

THE PURBECK VILLAGE QUIRE

By John Neimer

History

As society members will know, there are many groups of people in the county singing and playing music for every taste; from Handel oratorios to rock songs. One of the more homely and musically indigenous is the Purbeck Village Quire.

The spelling of the name is a deliberate reference to Thomas Hardy who used it in his description of village life in one of his more cheerful novels, 'Under the Greenwood Tree'. In that novel Hardy describes the place in villagers' lives for music and singing. It was the period just before the traditional providers of music for church services, the village musicians with their various instruments, were displaced by the new organs which began the move towards regulation and uniformity of hymn tunes and other church music that became part of the mid-Victorian religious reconstruction.

The village musicians with their violins, double basses, clarinets and other instruments, some of them improvised rather in the manner of the 1950 skiffle groups, played for church services and other local events. The music they played was handed down by one generation to the next or was obtained from itinerant traders at local markets, from people returning from rare visits to the cities or simply by exchanges with other village groups. Printed music was too expensive for many copies to be available except, perhaps, in rare instances where the "people in the big house" were interested.

Of course, in many parishes the band, although denied their church performances, continued to play in the pubs and for village functions and in this way many survived until the advent of the phonograph, and later radio, usurped their position as the principal music makers.

However that may be, as the village bands died out their music died with them and would have been lost forever had it not been for the activities of various interested people in the first half of the 20th Century.

A fine example of this work is that of Sybil Sheppard, LRAM, ATCL a music teacher of Langton Matravers. Sybil was instrumental (no pun intended) in recording the Worth Carols, these were a collection of carols composed by the Corben brothers who lived in the parish of Worth Matravers in the early 1800s. Howard Bower of Blacklands sang and played them for Sybil around 1950, and she arranged them in a four-part harmony and had them printed

Similarly, the Rev. A. W. Pickard-Cambridge found forty-two carols being sung in various parts of Dorset and collated them into a book that was published in 1926. In his life he visited many parts of Dorset and recovered hundreds of carols from which the forty-two were selected.

Many of the manuscripts and music sheets recovered were 'parts', that is the part for a single instrument and so, in order to produce a coherent musical record of the complete piece, some pains-taking work had to be done to knit them together.

The Purbeck Quire has an extensive library of these works, much of it under the heading of "West Gallery Carols". This is a reference to the west gallery built into the western end of village church naves where the band would play and the singers sing. Puddletown church, where the Hardy family worshipped, has such a gallery and there is another in St. Hubert's church, just off the A31 between Bere Regis and Wimborne at the turning to Lychett Matravers.

There is a strong association with folk dance music as the village bands used to play for weddings and other events, and it this genre, after the advent of church organs, that came to dominate their repertoire.

Modern Times

The Purbeck Village Quire was founded by Rollo Woods in 1989. Prior to that Rollo had researched the music of church bands combined with a study of Thomas Hardy's writings and the Hardy family's musical history.

The West Gallery Music Association (WGMA) was established in the early 1990s and, to inform its members and guide its development, Rollo wrote a book entitled "Good Singing Still". Here is an extract from his preface which will give the reader an idea of the association's wide appeal reflected in its membership:

"The WGMA is an unusual music society, for its members include singers from great choral societies, church choirs and folk clubs and instrumentalists at home in an orchestra and classically trained in an early music consort or from a ceildh band, often self-taught – yet these differences and their prejudices have not disrupted our mutual enjoyment of the music we have discovered. Discovered indeed, for almost every new Quire found that their local Record Office held MSS that had not been opened for perhaps 150 years, that there was scope for proper research and that their Quire could have as distinctive repertoire as any original church quire."

Clearly Rollo was one of those larger than life characters who enrich the lives of everyone they meet; a Morris dancer, musician and singer. It was his enthusiasm and dedication that attracted and inspired other people. He was an expert in English carol music and compiled a comprehensive collection of early examples. He co-edited (although most of the input was his) a book entitled 'Praise and Glory' a collection of psalm tunes from the era of church bands. To accomplish this he studied a huge number of manuscripts and hundreds of tunes which he accessed from private collections, museums, record offices and current West Gallery musicians. The production of the book required much study and decisions as to which tunes to attach to which psalms and which version of the words. This work was made more complex as most West Gallery psalms were not necessarily sung right through, or parts were even sung to different tunes and metres! All of the data is meticulously indexed and lists of sources are given, even of alternative tunes to each psalm.

