

## The First Song, Folklore and Song collecting in Yorkshire by Sabine Baring-Gould in the 1860s

Martin Graebe

Sabine Baring-Gould is strongly associated with the folk song of Devon and Cornwall through the collection of songs that he made from country people in the two counties and which he published in his two books *Songs of the West* and *A Garland of Country Song*. He regarded this collection as the greatest achievement of his life - a life in which he had achieved so much else as a writer, an antiquarian, an archaeologist, a churchman and squire of his small Devonshire village. He started collecting songs in 1887 and his interest continued until a few years before his death in 1924. One of my quests has been to understand how Baring-Gould's interest in collecting folklore and folk song developed. Recently I have found out a little more about some of these early influences and I believe that I have now identified the first folk song that Baring-Gould collected and published. Today I want to tell you about that and about some of those other activities when he was a young man that set him on his path.

We know that he heard folk songs as a youth when he wandered around Dartmoor on his pony, staying at local inns. He wrote, later in life, that he regretted that he had not, at the time, noted the songs down. When he did start to collect songs, in middle age, he re-visited some of these old haunts to see if he could find any remaining songs. A few years ago I noted a passage in Baring-Gould's book *Further Reminiscences* in which he gives the text of a song 'The Bonny Blue Handkerchief' which he collected from John Woodrich of Thrushelton in Devon and says

*'I presume that the following was gathered in Yorkshire, but I do not know. Ginger Jack professed not to be able to recall where he learned it.'*<sup>1</sup>

The Yorkshire connection here is weak and is in connection with a description of the mill workers leaving at the end of a shift. What has intrigued me for a long time, though, was his closing remark on this passage:

*'I may add that whilst at Horbury I collected several folk-songs, carols and folk-tales.'*

At that time a search of the manuscripts, including the additional material unearthed at Killerton in 1992, had not turned up anything collected from Yorkshire. Since then I have kept my eyes open and I have found a few scraps of references in articles and books that Baring-Gould had published. One scrap that I found in relation to the Cherry Tree Carol in Baring-Gould's introduction to Chope's *Carols for Use in Church*, where he writes:

*'I was teaching carols to a party of mill-girls in the West Riding of Yorkshire some ten years ago, and amongst them that by Dr. Gauntlett 'Saint Joseph was a walking' when they bust out with 'Nay! We know one a deal better nor yond;' and, lifting up their voices, they sang to a curious old strain*

*St Joseph was an old man  
And an old man was he, etc.'*<sup>2</sup>

In preparing a paper on Baring-Gould's work on folklore in 2003 I found some clues which have led me to firm evidence of his activity in Yorkshire.

It is now clear that his interest in song developed in parallel with his interest in folklore and, indeed, he may not at this time have distinguished between them. As a boy and at university his inclination had been to romance and he was drawn to the heroic tales of Northern Europe and, particularly, to the Norse sagas. This interest continued through the years in which he was a teacher at Hurstpierpoint, where he used the sagas as the basis for his stories for the boys when he took groups for walks on a Saturday. This interest led to his journey to Iceland in 1862 which gave him the basis for his book *Iceland – It's Scenes and Sagas* published in 1863.<sup>3</sup> In the following year Baring-Gould left Hurstpierpoint, and entered the church as a curate at Horbury, Near Halifax.

He was given the job of establishing a mission in the valley below the town in Horbury Bridge where the mill workers and canal boatmen lived. He hired a cottage and used it as a chapel and as a schoolroom. He tells us in his reminiscences that, after the school finished, his pupils would stand on his coat-tails and prevent him from leaving until he had told them a story. At Hurstpierpoint he had based the tales he told the boys on his studies of the Icelandic sagas. Now, I believe, his stories were based on English folk tales, often from Devon.

Baring-Gould's next major work on folklore, written during his engagement to the young mill-girl who was to become his wife, was *The Book of Werewolves* in 1865.<sup>4</sup> This is now one of his best-known books, because of the interest in its subject material and because it has been reprinted over the years, most recently as a cheap paperback which has increased the stock in the book market enormously. In later life he recorded that he did not make any money from either of these books.

All this time Baring-Gould was listening to and recording new tales from Yorkshire. An article by him was published in *Notes and Queries* in 1865 under the title 'Devonshire Household Tales.'<sup>5</sup> This included five tales which he had collected. The introduction to those tales is a harbinger of his calls to action on folk song 25 years later:

"It is of great importance that the household tales of England should be collected, as they have been collected in France, in Germany, in Russia, in Greece, in Scotland &c. ....Our antiquarian collectors of folk-lore have hitherto searched for legends, superstitions and charms; let them diligently seek out the household tale and I am sure they will find them still existing. I am now removed from my native county of Devonshire, where I know these tales may be picked up, and I have but a few which I was able to collect. Seeing before me no prospect of being able to continue my search for them I contribute what I have to 'N&Q' in hopes of setting others on the scent."

