

Folk Roots - July 1985

Far, far beyond the East Anglian outpost of Norwich, just a mile or two off the bleak Norfolk coastline, lies the slumbering village of Trunch.

Strangers are rare round these parts and as I drive through on a bitterly cold first day of April, the few Trunchians to be found stare me out long and hard. I stop an old man slowly passing on a horse and cart and ask if he can direct me to the home of the Kipper Family. His reaction, frankly, is astonishing. He lets out a blood-curdling shriek, whips his horse sharply across the rear and disappears into the distance doing a passable impersonation of Lester Piggott, yelling "E be after them Kippers, 'e be" at the top of his voice.

I'd heard the Kippers weren't popular locally as a result of some dark, unspecified scandal in years gone by, but never dreamt that the fear and loathing was so intense!

I followed the lane as it deteriorated into a mushy blend of cowpats and bicycle tracks and there, right at the end, unsteadily stood an old sprawling cottage that looked barely habitable. The famous, but rarely found, Kipper Family homestead.

For several minutes I stood in awe, paying silent homage to the overwhelming sense of history created by the dilapidated old building. In a sense this house radiated the very essence of the folk tradition... it was here that generations of Kippers since time immemorial had kept alive those great family songs like The Unlaid Maid, A Lightweight Dirge, To Be A Pharmacist and, of course, the unique Whistling Monologue. A tear trickled down my face as I let the magical aura of the place wash all over me, until suddenly the back door flew open and there stood the greatest legend of them all, Mr. Henry Kipper himself! "Get off my land, you nosy bugger" he shouted, and came stumbling towards me brandishing his walking stick in a violent manner.

Luckily his son Sid arrived just at that moment with a brace of pheasants under his arm and explained to him that I wasn't a member of the constabulary but had come to write about them in Folk Roots magazine. Naturally I completely understood Mr. Kipper's suspicion. The family home has been a constant target for tinkers, hippies, pewter tankers, folk song collectors and BBC employers through the ages and Mr. Kipper is rightfully conscious of the fact that he is the keeper of some of the greatest songs in the whole folk tradition. Wary of strangers coming along to exploit

the extraordinary family heritage, he guards the song jealously.

The little misunderstanding rectified, the family make me welcome. Dot - Henry's celebrated wife and herself a budding author currently working on her book *Handy Hints For Home And Household* - is generous with her scrumptious rock cakes and before long the horseradish wine ("a fiery brew") is liberated and the anecdotes start to flow.

"I mind well my old father," recalls Henry. "He says to me 'Never you let them old songs die out, Henry boy!' Well, I say, I know what you mean, father - them old songs must mean a lot to you. 'No' he say, 'But in years to come daft fools will good money to hear them!' Then there was my Uncle Albert. There was a story in our family of how he once had a flirtation with a young folk song collector by the name of Miss Lucinda Wormwood, but you don't want me to bore you with that, do you?"

The story of the Kipper's singing tradition (believed to stem from the Flems, who came to Norfolk because of their bad chests<sup>0</sup> and their discovery by the folk song clubs as a result of a recording made by Richard Digest is, of course, well-known by now. But it's fascinating to note how Henry and Sid have adapted to their newly-found celebrity status. Sid has always relished the opportunity - his first question at a club is invariably "Where are the groupies?" - but for the elderly Henry Kipper the transition hasn't always been easy. He has his reservations about travelling around singing clubs.

"We been to places they make me sleep on soft beds with blankets and clean sheets. How the hell so they expect me to sleep like that?" he says.

"Never been outside Norfolk before had you, father?"

"No, I never even been as far as Knapton before. And I never wanted to go to Knapton so that didn't matter. What they got in Knapton that we haven't got in Trunch?"

So what do you think of the world beyond Trunch, Mr. Kipper?

"There's some funny people out there. They talk funny, don't they? Some of these people you can't understand what they say. And they always want you to eat some foreign muck. I prefer Dot's home cooking."

The actual travelling can also be a problem. They usually catch a train, put their

bikes in the guard's van, and then cycle to the gig. "Sometimes," add Sid, "we borrow a car for the evening."

Oh really. Who from?

"Well, we don't actually know who the cars belong to when we borrow them... mind you, some people are a bit inconsiderate. They leave the petrol tank empty and no fags in the glove compartment. But you make do, don't you? It's not a glamorous life being a folk singer, you know."

"I thought it might be quite glamorous being a megastar. You know, plenty of money, young mauffers throwing themselves at me, that sort of thing. But that's not like that. Most of the time I have to look after father and make sure he don't get into trouble, so I don't have a chance to get into any myself. And all that travelling takes up a lot of time I could spend in the bookies. And some of the people we stay with are a bit peculiar. They know nothing about the local poaching, for instance, and hardly any of them have the Sporting Life delivered."

Mr. Henry Kipper's concerns are rather more ideological. Halfway through the 15th bottle of horseradish wine he confides to me that he's worried that Sid's attitude towards the songs isn't entirely wholesome. I sympathise. The songs are, after all, very dear to him. "They'll be even dearer when I get hold of them," says Sid. "That boy," says Henry Kipper, shaking his old head sadly, "is a constant worry to me."

