

HOW DO YOU THINK IT WAS?

Most people have an idyllic impression of the early days of the revival when in reality it was a very turbulent period. Some may be aware that Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) gave his first public lecture on Folk Song on 26.11.03 and that he crusaded to get Folk Song and then Dance accepted by the Board of Education for use in schools. However the personalities involved were closely bound up with the burning issues of the time, especially Votes for Women. They were protracted in the six episode BBC Series "Shoulder to Shoulder" in 1974 by Midge Mackenzie, who published the experiences in a book form in 1975

Mary Neal (1860-1944) worked with Emmeline Pethick (1867-1954), who had been born in Weston-Super-Mare and brought up a Quaker, at the Methodist West London Mission from 1890. Miss Neal came from a Manchester manufacturing family. The Mission seemed restrictive and not providing the help needed so they founded the Esperance Girls Club in 1895. It is difficult now to imagine how restricted were the lives of the leisured middle classes in the last decade of the 19th century. The very idea that women should leave their homes and live in the comparative freedom of a community, in order to carry out rather subversive principles of social sharing, was a bombshell to the large mass of conservative, low-church and non-conformist opinion. Both accepted a gospel of Socialism as it was practiced then by Kier Hardie (1859-1915), the first Member of Parliament for the Labour Party.

It is also difficult to imagine the conditions of the poorer classes in London. No canned entertainment, no travel, no access to the country - only the public house and the life of the street. Overburdened motherhood, overcrowded homes, drunkenness, dirt, starvation and brutality were the common experience and gave little chance of happiness. They were out for any excitement that was had to be had - they could not tolerate anything less vivid than the life of the street.

Mary Neal and her friends were pro-Boers, believing, with good reason, that international financiers wanted the Transvaal gold mines and were using British lives and money to obtain them. They were involved in many rowdy public meetings. She also campaigned against the then common practice of adulteration of food. Miss Neal founded the Esperance Club and Social Guild for girls with Emmeline as President, a senior boys club under W.G.Pearce, a junior club under Lady Katherine Thynne (later Lady Cromer), and "Maison Esperance", a dressmaking establishment in Wigmore Street with wages of 15 shillings a week, nearly double the current rates, and a 45 hour working week providing work all the year round, not just during the Season. The name with its associations of progress to a better state of affairs was suggested by the battle-cry of Henry IV - "Now, Esperance! Percy! and set on!". It was not the custom in the trade to have holidays, but Neal bought in conjunction with a Jewish Girls Club a house at Littlehampton and named it "The Green Lady Hostel" from a reference in the poems of Fiona Macleod. The Esperance Club became well known for its "national dancing" and Emmeline met Frederick Lawrence at a club display in 1899. Neal made all the wedding arrangements at Canning Town Hall in October 1901. Lloyd George came. Herbert MacIlwaine became musical director of the Esperance Club following Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's wedding. Mary Neal was not a musician or a dancer but a great organiser. The Lawrences built a guest house for London children next to their own, "The Mascot", Holmwood, near Dorking, Surrey, calling it "The Sundial".

H C MacIlwaine found that the girls did not enjoy singing the available art music and having read the review of *Folk Songs from Somerset* in the Morning Post, the first part of which was published in December 1904, and having tried the songs out they wrote to Cecil Sharp to ask if there were any dances as well. He was only able to give to Neal William Kimber's name and vague address from six years earlier. Neal visited Oxford, sought Kimber out, then invited him and another to London. On his first visit to Cumberland Market, St.Pancras, he brought his cousin and on subsequent visits a different dancer each time. It was noted that he varied his teaching on his early visits. He was in fact learning the finer details himself from other dancers and checking them with his father. Kimber was an exciting dancer and musician in his prime as well as a good bricklayer. His visits to London lost him his current job but he was able to immediately find replacement in his trade. The Esperance Club gave a public performance at Christmas 1905 which Miss Margaret Dean Smith, one time EFDSS Librarian and Britannia Book of the Year indexer, remembered attending.

Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958) formed the Women's Social and Political Union on 10th October 1903. Its constitution was based on that of the Labour Party. Her mother Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst (1867-?) called on Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in February 1906 saying that Kier Hardie, whom Mrs Pankhurst was campaigning for at

Merthyr Tydfil, had told her that in her she should find a practical and useful colleague who could develop in London the WSPU founded in Manchester. She went away disappointed, but when Emmeline was approached by Annie Kenney (1882-1960) the militant mill-worker and asked to be Treasurer, she and Mary Neal went to a meeting at Sylvia Pankhurst's lodgings in Park Walk. They there formed the London Committee.

A campaign of active intervention in by-elections against government candidates was started and the first arrests occurred, including Annie Kenney on 19th June 1906. The Pethick-Lawrence's flat at 4 Clement's Inn became the centre of operations for the next few years and Frederick who was the editor of several Socialist Publications, including the "Labour Record", became editor of "Votes for Women", published at 1 penny a week from October 1907. Parliament reassembled on the 23rd October 1906 and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence was arrested with the deputation to the House. She was sentenced to two months but nearly had a nervous breakdown and was released after two days. Her husband took her away to Italy to stay with friends. He then took on her role and acted as adviser to women who had been arrested.

Public opinion which had at first been outraged, began to change and three distinguished women writers, Elizabeth Robins, Evelyn Sharp and Beatrice Harreden wrote articles defending the actions. A delegate conference in September formed a National committee with Mrs Pankhurst as Chairman, Mrs Pethick-Lawrence as Treasurer, Mrs Tuke as Secretary, Christabel Pankhurst and Mary Neal and, to represent the outside world, Miss Elizabeth Robins, the novelist and playwright who had made her name as an Ibsen actress.

Evelyn Sharp was Cecil Sharp's youngest sister and she knew well Max Beerbohm, Thomas Hardy and Lawrence Housman. Max saw the Eynsham morris at the gates of Blenheim Palace and painted a portrait of the fool, now at Cecil Sharp House, and of the team dancing, now at the Southampton Art Gallery. She played hockey and went to the gym of the Chelsea Polytechnic. After the death of her father in November 1903 she became a fulltime journalist for the Manchester Guardian. She was reporting the annual Conference of the National Union of Women Workers when the session on woman's suffrage fell on the day Mrs Pethick-Lawrence appeared in court on the charge of obstruction outside the House of Commons. She joined the WSPU and became assistant editor of "Votes for Women" in October 1907. She became the editor in 1912 after the Pankhursts ditched the Pethick-Lawrences. Evelyn did not join in the militant activities at first because of a promise to her mother but eventually she got 14 days for breaking windows at the War Office in a militant demonstration in Parliament Square on 11th November and another 14 days for refusing to disperse from outside the Houses of Parliament in 1913. Unlike most others who had refused to pay taxes without representation she did not pay up at the start of the war and was made a bankrupt. She danced with the Karpeles sisters and the embryo EFDS and went with the EFDS team to the Basque Festival at Bayonne.

Mrs Mabel Tuke had lived in South Africa and met Mrs Pethick-Lawrence when returning to England after her husband's death in 1906. Some months later she wrote to Emmeline and spoke of her loneliness and asked to find something to fill her empty life. She came to stay with Emmeline. Anyone less like a militant could not be imagined. Charming and pathetic she touched the hardest of male hearts. Mrs Tuke collected the Abingdon dances and tunes for Neal from the Hemmings family during their visit to London and the Esperance Club which were published by Neal and she remained an active worker for the Esperance Club up to the war.

MacIlwaine and Sharp collected the Bidford dances at Redditch in 1906, Sharp only collecting the tunes. Because of the popularity of the Esperance Club morris they published a book of instruction in July 1907, with a dedication to the Esperance Club, based on the dancing of Florrie Warren the chief instructress at the Club, who eventually went to the USA with Mary Neal and there met and married an American. About this time Sharp started giving lectures illustrated by Esperance Club dancers, the first at the Small Queen's Hall, although Cecil Sharp had no official connection with the Club. He subscribed to a newspaper cutting service which covered his lectures and publications and included anecdotes from his collecting. The scrapbooks were examined while they were deposited by Maud Karpeles in the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House. The book *Folk Song, Some Conclusions* was published in 1907. There was a meeting in the Goupil Gallery in November 1907 of interested parties to establish an organisation to promote folk dancing but it never succeeded in becoming effective.

