

VILLAGE SONG & CULTURE

A Study Based on the Blunt Collection of
Song from Adderbury North Oxfordshire

Michael Pickering

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Volume 7

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FROM ADDERBURY NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

MICHAEL PICKERING



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FOR MY PARENTS

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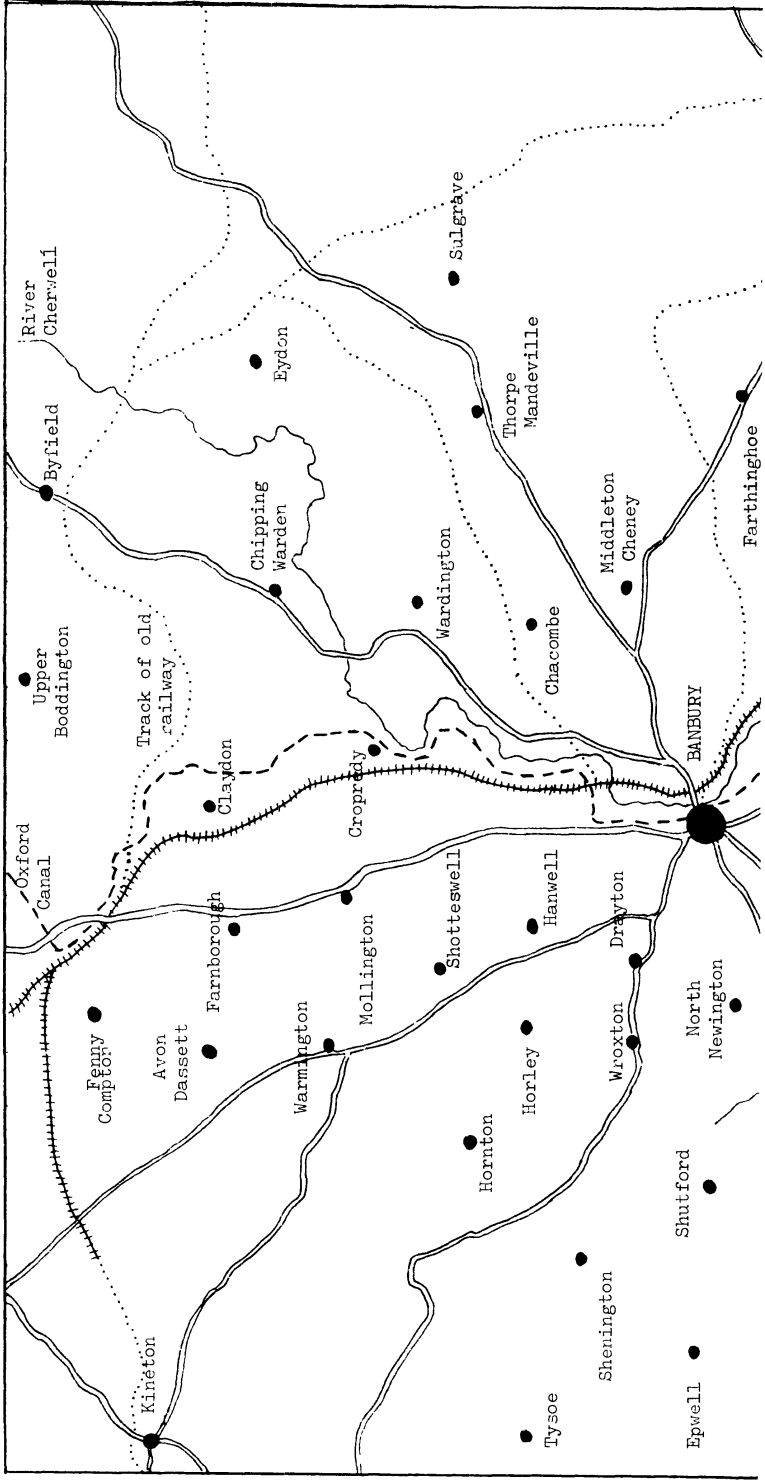
