

ENGLISH DANCE & SONG

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Bill Gibbons

Barge Dancer

This article is an edited version of a recording made by Dave and Toni Arthur at Bill Gibbons' house at Burscough in June, 1979. Thanks to Sam Sherry who guided us through the wilds of Lancashire to Bill's house.



Photo: Toni Arthur

I was born on the sixth of October, 1898 at Ring O' Bells Latham, just two or three miles down from where I live now at Burscough. We moved up to Burnley for quite a while and I finished my schooling there. Before I started full time work I used to do half a day at school and half a day in a factory weaving, then when I was twelve I left St. Stephens School and started on the Barges with me dad. They used to take the boys out of school, and take them on this job on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, and they gave us a man's wage. Me and me dad were paid £2. 5. 2d., £1. 4. 2d. me father and and a guinea me. We used to go right through Yorkshire, the barges carried everything, wheat to Blackburn, cotton to Burnley, wool to Bradford, sugar to Leeds, Palmolive oil, tinned salmon, we'd take all that; right through to Goole I've been. It was hard work, I used to carry fourteen score when I was fifteen year old, that's fourteen twenty pound bags, that's how they used to put flour, in bags, at one time and I've put forty-six tons of two hundredweight bags of sugar over me back in an hour and a half at Tate and Lyles at Liverpool, wet through with sweat you know. Sometimes we were away a month at a time living and eating on the barge. Me mother used to make up a basket of food, oh a big basket, full of pies, meat, cakes and all kinds, and she'd send it up to us either on one of the 'specials' or a 'Bradford Flyer', they were fast boats that travelled day and night, four handed specials, and three handed flyers, two men working and one or two sleeping, right through they went, and they'd pass on our baskets and take messages.

After I started work we moved back to Ring O' Bells, and there were sixteen of us in one house, fourteen children and me mam and dad. At that time everyone round about here were boat people, it was a canal village d'you see, and a lot of them at that time could dance, I think I'm the only one left now. I just make up steps as I goes along. I've got no names for them, I'm not tutored in that way. I just watched me father's feet, I thought I'll try that and I'll try that and eventually I got the mastery of it. Sometimes I try out a different step, although I think I'm getting a bit too old now. When we was on the barges we used to dance to the beat of the engine, if you went in shallow water it slowed down, and you just danced a bit slower, d'you see? You used to get frozen feet just standing all the time, and the dancing used to keep you warm.

I think I do more of a Cumberland type dance, it's a heel and toe dance with no shuffle step like in normal Lancashire Clog Dancing. I don't know where my father learnt his dancing but his brothers dance as well, and he had us dancing when we were two or three year old. I started with a couple of chairs, holding on and balancing myself. We used to dance to me dad's melodeon, hornpipes mostly, me next brother and me. I don't get much time for it now. My father used to play the melodeon and waltz around and dance at the same time. He was only a little man but he'd put his melodeon around behind his partner's back and play and waltz at the same time. Apart from the melodeon the fiddle was another popular instrument to dance to, a lot of people could knock out a bit of a jig.

They used to have talent competitions where the Stanley Club is now, it used to be a picture house run by Mr. Horrocks, and they held these competitions for clog-dancing, singing and different things. Me and my brother went on there a few times and had a bit of a go. The way they used to judge us clog dancers was from underneath the stage, they'd be underneath to hear if you made any false steps or anything, of course I was a lot younger then. It was quite common round here in the local families, doing a turn, dancing and owt. There was a right comedian called Mr. Lawson, he was better than many's as on stage and telly now. He had a tash (moustache) as he could twist and turn right up, a real one. Then there was Mrs. Walker, she were a good singer, she'd do 'Annie Laurie' and stuff like that, old time songs . . . Oh yes there used to be one or two good singers and dancers round here then.

Of course in those days they danced with clog-irons on, they could really make the sparks fly. I remember one time when I was at school at Burnley, we used to come down the road with

clog-irons on making sparks with 'em; anyway when I got in one day I said, 'I've got a clog iron off, dad.' He says, 'take your clog off I'll put it back on for you, sit down there.' I took the clog off and he gave me such a belt the side of th'earhole with it. He said, 'I'll learn you for making sparks.' He'd seen me do it d'you see! There used to be a clog-makers shop here in Burscough for ordinary working clogs, I've still got an old pair for gardening in. On the old barges we had wooden decks and the clog-irons didn't slip, but later when they made them with steel decks we had to have rubbers put on. I got my red dancing clogs from Turner the clog-maker over at Clitheroe, but I've put an aluminium plate on the heel to improve the sound.

