

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL  
BLAKE MUSEUM



BRIDGWATER TOWN AND  
FOLKSONGS  
*BY DAVID SUTCLIFFE*



Photo courtesy the English Folk Dance and Song Society  
Jack Barnard, aged 45 of West Street,  
Bridgwater, sang 49 folk songs to Cecil  
Sharp 1906-16

*Introduction*

Cecil Sharp, in conjunction with his friend and lyrics editor the Revd Charles Marson, collected a total of 195 folk songs from 40 singers in Bridgwater town between 1904 and 1916. Some songs were complete with words and tunes, while others were merely fragments or interesting variants. Of these songs, 16 were published in the 5 volume series of *Folk Songs from Somerset* (1904-1909) and a further 82 songs have been published elsewhere. The Bridgwater songs represent almost 12% of Sharp's total Somerset song collection.

Sharp was a music teacher in London and was looking for new songs to teach to his pupils. In August 1903 he went to stay at Marson's vicarage in Hambridge and heard his gardener singing the folksong 'The

Seeds of Love'. There were, of course, no tape recorders at the time and the new-fangled phonographs were not widely used either. Being a musician, Sharp simply wrote down the words and tune by ear. He and Marson next located and notated a number of local singers in the Hambridge and Langport areas. Moving about by bicycle and train, Sharp would eventually scour the whole county amassing over 1600 songs. His original notebooks have now all been digitised online.



Photo courtesy the English Folk Dance and Song Society  
Cecil Sharp

*What is the significance of this collection  
and why Bridgwater?*

Although there were folksong collectors before Sharp (e.g. the Revd Baring-Gould in Devon), Sharp had a particular mission to 'rescue' folksongs (and morris dances) from oblivion and to reintroduce them into the cultural life of the nation. It was a time for nationalism in music to counteract the domination of German music (Bach,

Beethoven and Brahms). Vaughan Williams and Holst in England, Grieg in Norway and Bartok in Hungary were all interested in reconnecting with folk melodies. The (English) Folk Song Society was founded in 1898 for this purpose and Sharp was a committee member.

Sharp's targets were the older members of village communities, who had learned folk songs from their families or friends as well as from the 'broadside' ballad sheets that were printed in London, Bristol or Exeter and circulated at markets and fairs. These sheets were 'words only' and singers drew on a store of remembered tunes and airs or invented their own. Sharp rarely collected in towns or industrial centres where music hall songs and early gramophone music were making inroads into the repertoire of singers. So it was something of a departure for him to try Bridgwater. His first visit in September 1904 was not promising, finding just one singer - Mrs Harriet Jarvis, a brickyard labourer's widow aged 70, living in one of the 'courts' in West Street. But he returned a year later and on 10 subsequent visits. The average age of the Bridgwater singers turned out to be exactly 70.

### *Sailors*

Because of its connections to Bristol's coastal trade and (beyond that) to deep water shipping, Bridgwater would have welcomed sailors with wide sea-going experience. At its peak in the 1880s the port of Bridgwater received 3,600 ships per year. Its 53 pubs and 28 beer houses no doubt absorbed many tales and songs of adventure and disaster. Of the 195 folk songs collected, 43 (22%) were songs about the sea - press gangs, battles and drownings. Included were 11 shanties (work-songs to raise anchor or hoist sails). Of the 40 singers, 4 were sailors and 3 were quay labourers. The sailors were Tom Griffiths, aged 78, a Trinity pilot for 40 years; Henry Rapsey,

aged 64; Henry Bailey, aged 71; and Richard Olding, aged 69. All these men would have been of working age during the 'golden age of sail' (1840-90), when merchant ships plied the global trade routes in clippers and packet ships before steam engines really took over. Shanty-men were employed on deck to sing out the rhythms of the 'call-and-response' songs that drove the crews on in their heavy tasks. Some of these songs drew on 'black' tunes from the cotton stevedores of the southern states of the USA, and the Mississippi steamboats. Examples collected in Bridgwater include: - two versions each of Tiddy i-o\* and Rio Grande; plus Tommy's gone to I-lo; Leave her Johnny; Blow the Man down; Sallador (Shenandoah); Lowlands\*; Old Stormalong; and Heaving the lead.