The 13th February 1907 saw the first of a number of one day Women's Parliaments at the Caxton Hall. The second was on the 20th March, the third on the 11th February 1908 and the fourth on the 29th June.

From October 1907 the suffragette campaign intensified. The first stone throwing was on 30th June 1908. When Mrs Pankhurst was released from prison in March 1908 there was a massed meeting at the Albert Hall. The government candidates were defeated at Peckham and North-West Manchester (no less than Winston Churchill) due to suffragette action. Rallies were large : 250,000 at Hyde Park (26.06.08), 20,000 at Clapham Common (15.07.08), 30,000 at Nottingham Forest (18.07.08), 150,000 at Manchester (19.07.08), and 100,000 at Leeds (26.07.08). On the 29th July Lloyd George was very effectively heckled at the International Peace Conference in Queens Hall. The colours purple, white and green were adopted to signify justice, purity and hope. But the WSPU were already not the main suffrage movement. By the end of 1906 it had lost the working class women and by the end of 1907 the Independent Labour Party. Militancy in 1905 seemed an inspired idea but each act has to be more violent than the previous one and it only attracts interest but not support. A problem also found with Trade Union actions over many years and with other protest movements, inevitably leading to the escalation of brutality on both sides. On 2nd July 1909 Miss Wallace Dunlop was sent to prison for a month and started on the first hunger strike. She was released after four days. It soon became the general tactic. On the 24th September the government instituted forcible feeding.

Lady Constance Lytton (1869-1923) was the second daughter of Robert Lytton a Viceroy of India in the late 1870's. Her godmother Lady Bloomfield died in 1905 leaving some money which Constance decided should do something useful. By chance she heard of a piece of social work that "contained an element of spontaneous joy" which contrasted with the "oppressive jackets" of ordinary philanthropists. She made the acquaintance of Neal and attended the Esperance Club and then brought some of its members to her village of Knebworth to teach dances. She was asked to the annual holiday in 1908 at the Green Lady Hostel of friends and comrades of the Esperance Club as a special guest along with the Kenny sisters. It was several days before she discovered she was among suffragettes but one wet Sunday the Club members begged Jessie Kenny to tell them of her experiences, having just been released from prison.

There was a sensational government defeat at Newcastle in September and a mass meeting was held in Trafalgar Square. On the 31st October most of the committee was arrested and Lytton no longer held back. She was imprisoned for stone throwing, but being a lady of title she was examined before being forcibly fed and found to have a weak heart and was released. Knowing she had received preferential treatment she disguised herself, cutting her hair short, and threw another stone under the name of Jane Warton through the window of the prison governor. She was forcibly fed after four days: with her weak heart she collapsed. A week or two after release she had a heart attack which left her with a paralysed right arm. She had been a fine pianist.

Cecil Sharp went to Winster in mid 1908 but did not start to collect the dances effectively till he got William Wells of Bampton to come over to Stow-on-the-Wold in August 1909 where Sharp and his family were on holiday. These and servants formed a team to learn the dances. This started a two year intensive collecting period. Sharp ignored younger teams and advised against copying them. MacIlwaine left Neal in 1908 because of the Votes for Women campaign, publically pleading ill health, but they remained friends and Mary Neal adopted his son Anthony when he died in 1916. MacIlwaine was replaced as musical director by Clive Carey. Carey continued until the start of World war One. Anthony MacIlwaine kept the book of photographs of all the 30 odd traditional dancers who came up to London to teach their dances. Clive Carey still had a complete set of programmes for the Mary Neal shows when interviewed. His papers were scattered after his death across four different depositories. After the war he was deeply involved with the theatre and opera.