I learnt a bit of melodeon from my father. He had a melodeon from Ward's of Liverpool, single row with stops on top, they were very reasonable about 12/6 when I was a boy, they called them 'Wards'. When my dad put it down I'd pick it up, he'd take it off us like, you know, thinking I was spoiling the reeds or something, but I got going a bit on it. Then when I was about twelve me and me dad met a man that was going to America and he had a Wheatstone Anglo-Concertina for sale, he actually had two concertinas the other was an English style which I really wanted but he wouldn't sell it. I said to me dad I'd like that concertina, so I got the Anglo off him. I think we gave him 2 or 3 pounds for it. We sent it off to Wheatstones in London and had it repaired, and I've had it tuned since and brightened up a bit, and it's in good order yet. My father played all kinds of tunes, hornpipes, the old time songs, music-hall songs, he used to sing a lot of those old songs like, 'One's Got Hair Of Silver Grey'. Oh yes he did all those. I like old time music-hall, I'm not very keen on modern pop music, not particularly struck like; the ones I like are Vesta Tilley, Anne Shelton—nice voice, Donald Peers—he's dead isn't he?, Hetty King, George Formby, all them. I used to go to the music-hall a lot, the variety at Leeds, Alhambra at Bradford, Liverpool Empire. I play some of those tunes meself, 'Keep Right On To The End Of The Road', 'Pop Goes The Weasel', Schottisches, The Keel Row, and I do 'The Bells' just a bit, not a lot like. A little while ago I brought a big piano accordion from a man who was going back to Scotland, I said 'don't let it go, I'll buy it off you' and I've learnt myself a little bit, you can pass many an hour with them at night. 'Among My Souvenirs', 'If You Ever Go Across The Sea To Ireland', 'Oh Oh Antonio', 'Amazing Grace' Oh they're all good tunes.

Then of course I played concertina for the local page-eggors, we were all dressed up with special clothes for the job. There was about six of us altogether, the handsome youth, the old lady, sailor brave, old toss pot . . . It's been done every Good Friday. I've known it ever since I've been a boy.

PACE EGG SONG

I beg you leave kind gentlemen
And you ladies of renown,
For we are coming a-pace-egging,
And I wish to make it known.
Now ladies all and gentlemen,
To you we'll give a song
I'll call upon our com-er-ades,
We'll call them one by one.

Chorus: Because we're jovial lads,
We'll do no harm wherever we may go,
For we are coming a-pace-egging
You're very well to know.

Now the next that does come in,
Oh he is a noble youth,
He courts all the pretty fair maids,
And he always tells the truth.
He says he'll never deceive them,
But he's always kind and true,
For day and night its his delight,
And we're always in one mind . . .

(The song continues almost identically to the version collected by Fred Hamer from Emma Vickers which appears in Garners Gay p.58.)

I used to go in to the house first playing the concertina then they'd march in and take their turns at the song, then they'd dance as well, they'd skip around in their clogs tipping their toes. They all had different costumes, the old lady had a big hat with flowers on, and they black their faces up as well. My costume was made for me by a lady in Skelmersdale, who I was teaching to clog dance, I had an old fashioned 'Blocker' (Bowler) and a white costume with pink and green flowers on. I was Toss-Pot so I had a hump-back and a pigtail, I used to have to put pins in the pigtail to stop the children pulling it off. Far back they used to do it in the company boatyard, old Tom Spencer and all them did it, anybody they could get, not just boat people, they'd have a collecting box and they'd go all round the pubs. It weren't just men in the play women did it too, Emma Vickers, Lily Bradley, Mrs. Babbuts (?), and a young feller from Junction Lane, he was lovely youth, they were all in it.

