THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Morris Tunes Collected by James Madison Carpenter

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Materializing Morris Dancing: Tangible Aspects of an Intangible 331 Heritage

Elaine Bradtke Morris Tunes Collected by James Madison Carpenter



Figure 1: James Madison Carpenter (American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, PH 099).

Mississippi-born, Harvard-educated James Madison Carpenter (1888-1983; Figure 1) travelled around Britain between 1928 and 1935 with a cylinder recording machine, capturing songs, stories,

The Histories of Morris (EFDSS/HDS 2018), 161-175 © author & publishers

tunes and customs. Because his work falls chronologically between that of Cecil Sharp and Percy Grainger at the beginning of the twentieth century, and later field recordings made by the BBC in the middle of the century, it provides an important glimpse into this otherwise neglected era in British traditional culture. In 1972, the Library of Congress purchased Carpenter's collection for the American Folklife Center Archive. In the first few years of the twenty-first century it was digitized and catalogued. Despite his intentions, Carpenter's collection was never published, or until recently, fully indexed, therefore it represents a relatively untapped resource. An international team has been cataloguing and editing the Carpenter collection over the years and has just added the raw material to the EFDSS digital archives. This paper serves as a glimpse into some of the morris related materials in the collection.

The Fiddle Players

Carpenter made approximately sixty recordings of fiddle music from a handful of musicians, primarily in the English South Midlands. It is important to note however, the fiddlers were not recorded in the act of playing for dancing. In addition to the recordings, Carpenter took down words to some of the morris ditties (including a few from William Kimber), but no descriptions of the dances. There are photographs of the original Bampton side, the second Bampton side started by Wells, various groups of dancers with whom Sam Bennett was associated, some English Folk Dance Society dancers, and one as yet unidentified group of young female morris dancers. From further north there are photographs of Goathland Plough Stots, Kirkby Malzeard and Ampleforth sword dancers.

His three main sources of morris music were John Robbins of Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, Sam Bennett of Ilmington, Warwickshire and William Wells of Bampton, Oxfordshire. One additional tune was recorded from an unidentified musician near Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire. From outside this region there is an example of the Greatham (County Durham) sword-dance tune. Although Carpenter taught himself to transcribe music in order to notate the songs, he did not notate any of the fiddle tunes and made only one transcription of dance music (from a concertina player). As part of a long-term project to publish Carpenter's collection, the author has transcribed the fiddle tunes from the recordings. In the course of this work, it became possible to build up a picture of individual playing styles, through their use of drones, double-stops, slurs and ornaments. This became useful in correcting the finding aid for the collection, as Carpenter's own documentation was sometimes lacking in information or inaccurate.

Each of the three men bestowed a legacy to future generations of morris dancers and musicians, and Carpenter's collection is part of the larger picture. William Wells had a tremendous influence in Bampton and in the wider revival. He came from a family of dancers, started one of the extant Bampton teams, taught outside of Bampton, and was sought out by members of the Morris Ring and the English Folk Dance Society. Recordings of his playing along with his musings and recollections of morris dancing have been published and preserved in various archives. Bennett's influence was also wide, through the work of Mary Neal, his own teaching and performing in Ilmington and elsewhere, and his appearance in an early sound film. Robbins was more of a morris outsider, he did not perform or teach the dances, but his music found its way to a wider audience through print publications.

William Nathan (Jingy) Wells, 1868-1953, was morris dancer and fiddler for Bampton Morris (Oxfordshire). His family had been part of the morris in Bampton for generations, and he joined them in 1886 as fool. A few years later he started fiddling for the group, having taught himself to play on a homemade instrument. In 1925 there was an internal conflict among the Bampton dancers, and Wells left to form a side of younger men. He was regarded as an exceptionally good dancer and musician, capable of dancing a solo jig and playing at the same time. He continued to play for morris dancing after his sight failed and he ceased to dance. His last appearance with the Bampton Morris was on Whit Monday 1949 after more than 60 years of nearly continuous involvement.¹ Douglas Kennedy said of Wells:²

¹ Biographical details for Wells are taken from the following sources: Keith Chandler, '150 Years of Fiddle Players and Morris Dancing at Bampton', *Musical Traditions*, Article MT 051 <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/bampton.htm> [accessed 10 February 2010]; Douglas

He had such drive and rhythm. He lifted you up and kept you up. It was music to move to, not to listen to. He played in his own mode. Sometimes a violin-playing friend would take his fiddle and tune it for him. He always turned the knobs and untuned it again, for his music was different from theirs.