Sharp last lectured with Esperance dancers in 1909, but he had already started to say that the revival was on the wrong lines. That year the Board of Education syllabus of physical exercises recognised morris dancing. Between May 9th and 25th in 1909 the suffragettes organised a "Woman's Exhibition" at the Prince's Skating Rink, Knightsbridge. There were daily morris dancing displays by Neal's girls. Also in that year at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Cecil Sharp judged the folk dance and song competitions. Cecil Sharp was a theoretical Socialist of the Fabian sort and had sympathy with many progressive movements although cautious in public pronouncements and conscious of social position. He had been able to dedicate the first volume of *Folk Songs from Somerset* to the Princess of Wales, later Queen Mary, and had given musical instruction to the royal children 1904-7. He did support political functions and when he had a men's side in 1911 he had them dance at a Fabian Society soiree - it was teetotal but served ice-cream! The Fabians, named after the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus

who faced the Carthaginian Hannibal, was a left wing organisation founded in 1884 to bring about social change by a slow process of education and persuasion rather than by revolution.

Mary Neal ran a major dance event at the Kensington Town Hall with traditional dancer guests the night before King Edward VII died and Sharp sent the first letter of complaint to the press, the Daily News of 29.04.10, about Sam Bennett, the Ilmington Morris he ran, and the decadence of the Abingdon Morris, the lack of standards but why it was acceptable for women to dance the morris. Tom Hemmings, one of the Abingdon party who came up to London, was convinced that the prominent figure at the event was the King, but Edward was in a coma that evening, so it must have been someone else. Contemporary newspaper accounts should be consulted. Mary Neal ran the vacation school at Stratford-on-Avon in 1910 but Sharp took it over in 1911. There had been classes at the Chelsea Polytechnic from September 1909, with their first display on 1910, and Sharp contacted them, which led to the founding of the English Folk Dance Society in December 1911. Mary Neal published the first Esperance Morris Book in April 1910. The arguments between Neal and Sharp supporters intensified. Much was made of whether the leg in the morris step should be straight or bent at the knees!

Sharp formed a men's side which danced out in December 1912 at the Savoy Theatre. Unfortunately four members were killed during World War One.

The Liberal's struggle with the Lords led to an election in 1910. A truce existed till November whilst a bill for suffrage was in Parliament. On 11th November 1910 a procession from a meeting at Caxton Hall to the House was met with great brutality by the police. It became known as "Black Friday". For five hours Parliament Square was the scene of battle; 117 were arrested, 50 were laid up with injuries received, 2 died later from heart attacks. All cases were dismissed to avoid the happenings being discussed in court. A memo was sent to the Home Office by the WSPU about the violence, the methods of torture, the acts of indecency and the after effects. The memo was widely reprinted.

When the government put the bill off yet again the Committee decided on 01.03.12 to end passive resistance and at 5.45pm window smashing started at shops. Mrs Tuke and others went to Downing Street and broke windows there, getting two months imprisonment. On release there started a conspiracy trial. Mrs Tuke was acquitted, others got nine months. In October the Pankhursts disbanded the Committee, drove out the Pethick-Lawrences and started a new policy of even greater destruction. Arson attacks on empty buildings started in the summer of 1912. The government responded with the Cat and Mouse Act, which released hunger strikers until they recovered and then took them back in again.

It is not surprising that Sharp with his ideals and hopes did not want to be associated in any way with the later lunacies but then few people were and certainly not Neal. Many people at the time, except for the hard core of the English Folk Dance and Song Society considered that Sharp behaved rather shabbily towards Neal, her efforts and achievements in order to establish the artistic value of the folk tradition. It should be remembered that the "revival", really a reinvention, was made possible because of what both of them did.

At the start of World War One, Mary Neal suspended the teaching and displays which by then had spread all over the country. She took a post at the rank of Secretary in the Ministry of Pensions and encouraged her key staff to move to war related activities, as also did Mrs Pankhurst with her followers who had declared a truce at the start of hostilities with Germany. After the war Neal did not want to reactivate the disputes and asked them to join the EFDS organisation.

The main male team was reformed as the HQ team. Douglas Kennedy became director after Sharp's death. The foundation stone for Cecil Sharp House was laid in June 1929 and it was opened in June 1930.

A H Fox Strangways biography of Cecil Sharp was published in 1933 and is both informative and entertaining. Mary Neal received an OBE in 1937 for her lifetime work and was given a celebratory dinner by the EFDSS at Selfridges, she was also the guest of honour at the Stow Morris Ring Meeting in 1938. Her autobiography was never published, although it said little about the disagreements with Sharp, and it has been deposited by a relative in the Vaughan Williams Library.

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