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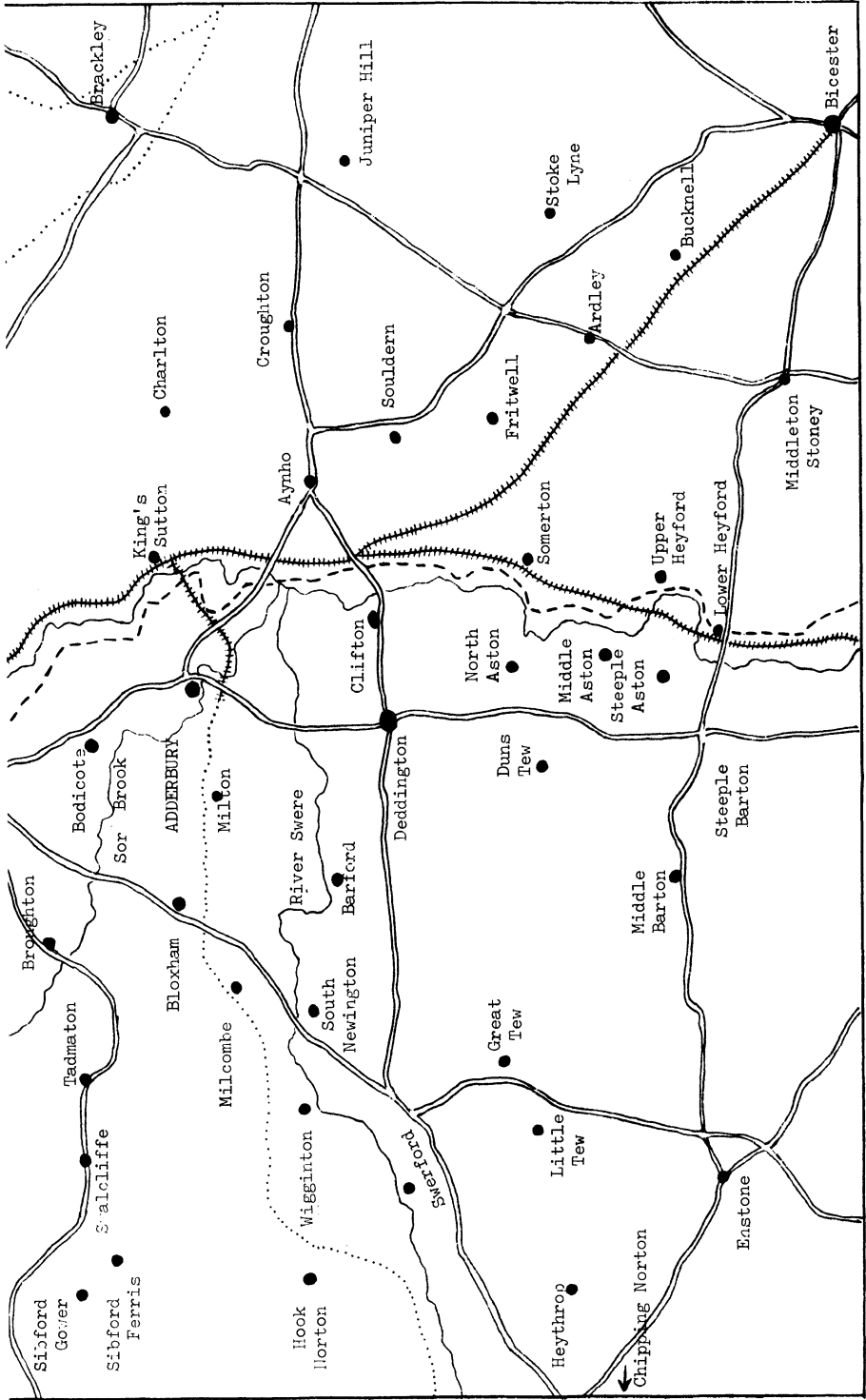
First and foremost, I wish to thank those people in or around Adderbury who have provided the oral information which proved so vital in developing an understanding of the village society of their childhood and of their Victorian forebears. Their names are in the text, but I am particularly in debt to Mr. Harry 'Tamp' Austin, the late Fanny Hitchman, the late Wilf Walton, and Mrs. Winnie Wyatt.