Wells was recorded several times in his life: by Carpenter in 1933 and by the BBC in 1936, 1937, and 1943. Russell Wortley recorded Wells in December 1936 (in London, these were issued as EFDSS recordings) and April 1937 (in Bampton, for the BBC) as well as another unknown BBC recordist in April 1937. Cecil Sharp (1909, 1914) and Clive Carey (1912) both notated tunes from Wells. An interview with Wells was published in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* in 1956 as an obituary.³

Sam Bennett (1865-1951) did not come from a family of morris dancers, but shortly after being given a second-hand fiddle, he learned the Ilmington tunes from a village pipe-and-tabor player named Thomas Arthur. He also learned Bampton morris tunes from Edward Butler (an occasional musician for the Bampton side), and following the split in the late 1920's when Wells started a new side, Bennett sometimes played for the old Bampton side. Bennett became involved in the revival of the Ilmington morris dances in the 1880s and continued to be active in one way or another for many decades. During his long life, he played the fiddle, sang, danced, assumed the role of the hobbyhorse, and taught traditional dances locally as well as in Wales, Devon, and in London. He appeared on several radio broadcasts, and a BBC programme was made about him. Deeply enthusiastic about traditional music and dance, he instructed groups of local children in maypole, social, and morris dancing, and lead social dances at events such as the Ilmington Empire Day celebrations. His playing style is quite rhythmic, with heavy use of drones and very lit-

³ Kennedy, 'Billy Wells of Bampton.'

Kennedy, 'Billy Wells of Bampton', *English Dance and Song*, 18.4 (1954), 115–16; William Wells, 'William Wells 1868-1953: Morris Dancer, Fiddler and Fool', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 8.1 (1956), 1–15; Keith Chandler, *Bampton Morris Dancers 1915-1945: The Newspaper Accounts* (Eynsham: Chandler Publications, 1986).

² Douglas Kennedy, 'Billy Wells of Bampton', *English Dance and Song*, 18.4 (1954), 115–16 (p. 116).

tle ornament. He often sang to his fiddle (morris ditties, ballads, and lyric songs) and like Wells, tended to tune the fiddle to lower than concert pitch. Bennett was a tireless promoter of the local traditional culture and became something of a celebrity. He attracted the attentions of folk-music collectors such as James Madison Carpenter, Cecil Sharp, Mary Neal, Percy Grainger, R. Kenworthy Schofield, Clive Carey, Alfred Williams and Peter Kennedy. Grainger, Carpenter, and the BBC made recordings of him. Mary Neal brought him to London to teach dances to the Espérance Girls' Club and perform with them. He was also a regular at the Stratford-on-Avon festivals. In 1926, Bennett and his Ilmington dancers (girls and young women) were the subject of a De Forest film Dances by Ilmington Teams in the Grounds of Peter De Montfort's House: Fiddler Sam Bennett.⁴ This early film (pre-dating *The Jazz Singer* by a year) features a simultaneous soundtrack throughout, allowing us to see and hear the dance and music. Both Wells and Bennett's playing appear on recordings issued by Peter Kennedy, but he did not make the original recordings.⁵

John (sometimes known as Jack or Tom) Robbins (1868-1948), was recruited by Ernest Richard D'Arcy Ferris (1855-1929) to provide music for his re-invention of the Bidford morris tradition.⁶ He and the dancers gave a series of public performances in 1885-1886. The Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers outlasted this brief flirt with theatrical morris and went on to appear at local events until the First World War. Robbins came from a musical family, was musically literate⁷ and was a proficient violinist when Ferris recruited him. Fer-

⁴ Dances by Ilmington Teams in the Grounds of Peter De Montfort's House: Fiddler Sam Bennett, dir. By Lee De Forest (1926), British Film Institute, 757445.