These tales were to re-appear in the following year as part of an ambitious appendix on 'Household Tales' that Baring-Gould contributed to William Henderson's *Folklore of the Northern Counties* in 1866.<sup>6</sup> This was Baring-Gould's first major contribution to the study of English folklore. He also supplied a number of anecdotes for the book. There was an overlap between this material and that he published in *Notes and Queries*.

In October this year, while I was working on a retrospective review on my work on the Baring-Gould's song collection, I had a chance to look back over some of the material I had found during the years and to fill in a few gaps. One of the discoveries that I made was in the January 20th, 1866 issue of *Notes and Queries* where Baring-Gould had written an article entitled 'Yorkshire Ballad' in which he gave a song that he obtained from some mill girls called 'The Jovial, Reckless Boy' with

what he describes as 'a tune with an ancient character'. *Notes and Queries* does not give the music but I found it in one of the rough manuscripts from Plymouth together with a note confirming that it came from Yorkshire. Though I had noticed it several years ago, I had not made the connection that this was actually collected by him 23 years before he 'officially' started to collect in Devon. So, after a gap of something like 140 years, here is the song:

*I am a jovial reckless boy  
And by my trade I go  
I trudge the world all over  
And get my living so.*

*I trudged this world all over  
A pretty fair maid I spied  
I asked her if she would go with me  
And be my lawful bride.*

*The pretty fair maid denied me  
And said 'If I do so  
I shall be ruined for ever a day  
And shall be loved no mo'.*

*'Oh, how will you be ruined'  
The reckless boy replied  
For I am sure I will marry you  
As soon as work I find.*

*Now hold your tongue from clattering  
And tell me none of your tales*

*For you are a jovial reckless boy  
And that is your only trade.  
How do you know me so, my dear  
And how do you know my trade?  
I know you by t' fringes of your apron  
Of your apron, she said.*

*The fringes of your apron  
And by your slender shoe  
Your stockings they are as white as snow  
So that's how I know you.*

*I could not help for smiling  
To hear the girl say so  
I threw my arm around her waist  
And along we both did go.*

*She brought a glass all in her hand  
And filled it to the brim  
Here's to the health of each reckless boy  
That calls my true love his.*

'An odd little song!' Shan said to me 'I don't understand it' – but it was another small but exciting moment and I decided to include it in my paper because of its interest.

I'd also rediscovered a paragraph in the essay about folk song that Sabine included in his mammoth book *English Minstrelsie*.

*'The other day, in 1896, I was back in Horbury, and I went to see old friends I had not seen for thirty years and more. One of these my first singers came running to see me when "'t mill loosed" at noon. "Eh, lass!" said I, "dost' remember singing to me the 'Jovial Heckler's Boy'? She laughed, and her eyes danced as she said, "Aye — but if thou'lt stay a bit I sing thee a score more."*

A small puzzle then – 'Jovial Heckler's Boy'. A very small bell rang and another dim memory stirred itself subliminally in the depths of my over-encumbered brain - but another glass of wine soon took care of that. Several days passed before I woke up one morning thinking: 'Hang on a moment, Martin - what IS a heckler?' The 'Concise Oxford' quickly told me that it was a dresser of flax - using a steel comb known as a hackle. Google found me a bit more background and led me to a song title 'The Roving Heckler Lad'. The Roud Index then directed me to Frank Kidson's Traditional Tunes where there is an incomplete version of the song and the following information:

*In the days of handloom weaving, a "Heckler," or "Hackler," was a man who heckled flax to make it ready for the distaff or spinning wheel. It was a labour which required*

*some degree of exertion and skill, and therefore a heckler would, to ply his trade, travel from village to village to heckle the flax which many house-holders who had suitable land would grow themselves. The hecklers were famous for wearing a fancy linen apron with an ornamental fringe hanging from it. The wandering heckler is, however, now a thing of the past, and his trade is superseded by machinery; but the above account is from the remembrance of a person who knew the time when the hecklers travelled about from place to place as described. The song of "The Roving Heckler Lad," used to be popular in the clothing districts round about Leeds."*<sup>7</sup>

So, if you replace 'reckless' with 'heckler' it makes a lot more sense, particularly the bit about the apron. So far I have not been able to trace any further versions of the song or a broadside with it on. But it may be out there somewhere.