In the above narrative I have tried to give the reader a glimpse of the huge amount of work and scholarship that lies behind the performances of the Quire. For me this knowledge adds to the pleasure of listening to the music and the singing and increases my appreciation of the performances.

The first revival of West Gallery music was in 1975 by Rollo, in collaboration with David Kettlewell; the first performance being at an evensong at Swanmore with the Rev. David Slater officiating. This event was enjoyed so much, particularly by the participants that they decided to form a formal group which eventually became the 'The Madding Crowd' a wonderful name for such a group, and I expect many readers will have heard and seen them at Sidmouth and other folk festivals.

After his retirement to Swanage in 1989 Rollo formed the Purbeck Village Quire, often joining-in with the band himself with bass concertina or flageolet. Both he and the Quire singers made regular appearances. Although, sadly, Rollo is no longer with us, the Quire still performs especially at folk festivals and particularly at Christmas when, under their musical director Stephen Earwicker, they do a whole series of performances of carols and music, interspersed with anecdotes of village life and historical notes to set the music and singing in context. For these performances they wear period dress and thus a performance of the Quire is not only entertaining but also educational!

They use, as an introduction and welcome to their performances, an extract from Rollo Wood's "Beginner's Guide to Singing West Gallery Carols" which I take the liberty of quoting here:

"Christmas would not be Christmas without carols. We sing them everywhere, even in the street. However, the carols we sing today were chosen for us by well-educated clergymen and the music by college-trained organists. 200 years ago things were very different, organs were rare – there were only three in Dorset in

1800 – and the singing was led by a band, the same band that would play for the Boxing Day dance, and the carol singers might have been singing folk songs during the week. They sang from manuscripts they had written, for most were too poor to buy hymn books; a penny for a pedlar’s carol sheet was their limit. They were independent and could choose the words and tunes they liked, and they could even write their own. We know of some 750 carol texts, set to over 2000 different tunes, with *While Shepherds Watched* topping the list with at least 100 (and some estimate 400) different tunes.”

I find the last two sentences of Rollo’s piece fascinating; being a musical ignoramus I would never have imagined that such a huge body of musical knowledge existed in the rural society of the time. Because most of the ‘music’ we cannot help hearing today, whether we want to or not, is so much aural wallpaper we do not appreciate how essential music and singing were in that older society. Yet, if one remembers the paintings from an even earlier age, by Brueghel perhaps, one can see how often the musicians and their instruments appear and how necessary they must have been to their communities.

And then one can imagine how a new vicar, trained in an Oxford college by the likes of “Soapy Sam Wilberforce” in the new evangelistic, modernising mode and appointed by a remote and magisterial bishop, would have reacted to the situation! How would he (or could he) tolerate a local group of rural peasants making up their own words for their carols or choosing any one of a 100 tunes to sing them to! And then to find that his similarly trained colleague in the next parish was hearing totally different words and music to what purported to be the same carol! One can imagine the gradually brewed battles and the eventual warfare that the village quires sadly lost.

Also, for the new vicar, there was the far from holy context of some of the carol singing; starting at the village pub (and every village had one then) and, no doubt, well-fortified against the cold, they went from house to house in the parish singing their message of good cheer “lustily and with good courage” as Rollo says later in the narrative and where the cottagers would reinforce their defences against the cold with home-brewed beer and cider.

I do hope that I have inspired those readers who have not already heard and seen a Purbeck Village Quire performance, to do so when they have the chance. You will be well rewarded! And, with Christmas approaching, I will surely see you at one of them!



The Purbeck Village Quire – Rollo Woods 2nd from left



The Quire in action. Stephen Earwicker conducting. Note the costumes!

There is a DVD of the Quire and CDs; both are available for purchase. These can be obtained by contacting the secretary, Mike Quinlan. For further details phone 01929 288045 or email: mike@quinlanfamily.co.uk. All proceeds go to the Purbeck Village Quire charity fund.

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