⁵ Biographical information on Sam Bennett is taken from the following sources: John H. Bird, *Sam Bennett the Ilmington Fiddler* (1952); Keith Chandler, *"Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles": The Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands 1660–1900* (London: Folklore Society, 1993); Elaine Bradtke, 'Sam Bennett: A Case Study in the English Fiddle Tradition from James Madison Carpenter's Ethnographic Field Collection', in *Driving the Bow: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic, 2* (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2008), pp. 57–73; Keith Chandler, 'The Archival Morris Photographs – 4: "The Old 'Uns and the Young 'Uns", Bampton, Oxfordshire, 1927', *English Dance and Song*, 47.3 (1985), 26–28.

 ⁶ Roy Judge, 'D'Arcy Ferris and the Bidford Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, 4.5 (1984), 443–80.
⁷ Keith Chandler, 'Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins of Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire (1868 - 1948)', *Musical Traditions, Article MT 189*, 2006
http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/mus19_16.htm> [accessed 13 January 2010].

ris felt the pipe and tabor was more suited to the Shakespearean theme, so Robbins was sent to Ilmington to learn to play the pipe and tabor, and acquire the morris tune repertoire from James John Ar-thur (1828-1906)⁸. It proved difficult to obtain a pipe for him to use on a permanent basis, therefore Robbins often played fiddle instead.⁹ Robbins's morris career was shorter than that of Bennett and Wells, and he attracted less attention from collectors. Sharp notated and published some material from Bidford, retracting them in later editions after discovering they were not as old as he originally thought. Mary Neal published a Bidford dance in the first part of the *Espérance Morris Book*,¹⁰ and in 1907, John Graham published his notations of the Bidford tunes and description of the dances.¹¹

All three men were the subject of varying levels of interest on the part of collectors, revivalists, and authors of books, but importantly, James Madison Carpenter was the only person who recorded the playing of all of them. It is often said about recordings of traditional morris fiddlers, Wells especially, that they were made when the men were past their prime, and out of practice. However, Carpenter's recordings captured all three musicians in fine form, and while Wells and Bennett were still actively performing with morris dancers.

Repertoire

Of the morris tunes in Carpenter's collection, Bennett and Wells had the largest number of tunes. Thirteen are from Bennett (plus another dozen songs with fiddle and social-dance tunes) sixteen from Wells and ten from Robbins. The overlap between the three is enlightening. All three men played two tunes, 'Constant Billy' and 'Shepherd's Hey'. Bennett and Wells shared seven tunes in common, Bennett and Robbins shared four tunes, and Wells and Robbins shared three tunes.

⁸ Keith Chandler, "Ribbons, Bells and Squeaking Fiddles": The Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands 1660–1900 (London: Folklore Society, 1993), pp. 140-41.

⁹ Chandler, "Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins."

¹⁰ Mary Neal, The Espérance Morris Book: A Manual of Morris Dances, Folk-Songs and Singing Games, 2 parts (London: Curwen, 1910-12), I, 7, 20; II, 2, 11, 30.

¹¹ John Graham, Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dances: With an Introduction, Description of the Dresses and the Dances, and Hints on Adaptation to Schools (London: J. Curwen, 1907).

Some of the overlapping repertoire between Wells and Bennett is due to Bennett being invited to play for the old Bampton team after the split. Carpenter happened to be in the area during one of the years in which both the old Bampton side and Wells's new side danced out.¹² He photographed both groups in the same location, probably on Whit Monday, 1933. The Carpenter collection includes several photographs of Bennett playing for Bampton dancers (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Sam Bennett playing at Bampton, 1933. (American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, PH 034).

Bennett was well travelled and knew quite a few tunes outside of the Ilmington and Bampton morris repertoire, including a few Playford era country dance tunes. There is a close musical relationship between the tunes shared between Robbins and Bennett.¹³ Elsewhere there has been some discussion of possible borrowing between the

¹² Keith Chandler, *Bampton Morris Dancers 1915 - 1945: The Newspaper Accounts* (Eynsham: Chandler Publications, 1986), pp. 25–26.