\*These two songs were published by Sharp in his book *English Folk Chanteys*, 1914.

Also you can hear Somerset shanties on a 3 volume set of CDs called 'Short Sharp Shanties' available from [www.umbermusic.co.uk/SSSnotes.htm](http://www.umbermusic.co.uk/SSSnotes.htm) These are based on Cecil Sharp's notations of John Short ('Yankee Jack') of Watchet.



Photo courtesy the English Folk Dance and Song Society  
Henry Rapsey, shanty-man

### *Brickmen and Labourers*

By the time he returned to Bridgwater on August 21<sup>st</sup> 1905, Sharp had already bagged 460 songs elsewhere with mainly pastoral themes – ploughboys, gypsies, chance romantic encounters. The (slight) majority of his informants hitherto had been women, some involved in the gloving or shirt trades. But the clear majority of the new Bridgwater singers were men (158 songs from 26 males). Some were sailors, as we have seen, but others were brickyard workers (9 of them). Whether they sang as they worked in their handcrafting of bricks and tiles is not recorded.

In fact the man who contributed most songs (49) to Sharp was John Barnett (or Jack Barnard, as he was recorded in a later census). John was a stone-breaker and road labourer, aged 45. He had been crippled since birth and was actually illiterate but had a fantastic memory and a repertoire of 150 songs in all. John lived in West Street and introduced Sharp to a number of singers in that district

#### *Union Workhouse*

Sharp met 5 of his singers in the Union Workhouse in Northgate and collected 21 songs over 5 different visits. He must have struck up a rapport with Thomas Hallett, the Master to have such easy access to the 64 male inmates there at the time. Two singers were formerly shoemakers (George Radford 76 and William Mantle 72). A third Robert Dibble, aged 85, a former brick-worker, gave 6 songs to Sharp and died within weeks of his visit.

#### *Women and children*

Like the men, the female singers were of a mature age, the oldest being 85. The only occupation noted was for Mrs Ellen Jarrett, aged 54, laundress of West Street. She sang 9 songs for Sharp. Near to her in Halswell Lane lived Mrs Elizabeth Porter, aged 49, a brick-maker's wife. Her daughter Lily (aged

11) sang 2 children's songs for Sharp – Jenny Lengle & Three Dukes come a riding.

#### *How exactly did Sharp meet all these singers?*

It was Sharp's practice to write to the vicars of any new parish that he wished to visit and ask them about likely singers. This was surprisingly effective. Many clergymen in those days did visit their parishioners in their homes and might indeed know of one or two people with reputations as singers. Sharp's friend the Revd Marson might also have secured introductions on his behalf. In the second volume of 'Folk Songs from Somerset' Sharp particularly acknowledges the help of the Revd AH Powell & the Revd W. Warren (vicar and curate respectively of St Mary's church Bridgwater). Many older singers, feeling somewhat overtaken by the new sounds of the music halls, may have been pleased to meet a collector who was genuinely interested in their old songs. They probably referred him onto other singers they knew.

#### *Legacy*

Whether or not Sharp achieved his own objectives remains an open question but he did reveal an aspect of Bridgwater's cultural life that is still available to us today via his (digitised) notebooks and the photographs that he took of his singers. Most importantly some of the Bridgwater songs are still being sung and reinterpreted by today's musicians.

#### *Photographs*

There are photographs of the following singers in the (English) Folk Song Society library:

James BALE;  
Jack BARNARD;  
William BRIFFETT;  
James CREEDY;  
Tom GRIFFITHS;  
Henry RAPSEY

## Cecil Sharp's original notebooks

These have now all been digitised online:

<https://www.vwml.org/vwml-about-us/vwml-projects/vwml-the-full-english>. So you can search any of the Bridgwater songs and singers with the click of a mouse!

David Sutcliffe is the author of the biography of Cecil Sharp's collaborator, the Rev Charles Marson; *The Keys of Heaven: The Life of Revd Charles Marson, Socialist Priest & Folk Song Collector*, 2010,

Copies may be purchased from the Museum shop



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Version 1: 30 March 2018