"And when we sing at these folk song clubs, the songs sometimes don't get treated with proper respect. See, they don't listen. Silly buggers, they sit there and laugh at them half the time."

They laugh at your songs? Now why on earth should they to a thing like that?

"S'pose they don't understand them proper."

Fortified by the horseradish, I take my courage in both hands and challenge them both with the Big Question. The rumours are beginning to spread around the folk scene that Sid and Henry Kipper are not genuine traditional singers at all, but impostors, who make up their songs as they go along. There's a stunned silence in the room and only the heavy tick of the grandfather clock.

"Well," says Sid eventually, "I have heard there are two young blokes who go around pretending to be us. You heard that, father?"

“No,” says Mr. Kipper stonily.

“Who in his right mind would want to go round dressing up looking like this old fool?” adds Sid.

Apparently enraged, Mr. Kipper suddenly gets up and storms out of the room, swearing as he bangs his head on the low-hanging bream (a fish trophy). I chase after Mr. Kipper, distraught that I have offended him talking of impostors. He’s in the loo. It’s the horseradish wine, not the conversation that caused his rapid exit, he informs me abruptly through clenched teeth.

When he returns we change the subject and I ask Sid how many songs there are in the family repertoire.

“ Well no-one know. You see, now that people are showing an interest in them and paying good money to hear them, we’re remembering new old songs all the time. Sometimes we go to some folk do somewhere and hear an old song and one of us think “that reminds me!” And then before you can say Martin McCartney, we’ve remembered the whole bloody thing. There’s loads more we could remember if only we knew what they were.”

Henry: “Of course, there’s not just songs. There’s also dances like The Dashing White Privates and mummering plays and so on. And tunes.”

Oh yes, tunes. The Kippers are such masters of harmony singing that their instrumental prowess is often overlooked. In fact the Kippers are keeping alive the ancient instruments the Trunch Blow-Pipes and the Half-Row Melodeon, shortly to be heard on the new Buttons & Bows album. They’ve even been recoding a single for Richard Digest – an extended version of Whistling Monologue. This features a couple of verses not included when they recorded it on their Since Time Immoral album.

“It’s a deeper plot,” says Sid, “We’ve remembered a few more verses. There’s one verse a bit gory, but he say alright, that Mr. Digest. But he went white when he heard it.” On the other side in When The Wind Blows, which is “all about the trouble you can get with the wind. You know, all the different things you can smell depending on which way the wind blows.”

Even more exciting is the news that the Kippers are currently in the process of

remembering a ballad opera based on the Trunch Crab Wars. The opera is likely to be called The Crabpots and they mention that they are hoping to persuade some of the leading lights of the revival such as Maddy Groves and John Fitzpatrick to join them in the venture.

“We are remembering various bits of The Crabpots as time goes by. There’s a few songs we think might be a part of it, like I Wish I Was Plural No More and Fall Down and the like, but we’re a long way from remembering all of it. I mean, that’s hard work remembering songs and things, you know. That’s not like remembering something you forgot yesterday. Some of these old songs have been totally forgotten now for hundreds of years. Now that takes a lot of remembering, don’t it father?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know, I’ve forgotten.”

But you have remembered one of the old dances, haven’t you?

“What? – The Dashing White Privates, you mean?” says Mr. Kipper, “Well, since we’ve been going round in folk circles we’ve been to a few of them old barn dances and we were surprised to see that they were doing them all wrong. I mean, the whole point of them old dances was to tell a story, but they do them without any story at all. Se we showed them how to do the old Privates with the story and all. They were astonished. They’d never seen nothing like it. That Mr. Eddie Upspoke wrote it all down, se hw must have been impressed. We done it at Sidmouth last year, and then at Whitby we got everybody doing it. They kept saying “I don’t believe it, I don’t believe it”. But that was true.”

Their prowess with tunes is likely to be put to further use on you another record.

“Well,” says Sid, “That Mr. Digest he say “Boys, we’ve got to come up with a new gimmick”. So I asked him that he meant by gimmick and he say that meant exposing another bit of the old traditions. So we thought we might get the Old Trunch Brewery Band to play for us and doing it all about the different seasons we have where we live. We’ll put all the old seasonal rhymes on it, like ‘Thirty Days Hath September, all the rest I can’t remember’ and so on. We thought that would be a novel idea to have a gramophone record that go through the year in order.”

By the way Henry, was there anyone who was a particular influence on your singing?

“Pardon.”

Now that is fascinating. Walter Pardon was an important figure in the development of Henry Kipper’s singing style?”

Henry: “No, I’m saying I didn’t understand the question.”

Okay, so where do the Kippers go from here?

“Well, we aren’t going anywhere from here. We live here. The question is, where you going from here? ‘Cos we’re now off to the Old Goat for a pint or two, so if you’re going that way you can give us a lift.”

(supplied to us by Chris Sugden)