared greatly about how they played.

Unlike America, Scotland or Ireland, there were no commercial recordings of English fiddle music to provide a model for the younger players in the early part of this century. There was no 'English Michael Coleman'. Neither was there an English equivalent of Henry Whitter, recorded in New York during the early '20's, whose performances were reputedly so poor that they encouraged other traditional musicians to try to get on record, knowing full well that they could do better! Perhaps one of the effects of the first folk music revival, which was to convince many people that everything worthwhile had been collected and published by Cecil Sharp, Sabine Baring Gould, George Butterworth and their ilk, was also to blame.

There was little collecting between the wars, and the English record companies of that time didn't have A&R men like Frank Walker and Ralph Peer in the USA who were able to make a considerable commercial success of recording the music of ordinary working people. This led to the (American!) 'Country Music' behemoth! Perhaps the huge sales of records like 'The Fly be on the Turmut' and 'Buttercup Joe' should have alerted the companies to the potential market, but these records were simply seen as novelties.

The development of radio broadcasting in the UK also had a considerable effect, with the state monolith

of the Reithian BBC determining acceptable taste! We had to wait for a new generation of folk music collectors (including the BBC!) to start to take their portable disc and wire recorders into the country during and after WW2. Much of our view of the old music has to be filtered through these recordings which were often barely adequate. This was both due to technical problems in the recordings, and also the effects of age and lack of practice on the part of the performers, many of whom would have been at their peak twenty, or more, years earlier.

Despite all this, it's well worth making the effort, and listening. As Bob Marley said 'In this great tomorrow, you can't forget your past.....'

Recordings

Recordings of traditional English fiddle players aren't available at your local 'Our Price'! The list below isn't complete, but it will provide an overview. I'd be happy to hear of other recordings, and I'm also always pleased to talk about the music.

Player	Region	Recording
Rig-a-Jig-Jig	**S. England**	**Dance music of the south of England, from the new Topic anthology "The Voice of the People"** Topic TSCD659, edited by Reg Hall, 1998
Fred Pigeon	**Devon**	**Folktracks Folk in Focus FSA-060-087** rec. Peter Kennedy. 1951/1954
Stephen Baldwin	**Herefordshire**	**Stephen Baldwin - English Village Fiddler** Leader LED2068, rec. Russell Wortley.1954 **Folktracks FSA-45-115** rec. Peter Kennedy, 1952
Jinky Wells	**Oxfordshire**	**BBC Recorded Programmes Library (various)** **Columbia Records (never released)** **Folktracks FSA-90-084** rec. Peter Kennedy. 1952
Sam Bennett	**Warwickshire**	**Folktracks FSA-60-098**
William Hocken	**Cornwall**	**The Boscastle Breakdown** Topic 12T240, 1974, rec. BBC. 1943
Harry Lee	**Kent**	**The Boscastle Breakdown** Topic 12T240, 1974, rec. Steve Pennells & Ken Stubbs. 1962
Walter Bulwer	**Norfolk**	**The Boscastle Breakdown** Topic 12T240, 1974, rec. Bill Leader. 1962
Harry Cox	**Norfolk**	**Due to released on a new Topic double CD!** His fiddle playing was recorded by Frank Purslow in the late '50's
Fred Whent	**Suffolk**	**1970's Topic album (I want a copy!!)** Also on current Topic 'Hidden English' CD, rec. Keith Summers 1970's
Fred Whiting	**Suffolk**	**Earl Soham Slog (Veteran)**

Trinity Church

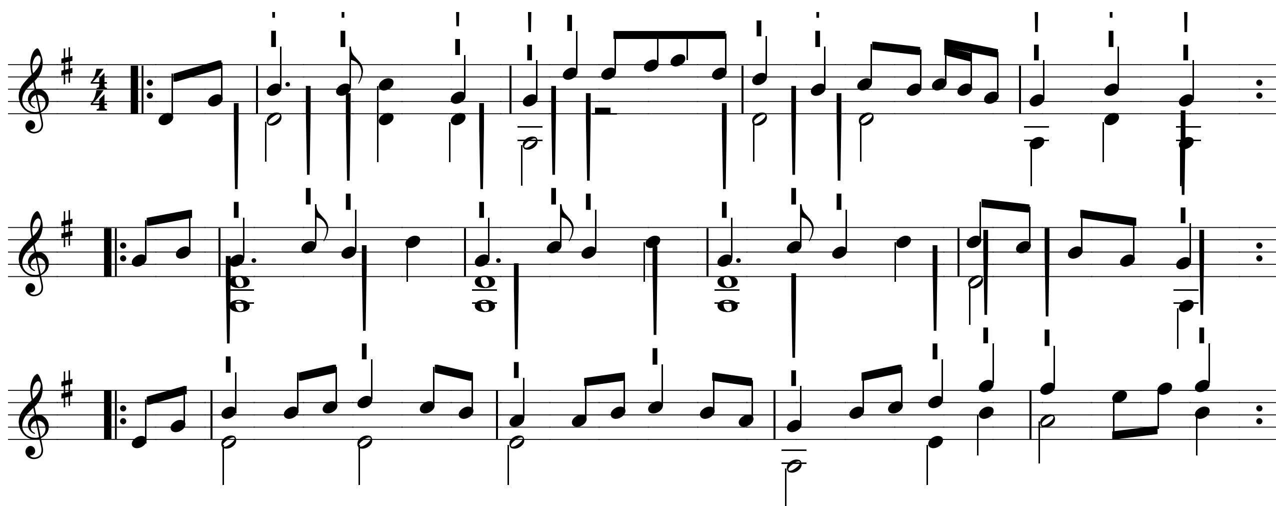
Barn Dance tune
which Chris Batram learnt from his Dad

The Greenwood Tree

Hardy MSS

Shave the Donkey/Sally Luker

Jack Hyde, Abingdon
Arnold Woodley, Bampton
Chris Bartram © 1998



Captain Wyke's Dance

Hardy MSS

The Wantage Hornpipe

Local stepping dance tune
cp Ricketts HP / Manchester HP / Pidgeon on the gate

The Dorset Hornpipe

Bob Cann via Peter Kennedy?
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

Rig-a-Jig

Fiddle tune from East Anglia
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

Untitled Hornpipe *(Morpeth Rant)*

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

The Liverpool Hornpipe

From versions by Bill Hocken, Boscastle, Cornwall
and Stephen Baldwin, Bishop Upton, Herefordshire

Untitled *a version of the Liverpool Hornpipe*

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

Schottishe Number One

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

3
Fine
D.S.

Schottische Number Two

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

The Coleford Jig

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

Cabbages & Onions

Stephen Baldwin, Herefordshire
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

D.C.

The Breakdown

Fiddle tune from East Anglia
Transcription © Chris Bartram

Woodland Flowers

Tunes from Fred 'Eely' Whent, Suffolk
Transcription © Chris Bartram 1998

A

B

C

D