¹³ Elaine Bradtke, 'John Robbins and the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Tune Repertoire', in *Routes and Roots*, Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic, 4 (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2012), pp. 34–50.

Ilmington and Bidford traditions (the hobby horse being a highly visible similarity).

One example of this may be the tune for the Ilmington dance 'Bumpas o' Stretton', which is the same tune that is used for Bidford's 'Abraham Brown'. Since Robbins learned at least part of his repertoire from an Ilmington musician, it is not surprising that there are similarities between his and Bennett's renditions of tunes. But it is not always possible to tell which way the borrowing went.

Playing Style, What we Can Learn from Carpenter's Recordings

In a letter to Kitteredge, dated 21 November 1933, Carpenter reports that he had collected 'at least two score of morris-dance and folkdance tunes, with nearly a score of the droll, enigmatic word-sets that were sung in snatches to the accompaniment of the tunes'.¹⁴ The technology that Carpenter was using was not capable of recording the fiddlers while they were playing for dancers. Indeed, the portable dictating machine that Carpenter had was not designed for recording instrumental music at all. The sound was funnelled to the cutting stylus by means of a speaking tube, held close to the speaker's mouth. Carpenter must have used some ingenuity to record Sam Bennett's singing and fiddle playing on the same track. In order to eke more recording time out of his cylinders, Carpenter habitually slowed down the recording speed (which makes the pitch higher and speed faster on playback). The wax cylinders themselves were not meant for long-term use or storage, and because of his working methods and subsequent storage in poor conditions, Carpenter's field recordings are notable for their generally dreadful sound quality. Carpenter did make disc copies of most of his cylinders, and sometimes the disc survived when the cylinder did not. When the Library of Congress digitized the collection, they included both the original cylinders and the disc copies. The discs have a fainter sound, but it is possible to

¹⁴ 'The James Madison Carpenter Collection', American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, MS p. 06395.

compare the relevant tracks from both formats and fill in some of the gaps.

Despite the issues surrounding the speed and pitch of the performances and the signal to noise ratio, there is a lot of information to be extracted from the recordings. For instance, the notes, as fingered, may be derived through the reference points provided by open strings and drones. Due to the deterioration of the cylinders, surface noise often masks the sound of bow changes, but it is still sometimes possible to hear slurs and tied notes. Ornaments, when present are fairly easy to hear, especially if the listener uses digital slow down and loop software.

After thorough listening, some generalizations about the fiddlers are possible. William Wells was the most nimble-fingered of the three; his playing is full of ornaments and double stops. Sam Bennett had a more straightforward, driving style and he supplemented the melody with lots of open-string droning. John Robbins had a lighter touch; he used fewer drones and practically no ornamentation, in line with his more formal musical background.¹⁵ He also played some tunes in a way that shows the influence of the pipe and tabor. Based on these differences in style, it is possible to identify the performer on the recording when Carpenter's attributions were absent or incorrect.

If the speed and pitch are adjusted so that the speaking voice sounds reasonable (admittedly, this is an educated guess), Carpenter's recordings of Wells illustrate his preference for tuning flat. He used to sing while playing his fiddle (this is sometimes audible in Carpenter's recordings), and the low tuning suited his vocal range and gives his violin a distinctive sound. He also embellished his tunes with little runs of grace notes or ornaments, and added drones and double stops to reinforce the sound. Writing specifically about Carpenter's recordings of Wells, Townsend states 'The tone is well-produced, the intonation reliable, and all the stylistic features clear, and the playing is of an intricacy hardly hinted at even in the 1936 recordings'.¹⁶ Photographs from the Carpenter collection and elsewhere show that he

¹⁵ Chandler, 'Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins.'

¹⁶ Dave Townsend, 'When James Met Billy : The Earliest Recordings of Jinky Wells', *Fiddle On Magazine*, 21 (2006), 10–13 (p. 12).

used a relaxed, dropped-wrist position, no shoulder or chin rest (Figure 3). His bow was pulled quite tightly, to the point of lacking a reverse curve (much like a baroque bow). This larger gap between the wood and horsehair makes it easier to play on multiple strings simultaneously (Figure 4). The playing position and tuning are indicative of a fiddler who, if he had any formal training, went on to devise his own technique.