I have written this book in the spaces between other tasks of work, but it derives essentially from research conducted at the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies at Leeds University, and funded by the Department of Education and Science. For help and conversation in those years, my thanks to Stewart Sanderson and Steve Counce. In my attempt to refer song to social context and to village culture generally, and to interpret song in relation to that context and culture, I have been helped most of all by Tony Green. His friendship and counsel display a great generosity. Several other friends and colleagues offered comments and encouragement, and I am grateful to Dan Schiller, Barry Troyna, Iain Steele, Mike Scott and Kevin Robins. David Buchan read through an earlier version, and provided useful criticism. I am indebted as well to Jeremy Hawthorn, who took time out from other commitments and kindly read through the manuscript. Any surviving errors and ineptitudes rest on my head alone.

Alison Troyna drew the sketch map of Banburyshire, and Penny Harlow patiently and efficiently typed up the final script. Many other people, too numerous to mention by name, have also given more casual help and co-operation. To all of them I extend a sincere gratitude. Lastly, and by no means least, my friend Isabel has provided invaluable assistance and support in the haul towards completion of the text, and to her I owe my greatest debt.

Sketch Map of Banbury and Outlying District





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INTRODUCTION

The songs on which this study is based were once vibrant in the throats and ears and minds of living people. I have attempted to explore their roles and meanings in relation to the lives of those people, and to the cultural tradition and practice of which they were an integral part. In 1907, Cecil Sharp remarked on 'how intimately folk-singing and folk-dancing have, in the past, been bound up with the social life of the village', (1) and yet reading the many collections published since the early twentieth century upsurge of interest in what was ideologically conceived as the traditional song of country folk, precious little insight into the integration of rural life and song is to be gleaned.

The art of village song, though interwoven with particular traditions and the sense of the past inherent in those traditions, cannot be divorced from the historically specific existence and consciousness of working men and women. It must be released from the sanctified amnesia of a 'folk' culture, and located within the particular patterns of social and material experience, solidarity and conflict, exploitation and resistance, to which village culture as a whole gave expressive shape and meaning, however obliquely or obscurely. The actual ways in which songs related to, and were a part of village life, are of course highly problematic, but it is an understanding of the place of song in the social life of villagers which this study endeavours, most of all, to reach. It is my contention that without an attempt to establish the nature of the relationship of song to social context, what is said to constitute an essential part of our national cultural heritage remains of no more value than the paper on which it is printed. No amount of pretty lettering or bucolic woodcuts will alter that. Furthermore, the mere printing of songs without reference to the contexts in which they were performed is an activity as laudable and valuable, historically, as the collection and display of Victorian pince-nez or Edwardian monocles.

A basic premise of this study is that there is no existence of the 'text', in the song and singing tradition on

on which I have focused, which is separate or separable from the 'context' in which it was located. The two were fundamentally and actively linked, and in a complex relationship always mutually informed each other. How, then, are we to gain some sense of the ways in which village song and culture were in fact 'bound up' with the experience of life and labour in a specific context? Those ways must be seen as both bequeathed by the past, and part of the changing patterns of response of men and women to the lives they led. They must as well be placed within the relations between members of the local labouring community, and within the relations between that community and the wider influence and contacts in the social world 'outside' the community. Village culture was not merely intrinsic to the way of life of a particular local community, but was at the same time situated within the class formations evolving throughout the period, and in relation to a dominant culture and hegemonic ideology. The local culture of working class villagers generated elements which were in some ways distinct from and alternative to the dominant culture, but a dual and simultaneous process or result of incorporation into that dominant culture was also manifested in many aspects of village cultural expression and practice. (2) This incorporation cannot satisfactorily be explained by a catch-all notion of 'false consciousness'. Whether village custom and culture was contestatory or incorporated cannot be decided at an abstract level; such questions must be addressed in relation to complex and shifting patterns of cultural domination, power and struggle, and these can only be seen in definite and specific historical terms. The achievements of the English 'folk' song and dance movement must be set within the context of the cultural expropriation and the historical decontextualisation of these 'texts', and it is the negative and disabling effects of this side of those achievements that I am concerned here to counteract by means of reconstituting these 'texts' in their original milieu, and in relation to the social practices which produced and informed them. I seek to gain them back, in other words, for the people from whose culture they were extracted, to be placed as unproblematic remnants of a past and more harmonious way of life in the national gallery of literature.

Such recent publications as Maud Karpeles' edition of Sharp's English folk song collection, though useful as repositories of material for reference, are only coffins for the songs themselves. (3) In approaching the Blunt manuscript of songs, I have tried always to avoid being their undertaker. Understanding of village song culture and village singing tradition must be set within, and interlinked with, the everyday life of the village, but such an understanding can of necessity only be partial and provisional. At the time and in the context of the original reproduction of the songs, that understanding was supplied by singer and listeners, inserted in the interstices of performance, in the space between lines.

