



by Mike Mandolin

Session Seen

Bradford on Avon

This is the scene – a local pub (The George) in a back street on the fringe of a small Wiltshire country town (Bradford on Avon). You've heard from a neighbour involved in the Morris scene of a group of players who meet regularly on alternate Monday evenings with their instruments to pass a few hours amusing themselves and a few of the locals, with an array of tunes drawn from the English tradition. Could I join in, you might ask yourself? Would they all be too good? Would I be out of place? Park the car, pick up instrument, and head for the door with some trepidation.

Before even halfway across the car park a pleasant sound is heard stealing out of the pub. It's Harpers Frolick. That's a good start - I know that piece! Negotiating the door and an Alsatian dog the size of a small horse (friendly) I equip myself with a pint of Wadworths 6X and head for the side room from where the music is coming. By now it has morphed into Bonny Kate, which I don't know so well so find a seat, unpack the instrument, take a swig of the beer, and look around.

The first thing you notice is the lighting, or rather lack of it. This is no harsh industrial techno-pub with strobe and spotlights glaring down. To be frank at first you wonder whether the landlady has simply forgotten to put any light bulbs in the sockets, but then you realise that most of the light comes from candles artfully stuck in bottles, though with one proper light bulb near the door - the better to ease the way to the main bar for a refill, I suppose. When the eyes have adapted to the gloom you can make out that the music is emanating from instruments being blown, squeezed, scraped and plucked by people, about twelve of them, and on the whole they look normal and friendly. Things are looking up!

When Bonny Kate has finished I find myself being greeted by the session organiser, Chris Timson, who quickly introduces most of



the other players. Quite correctly, they're not particularly interested in me, just in whether and what I can play. Not being a mood to dazzle them with my one-handed version of Worcestershire Hornpipe (that's harder on a mandolin than it might at first seem) I sit back and listen. The pattern quickly emerges: someone starts a tune and if others know it they join in, three times through, two A's and two B's. If no one knows it there's no backing out – you have to finish, solo! Actually by the end, a few of the better players (those blessed with the talent of 'ear') might be joining in. At the end of one tune, there may be a brief pause before a second tune is launched into: Galopede is followed by Tannerman, Spirit Of The Dance follows Seven Stars. At the end of a set there are usually cries of appreciation, followed by, "What was that then?", or "Too fast!" or "Wrong key!"

An hour or so passes and I have recognised and even joined in quite a few of the tunes. Some such as Michael Turner's Waltz are obviously so well liked that they get played twice. There's quite a preponderance of Morris tunes, which is partly explained by the fact that a number of the players also moonlight for the local ladies' Morris side so they come to the sessions for a bit of extra practice. Another common source of tunes appears to be Nick Barber's excellent collection*. I notice a few well-worn copies around the tables, though in practice books

and notes are hardly referred to. I am led to believe this is to do with session etiquette, though personally I think it's more to do with the gloom in the room inhibiting anyone not equipped with night-vision goggles from reading dots.

Chris Timson tells me how it got started. He and his partner Anne have been enthusiastic concertina players and singers for years, and regular habitués of the Sidmouth and other festivals (I notice that the Radway pub seems to hold a special place in the affection of these two). Last year Chris decided to see if he could flush out some local interest by establishing a session in a local pub. "The first pub we tried was OK, but we always felt we were there on sufferance. If there was a special occasion like Valentine's Day we had to move out. So at Easter we came here, The George. Julie and Jim (the landlords) are very sympathetic and Jim is a musician himself. The side room is perfect for our purposes, – and the beer is cheaper!" Having established priorities in this way, we settle down to play a few more tunes. Chris leads off with Redowa Polka - "My favourite weird tune," he says by way of introduction...

As the evening wears on to a happy conclusion I get to know a few more of the players. On my right is Hilary, a lady melodeon player who calls herself a beginner but can actually work up quite a steam on favourite tunes, such as

Winster Gallop and Lilli Bullero. Stephanie and Denis are a couple who combine concertina, melodeon, Northumbrian pipes, whistles and fiddle. Stephanie likes Enrico, while Denis seems able to play anything. Dave Field is another notable player, probably the most experienced in the room. Apart from having an enormous repertoire of his own, his great strength is being able to step in whenever a weaker player is faltering. This can be most reassuring.

Why do they come? "We love the tunes, the atmosphere, and the chance to meet other people 'like us'. It's one thing to go to the big events in the summer, but what we like is the chance to keep playing all through the year." While these sentiments prevail, and while wise characters like Chris and Anne are happy to provide the minimal organisation needed to keep these things going, there's every reason to be optimistic about English traditional music staying alive and developing. □

**Perhaps a 'Second Helping' is due from Nick Barber?*

Session Index: Meets from about 8.30 every 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month at the George Inn, Woolley Street, Bradford on Avon, Wilts. Mainly English tunes. All levels of ability welcomed. For more info contact Chris Timson on 01225-863762, or via www.concertina.info/session/

The Living Tradition welcomes submissions of articles (and photos) from all over the UK and Ireland to feature in 'Session Seen'. Maximum of 1000 words. We would also like to publish a UK wide 'Session Index', so please send us details of your session.

Mike Mandolin is the editor of 'Session Seen' and all articles, 'Session Index' entries (see example above) or questions should be directed to him. Mike can be contacted by phone: 01225 334775, or email: mike_mandolin@yahoo.co.uk

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