Old Emma Vickers was a *real* character, her father was on the canal and he played the fiddle, she played melodeon in the play. The Rufford line used to get frozen up in winter and Emma used to sit on the side of the bank with her melodeon and play the Pace-Egg Song and the children used to go round singing. She was a good dancer in her time but her legs swelled out d'you see. She had a Morris Troupe of young girls years ago, her daughter Vera was leader for them. There were no male Morris dancers round here then. Of course you see them now, I saw men dancing at a garden party last Saturday.

Brass bands were very popular round here, my wife's father played trombone in the Ormskirk Band, he were always a bandsman. Then around Liverpool you got concertina bands. There was a good one at Bootle. They used to come out every May-Day. I've seen them many a time, they used to go round parading. Me father's uncle used to have a coal yard and they used to get a big cob of coal off him and put it on a wagon, nearly a ton weight, and decorate it up and go all round the streets in Bootle with the concertina band playing away. Oh aye I've seen some do's on the first of May.

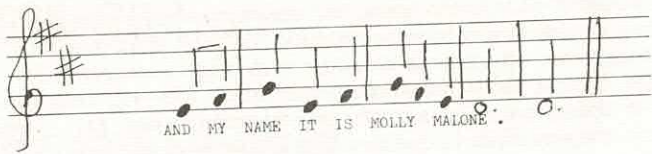
Then of course we had different games and things at certain times of the year, cricket, a bit of boxing, 'jacks'—but that was more of a girl's game, and iron hoops which we got made at the Blacksmiths, the posh ones had hooks fitted on to push them with, we called them 'Trundles'. When we tied up at Bradford, there'd be so many barges that the lads used to all get on the spare ground and play football or sometimes 'Peggy'—that's a bit of wood with a point on, you hit it on the point and rise it up and give it a clout while it's in the air, we called it 'Peggy', we'd make our own 'Peggies' out of a stake, cut a point and hit it with a sort of broom handle.

At Christmas we'd all go carolling with a concertina or a melodeon, you know a bit of music, children *and* adults and then when we got home we'd have a sing song and a bit of fun with me dad playing the melodeon. Perhaps we'd do 'Molly Malone' it's a song *and* dance really, it was very popular round here.

I'M A DECENT GOOD OLD IRISH BODY

AND I COME FROM THE COUNTY OF TYRONE

I LIKE A GOOD GLASS OF OLD TODDY



MOLLY MALONE

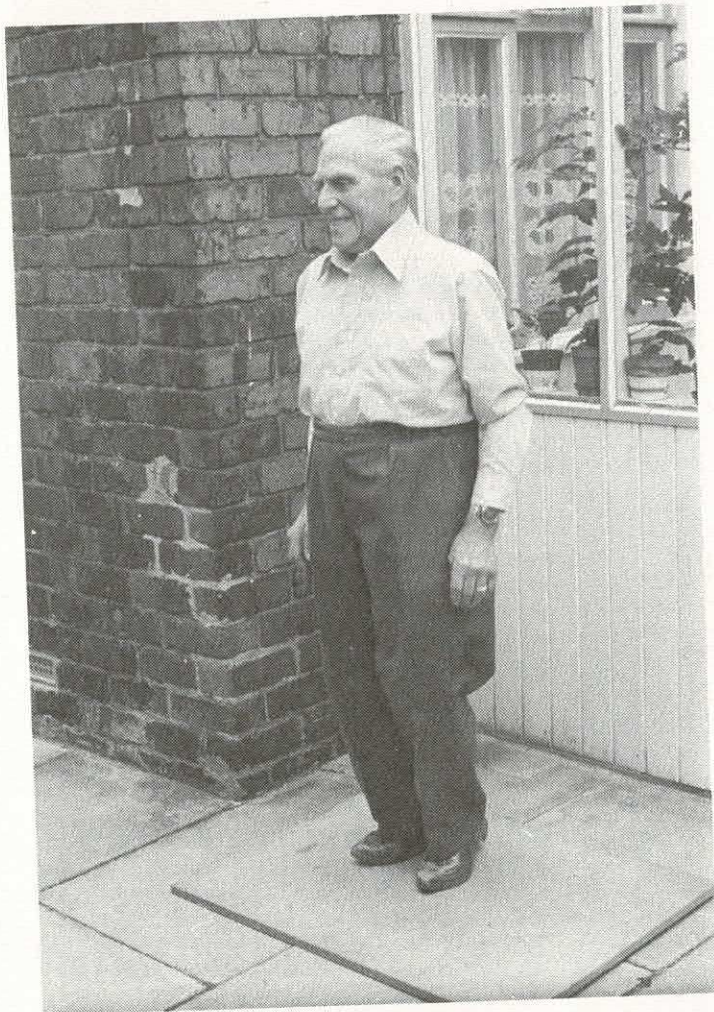
Now I am a decent good old Irish body
 And I come from the county Tyrone,
 I like a good glass of old Toddy,
 And my name it is Molly Malone.