It is the meanings and significances which constituted that understanding which have now to be recreated. Inevitably, with the original participants no longer available to provide evidence, interpretation must begin with a reconstruction of the dynamic and complex interrelationships of social experience and singing tradition, of text and context, but one is always to an extent forced to risk certain intuitive connections, certain leaps into the dark, not always perhaps with a graceful and felicitous landing. In attempting that reconstruction I have utilized aspects of local history (though it has not been my intention to provide a local history as such (4)) derived from both documentary and oral sources, and I have found also, in small yet significant ways, useful clues and signposts towards interpretation in the incidental marginal annotations made by the collector in the pages of her manuscript. These are brief and random jottings about informant, incident, occasion or singing style associated with a particular song, and in no way comprise a comprehensive set of field-notes. But although any such smidgin of descriptive comment can set the heart of the lonely hunter of the past hungering in vain for further detail, they have for me more than once shed a ray of light or opened up a small corner that would otherwise have remained hidden and obscure. Given such an initial lead, I have in various instances been able to go on to combine it with other oral and documentary evidence and so try to fit together one more feature in the jigsaw of text and context.

A few words here about the song manuscripts. They were compiled during the first two decades of this century, the bulk of them during the First World War, by Janet Heatley Blunt (1859-1950). Some of the songs she collected were sent to the Folk Song Society for publication, but apart from one or two of these none of the texts or tunes were put into print during her lifetime (5). After her death, in a timely act of rescue from the fire, the manuscripts were forwarded to the archives at Cecil Sharp House by Winnie Wyatt, long-serving maid and companion to Janet Blunt. The majority of the songs in the Blunt manuscripts were collected in Adderbury, North Oxfordshire, and though in one sense this is a basic limitation of the collection, it did provide me with the opportunity of relating a body of song, taken (albeit selectively) from one particular singing tradition, to a particular locality and culture, to particular people and places. This opportunity was the main impetus behind my beginning the work in the first place.

I shall return, in a spell, to an assessment of Blunt's collecting activities, but I would first like to make a more general point, that the work of any 'folk' song collector must itself be contextualised, so that, in attempting to reestablish the relationship of a song collection to its original social and cultural milieu, we take into account not only the content of that collection but also the social and

cultural nature of the collecting itself, the ideological factors limiting and delimiting its operation and achievements. For, in a similar way to the submergence of actual social context beneath socio-politically acceptable cultural items deliberately isolated as 'traditional', so we find, after a little delving, the concealing of part of the actual cultural content as well. We cannot, in other words, attain to an understanding of popular village culture as mediated by village song without first attempting to assess the ideological mediations of the song collector and his or her culturally hidebound collecting activities. This is why I began my study of Adderbury working class song and culture by writing a biography of Janet Blunt. Only by doing that was I able to understand and properly evaluate the song collection in relation to the culture from which it was drawn. Only by doing that was I able to explain to myself certain crucial omissions from the manuscripts, as, for instance, the repertoire of the brother of William 'Binx' Walton, Blunt's main informant. John Walton by contrast preferred singing a different kind of material to that which Blunt conceived of as representing 'genuine folk song', and even though he was one of the most noted Adderbury singers of his day, hardly a word of his repertoire or musical prowess appears in the manuscripts. Thus certain aspects of nineteenth century village culture lay buried, which but for my endeavours would have remained hidden out of view in any conventional edition of the manuscript collection. Here was another reason for eschewing an easier, but far less valuable option.

Much of the Blunt biography has been published already, and I will therefore only provide a summary of her life, and of her achievement as a song collector (6). She was born in India, just after the Mutiny, and spent her first thirty years there, living alternately in the Punjab and in Kashmir, according to the season. Her delight in 'folk' song was sown in these early years through the singing of her father, Charles Harris Blunt (1824-1900), a major general in the Royal Bengal Artillery. Some of his songs such as 'Three Jolly Welshmen' and 'The Berkshire Tragedy' were sung in those days, 'en famille, with great enjoyment' (7). The latter song had been learnt as a boy from his uncle's butler in Hampshire, in the same way that Janet's cousin Sybil Blunt, who lived at the manor house in Dorchester, south Oxfordshire, learnt 'King Arthur' from the singing of her nurse, a Miss Harvey. In her collecting activities, Janet Blunt was simply continuing this practice, though in a more purposive and dedicated way. She returned to England in 1892, after the death of her mother, and settled with her father (now retired) into the estate of Halle Place, West Adderbury. There she lived out her days as a spinster, and as a latter-day exemplar of a dying breed, the Lady of the Manor.