So this contribution to *Notes and Queries* is certainly the first English folk song that Sabine published. Baring-Gould, says, that he actually collected the song, with others, from the mill girls (who may well have been his future wife and her friends) in 1864, the first year he was in Horbury. He also describes how, in 1867, he took down a version of the 'Spanish Lady' from a workman on a train between Leeds and Thirsk

So far no manuscript notes of songs collected during this period have been found.<sup>8</sup> After these early experiences he seems to have put folk song on the shelf for another 23 years. Marriage and the start of what was to be a large family as well as a lonelier, more responsible parish seem to have cooled his interest and the focus of his writing shifted to religious topics.

And the rest, as they say, is history. From this small beginning was a remarkable collection born. It was this experience, together with the knowledge that he had acquired about the broad sweep of English music that enabled him to step forward when the call came years later. His greatest achievement, then, was the collection he made in Devon and Cornwall. But let us not completely overlook his achievements in Yorkshire.

Martin Graebe

(Read at the meeting of the Traditional Song Forum at Sheffield University, 4 Dec 2004)

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *Further Reminiscences* (London: John Lane at the Bodley Head, 1925), p3-4.

<sup>2</sup> R R Choep, *Carols for Use in Church* (London: Metzler, 1875), p xix – p xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *Iceland – it's Scenes and Sagas* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1863).

<sup>4</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves* (London: Smith and Elder, 1865).

<sup>5</sup> Sabine Baring-Gould, 'Devonshire Household Tales – I', *Notes and Queries* Vol 8, 3rd Series (187) Jul 29.

<sup>6</sup> William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders. With an Appendix on Household Stories by S Baring-Gould*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Kidson, *Traditional Tunes* (Oxford, Charles Taphouse, 1891), p146-147.

<sup>8</sup> Update, 2017 – The journal in which Baring-Gould recorded his finds in Yorkshire has since been discovered. For the full story see my book 'As I Walked Out'.

## Jovial, Reckless Boy (Jovial Heckler Boy)

I am a jo - vi - al reck - less boy, And by my trade I go. I  
trudge the world\_ all o - ver and get my liv - ing so

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I know you by t' fringes of your apron  
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She brought a glass all in her hand  
And filled it to the brim  
Here's to the health of each reckless boy  
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Song text as given in Notes and Queries, 3rd ser. IX. Jan 20, 1866. Baring-Gould says that he collected the song from some mill girls in 1864. The tune is from the Rough Manuscript (Vol 13 p 40) and is similar to that given by Kidson in 'Traditional Tunes'.

English Folk-Songs for Schools collected and arranged by S. Baring Gould, M.A., and Cecil J. Sharp, B.A. Composer. Baring-Gould, Sabine. I-Catalogue NumberI-Cat. No. None [force assignment]. Movements/SectionsMov'ts/Sec's. 53 songs. The Wraggle Taggle Gipsies. Lord Rendal. The Old Man and His Wife. The Shepherd's Daughter. The Two Magicians. Cold Blows the Wind. The Golden Vanity. Flowers in the Valley. The Coasts of Barbary. Henry Martin. This gruesome fairytale (analogous to the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree"™) was collected in Devonshire by Baring-Gould in the 1860s. A pretty little girl is murdered by her stepmother, who cooks her heart and liver and serves them to the child's father; she is then buried by a rose tree, where her little brother weeps for her daily. In the spring a white bird appears among the roses, sweetly singing:My wicked mother slew me, My dear father ate me! The bird's song so charms various craftsmen that she gets from them a fine pair of shoes, a gold watch and chain, and a millstone. Carrying these, she lures the family out of the house one by one and drops the watch and chain on her father, the shoes on her brother"and the millstone on her stepmother. Text in Henderson , 1866: 314"17 Song Of England. Climate. Architecture. Yorkshire & Humber. Folklore. 2013. By Amelia Meyer. Folklore refers to the tradition of telling tales and reliving legends amongst the individuals within a particular country, territory or tribe. This is usually done orally as older generations tell the stories to the younger members of their culture, keeping the traditions alive. As with all folklore, English legends are fantastical in nature, often referring to heroes, villains, ghosts, imps and fairies. England's folklore has been enriched by several factors. First, its history has been a complex and convoluted one. It has seen many battles, losses, victories, religious revolutions, artistic renaissances and political upheavals.