Chorus: I can sing, I can dance like a starling,
 By the youngsters I've never been beat,
 In a whisper I'll tell you my darling,
 I'm as good as their making them yet.

STEPPING

Some folk they're all out for scandal,
 Some say I'm dirty at home,
 But where there's a goose there's a gander,
 And don't suit Old Molly Malone.

They say that the older the fiddle,
 The sweeter and better the tune,
 But the bow must have plenty of resin,
 Or it won't suit Old Molly Malone.



I don't do it so much now, well I'm eighty-one come October,
 but we've certainly had some good do's.

BACUP REVISITED by Sarah Ledbury

On Easter Saturday we made what has become over the last ten years an annual trans-Pennine pilgrimage to Bacup to see the Britannia Coconut Dancers. This traditional event is something we look forward to with anticipation, but after this year I would like to think that we shall not be going again, for what was purely a local event ten years ago has become the "Folk Mecca" of Lancashire. The general intrusion of people like us has utterly and completely spoiled the day for many of the inhabitants of this small town.

There were six of us in all as John and myself were joined, as we have been over the last few years, by four friends from Sussex. We arrived later than we intended (you try getting John out of bed on a Saturday morning!) and joined the dancers at the Fire Station, where we were immediately struck by the vast number of people sporting sophisticated recording equipment and behaving in a generally intrusive manner. These "academic folklorists" have multiplied out of hand and so keen are they to "record" the event that they think nothing of disrupting the dance and insisting on standing in front of the local crowd, most of whom then find their view completely blocked.

When the dancers left the Fire Station and started wending their way to town we were struck by the fact that there was far less processional dancing and more walking than in previous years, although there were more stops on the way for garland dances. There were several new men in the side and we gathered they were from the town. They perhaps did not know the dances as well as they might, but the important thing is that they are continuing the tradition. Leader John Flynn "talked" new members through to start with before taking a more active part later in the day.

On their arrival in town the dancers were immediately surrounded by a massive crowd swollen by the uncharacteristically fine, warm weather. There must have been a large "bag" taken that day! This year the police were more in evidence and they did an excellent job against the odds, but as the day progressed tempers became strained as the crowd refused to take notice of their directions and endangered life and limb in a mad dash to keep up with the Coconutters. After lunch at The Joiners Arms the team split and did their round of the town pubs before another display in the Square and then proceeding down the Rossendale towards Rawtenstall.

On the subject of town pubs: they were packed with folkies with many and various instruments, who were intent on turning the day into a glorified folk festival. The tunes were ragged and Linda even heard a rendering of "Tip Top Polka," one of the Nutters' own dance tunes! I doubt if any of these folkies were in any way interested in the dancing and if they wanted session music there were two folk festivals in easy reach at Poynton and Barnsley without inflicting their dubious personalities on the unsuspecting town of Bacup and a traditional event.

Bad manners on the part of the crowd were again evident at the old people's home just up the valley. People insisted on standing in front of the windows and one avid camera-man was photographing the residents through the window! It was noted that there were also many pint glasses in evidence here, the pubs having turned out. I am sure that many landlords will begin to dread Easter weekend as these glasses are expensive to replace and I am sure people did not arrive in Bacup with the same.

On the plus side for the day the Stacksteads Band were as superb as ever and included three cornets and two basses this year, and the Britannia Coconut Dancers danced on Easter Saturday as they always do. The tradition looks in a healthy state to continue indefinitely.

That was my impression of Bacup 1979. It is an event that I have previously enjoyed, but next year we may well give it a miss. I like to think we were unobtrusive, but our presence helped to swell the crowd.