'Folk' song collecting was one of several hobbies indulged in by Janet Blunt in her life of constant spare time.

These included archaeology, antiquarian local history, genealogy, the genteel pastime of the pianoforte, landscape painting and versifying. She spent much time overseeing the management of the Halle Place farm and estate, visiting her tenants in and around Mud End, and making herself acquainted with the working people of the village. It was through her general walkabout activities that she was able to begin her collecting, often in the first place by singing a homely ditty to her humble guests, then asking for and coaxing 'folk' song material from them in return. Once she had found material she considered appropriate, she would ask the singer along to her manor house drawing room so that she could work out the tune on her grand piano, as well as write down the words. Harry Austin remembers sneaking up to her window as a boy, and crouching under the sill while William Walton stood inside singing 'My Boy Billy' for her. This was in 1916.

Where have you been all the day
My boy Billy?
Where have you been all the day
Billy won't you tell me?
Yes I've been courting all the day
Courting of my Nellie Grey.

Chorus: But she is too young to be taken from her mammy.
But she is too young to be taken from her mammy.

Can she knit or can she spin
My boy Billy?
Can she knit or can she spin
Billy won't you tell me?
Yes she can knit and she can spin
She can do most anything,
But she is too young etc.

Can she brew or can she bake
My boy Billy?
Can she brew or can she bake
Billy won't you tell me?
Yes she can brew and she can bake
And she can make a wedding cake,
But she is too young etc.

Did she ask you to come in
My boy Billy?
Did she ask you to come in
Billy won't you tell me?
Yes she asked me to come in
With the kiss upon my chin,
But she is too young etc.

How old is she then
My boy Billy?
How old is she then
Billy won't you tell me?

Yes, twice six, twice seven
Twice twenty and eleven,
But she is too young etc.

In her leisured occupation as 'folk' song and 'folk' dance collector, Blunt was unquestionably influenced by the activity and tenets of the revivalist movement spearheaded by Cecil Sharp. Her approach can be characterised as essentially moralistic, reformatory, romantic, evolutionalist and nationalist, while her achievement was restricted by a hobbyist temperament, a fitful sense of devotion and lack of application, an inability to see a project successfully through to its completion. Her version of the Adderbury singing tradition and general song culture must therefore be acknowledged as both highly selective, in view of her own sense of purpose and preoccupation, and also unfinished: not only did she confine herself to her own village, but certain singers there (Zachariah 'Shepherd' Stilgoe for example, or the tenant of her home farm, Bill Hone) were not, as far as we know, personally approached for their own songs. Her class position, as well, must be taken into account when assessing the manuscripts, for she was, in a local context, the intermediary between two cultures, that of the piano and that of the pipe and tabor. This fact prescribed an underlying ideological bias and bent, and prevented a true representation of the working class culture of Adderbury.

Both a song and a singing tradition among working class villagers in Adderbury has now disappeared. Its abandonment (and the archival material which is the corollary of that abandonment) made the manuscript singers some of its last representatives, though it must be stressed that the villagers themselves did not conceptualise a 'folk' song tradition as such, and were not interested in distinguishing between a 'folk' song and another 'non-folk' song which they might equally have enjoyed. Nevertheless, the manuscript singers were effectively the last generation who actively wished to sing the songs of the oral tradition in the village, and who learnt to do so in a relatively distinct, local environment of song learning and song performance. Villagers born in the last decade or so of the nineteenth century and the first two of this, found or had imposed on them other interests (such as amateur dramatics, penny readings, cottage lectures and verse recitations), and tended to view the old songs, as they were considered, with scepticism, lack of sympathy and disinterest. Their relatedness to social and moral life had faded. E.N. Bennett wrote in 1914: 'I have heard quaint lines sung to unprinted melodies by old men in Oxfordshire, which, words and tune alike, are nigh unto vanishing away, for the young men and maidens refuse to learn the old songs, and when they sing at all use more or less obsolete music-hall ditties from the towns' (8). Blunt characteristically saw this as a cause for lament. She was, according to one villager, extremely