Figure 3: William Wells's playing stance. (American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, PH 030).



Figure 4: William Wells's bow. (American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, PH 049).

Sam Bennett's recordings for Carpenter cover a wider spectrum. Not limited to the expected morris dance tunes, he played social dance music, ballads, and quite a number of humorous songs. Many of his songs were based on dance tunes, and even in the case of the songs not associated with dance, he played the fiddle before, after or even during singing. In addition to the Ilmington tunes, he knew enough of the Bampton tunes to be able to accompany the morris dancers. Of the three, his style is what one might expect from a morris fiddle player. Rhythmic, with little embellishment, but liberal use of drones, his playing is emphatic rather than expressive (Figure 5). Though he rested his fiddle on his collarbone, photos of him playing show that he doesn't hold it with his chin, and his bow, unlike Wells's, retains the reverse curve. Bennett occupies the middle ground between Wells and Robbins, both in repertoire and in playing style.



Figure 5: Sam Bennett. (American Folklife Center Archive, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001, PH 036).

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Figure 6: John Robbins and the Bidford side (London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil J. Sharp MSS, Photograph Collection D21).

Carpenter's recordings from Robbins represent that of the Bidford side, as Ferris assembled it from various sources (Figure 6). His tunes feature very stable melodies, with little variation on the repeats. Robbins used little to no ornamentation, and fewer dotted notes than Bennett and Wells. His playing also lacks the drive found in that of Wells and Bennett, and this may be because he was no longer involved in playing for morris dancing at the time of recording. Robbins learned and performed at least some of these tunes on the pipe and tabor, and this has left its mark on his fiddle playing. Passages where Robbins plays what appear to be transpositions into a lower register, or alterations to avoid chromatic notes may be due to the restrictions of the tabor pipe. Conversely, Robbins's use of the raised pitches in the B section of 'Constant Billy' (see Figure 7) suggests that this tune was not learned on the tabor pipe, but rather on the fiddle. He also played it in D, higher than the common key of G used by Bennett and Wells. There are no photos of Robbins in the Carpenter collection, but from other sources we know that he used a fairly formal playing position.



Constant Billy

Figure 7: 'Constant Billy' comparison of Bennett, Robbins and Wells.

Looking at the specific example of 'Constant Billy', the differences in musical style become clear. Robbins's line (the notation is transposed for ease of comparison) is sparse, undotted, and lacking ornament. Wells and Bennett dot many of the strong beats and add drones and double stops. Wells embellishes his tune with extra semiquavers. Finally, Wells added an extra beat at the end of his phrases, to accommodate the different steps used in a particular version of the dance. In a discussion of 'Constant Billy' Wells stated that 'They used to do it three different ways' incorporating different steps and jumps into the choreography.¹⁷ This is not noted in Sharp's published dance notations.¹⁸ The version that Carpenter recorded is for one of the alternate ways of performing this dance.

Conclusion

The foregoing has merely scraped the surface of what is in the Carpenter collection. Certainly, the morris material is a small but significant segment of the whole. While there is a great deal of raw data such as photographs, song texts and sound recordings, without the work of other researchers such as Keith Chandler, Roy Dommett, Roy Judge, John Forrest, and Mike Heaney it would be much harder to put these items from the Carpenter collection in context and make sense of them. Between these three contributors we can begin to see a web of interrelationships, hints at how the village traditions shifted and evolved with the movements of musicians. We may never know how extensive this was in earlier generations, but Carpenter's collection opens a window into the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century south Midlands morris.

 ¹⁷ William Wells, 'William Wells 1868-1953: Morris Dancer, Fiddler and Fool', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 8.1 (1956), 1–15 (p. 5).
¹⁸ Cecil Sharp (with H.C. MacIlwaine), *The Morris Book, Part III*, 2nd ed. (London: Novello, 1924), p.49.