

Folk Tradition, Families and Generational perspectives

Merv Davey - Cava 16/08/08

To introduce myself, I am a research student with the Institute of Cornish Studies looking at how Cornish identity is constructed and expressed through the medium of folk music and folk dance traditions in Cornwall. The approach that I am taking to these studies is called *Participatory Action Research* which is to say that I am a practitioner and active participant in the area and subject matter that I am researching. Which translated less formally is to say that I am a jobbing musician in a barn dance band and take part in a variety of events that fall within the traditional folk spectrum from Polperro's Mock Mayor to facilitating revivals of the Clay Country Tea Treats and in doing so reflect upon and record aspects which construct or express Cornish Identity. The extent to which subjectivity is a problem in this method of research is much debated, on the one hand it is felt that objectivity suffers at the hand of one's own bias and personal experiences but against this it is argued that these very experiences add insight and information to the study in hand. Two tools are used within *Participatory Action Research* to address and counteract this subjectivity:

- *Critical Reflexivity*, which is to say that impressions and conclusions are critically evaluated by being aware of one's own interests (or bias) and experiences and taking this into account when considering the meaning or purpose of an activity or event.
- *Triangulation*, of the understanding of an event or activity arrived at with accounts and interpretations from different sources.

For all that it can be couched in academic terms this process of careful reflection and reference to other sources of information is a common sense and practical way of approaching research that lends its self well to the study of one's own family history. What I would like to share with you today is a personal journey tracing musical activity and a sense of Cornishness through five generations of my own family.

The recent juxtaposition of events a little over 125 years apart prompted me to look more closely at my own family and follow a thread which goes back to the days of the Seine Fishing industry in Newquay during the last quarter of the 19th Century. The story, however, starts in 2008, a little further up the Cornish coast at Port Isaac and a *Barn Dance* held in the village hall to raise money for the local RNLI lifeboat. The band booked originally found they were unable to do the gig at short notice and my two adult children were asked to stand in. Jojo and Cas play flute and guitar as a duo called "Scoot" and use their performance as a passport for travel to various folk and Celtic festivals but they are also well versed in playing for barn dances or ceilidhs. For the uninitiated the term *barn dance* is often used interchangeably with *ceilidh* and

might be described as a frenzied activity involving reels, spins and hurtling around the dance floor to folk dance music with a driving beat. The barn dance at Port Isaac was evidently enjoyed by all and at the end of the evening Scoot received the accolade of being thanked as the *North Cornwall Ceilidh Orchestra* – a reference to the fact that although there were only two of them to replace a much bigger band they made enough noise to compensate!

Shortly before this event my mother presented me with a notebook written by my grandfather, James Edward Veale, that she had discovered, classically, in a box of old photographs. The notebook contained reminiscences and stories of what he described as *Old Newquay* and amongst them was the description of an event in 1885, much like the Barn Dance described above, at which my Great Grandmother, Phillipa Susan Veale (nee Clemens) together with her sister Blanche and brother in law Ed Murrish were asked to play for the dancing. He describes this event as a *Troyl* and it was held in the Unity fish cellars now clear of fish barrels and nets at the end of the seine fishing season. Reflecting upon the meaning for grandfather, he was a member of the Newquay Old Cornwall Society and responded to their motto *Cuntelleugh an brewyon us gesys na vo kellys travyth* (Gather the fragments that are left so that nothing is lost). For Grandfather this was part of *Old Cornwall*, a Cornish heritage he was proud of and felt it important to record. From the perspective of Jojo and Cas, however, it is a living Cornish tradition, something that they *just do*.

Starting with the present and working backwards, Scoot are fairly up front with their music and their sense of being Cornish, their most recent exploit was to travel to Brussels to represent Cornwall as part of a programme of events celebrating Celtic culture in Europe. For them a Cornish identity is a matter of fact and it is natural that they should use music as an expression of this. From their perspective during their formative years the world was rich in the icons of Cornish identity, whilst following rugby for example as well as the more self conscious activities of celebrating St Pirans day. Teenage years provided the opportunity to wind up parents with some magnificent Celtic tattoos and to be slightly angry young Cornish people as they became more politically aware and conscious that not everyone perceived or recognised the same Cornwall as them. It is interesting to reflect that whilst both of them engaged in some formal music study there remained an area of musical activity that was essentially within a traditional idiom, simply something that you participated in as a social activity, there was no agenda involving exams, creative careers or commerciality. Their music and the culture that surrounds it remains a very clear vehicle for their celebration and expression of Cornish identity, however.

My own developmental experiences around music were similar to those of Jojo and Cas in that there was always a mandolin, guitar or banjo lying around somewhere and situations where the

family would play music together informally. Although I had the opportunity for formal study this fizzled out quite quickly because I could not see the connection with the kind of music that interested me which mostly consisted of turning the volume up to no 11 (there are normally only 10 points on the volume control) on the amplifier and playing extemporisations on lead guitar. It is quite challenging now to reflect upon whether I made an active connection with music and Cornish identity as a teenager in the 1960s. My immediate response would be no, but on reflection I can question this a little when I recall musical contemporaries of mine playing in a band called *Saffron* and being quite uncompromising about their Cornish identity in their stage presence even if the music was a mixture of Rhythm & Blues and Rock. Rock music, of course, is as much about the theatre of stage presence as it is about the style and structure of the music and I can remember hero worshipping Big Al Hodge playing some very upbeat Bach at a gig in the Blue Lagoon at Newquay with the Jaguars, they were upfront about being a local, Bodmin School band, and whenever I have seen him at more recent gigs Al's Cornish roots were always part of the show.

I grew up in a family that were aware of a distinctive Cornish background, for example at one point my father did some market gardening and called the enterprise *Gwel Vean* a small working or small field. They were aware of the significance of Cornish place names and would involve me in discussions to try to guess the meaning based on the classic Tre, Pol and Pen, we lived at Pentire and I understood this to mean headland. My early experience of Cornish identity lies closer to the *Old Newquay* of my grandfather, however, and my association with a group of youngsters, mostly the children of the community around Newquay Harbour, who were known as the harbour rats. We spent our summers swimming around the boats and harbour environs and engaged in tombstoning, diving and other activities designed to annoy the boatmen and show off to the girls. Looking at my experiences with the harbour rats carefully, I can now recognise my first encounter with the *other* that defined me as being different and Cornish. In the language of social anthropology creating the *other* is the device by which a group can define itself and for the harbour rats the *other* were *emmets*! I have not researched the earliest use of this term but the group of youngsters with which I was involved laid claim to coining this term in the 1960s.

Needless to say my parents generation were less than happy with this terminology, tourism being seen as the lifeblood of the community. Although the official line might have been *visitors*, there was some admission that the term *furriner* was once in vogue and it is difficult to see that the connotations were very different. This identification of difference or other in 1950s / 60s Newquay is well illustrated by the words of the Newquay Heva. In 1961 Newquay Crantock Street School, which I attended, were commissioned along with Nigel Tangy of Glendorgal and

a musician from RAF St Mawgan, called H Whipps to compose the words, music and Choreography for the Newquay Furry dance which became the Heva. Once line reads *and visitors leave happy memories behind* but from school I distinctly remember it as *furriners leave more than rubbish behind*.

The Newquay Heva song triangulates with my own recollections and captures some of the memories of *Old Newquay* together with a strong hint of Cornish distinctive identity in the fourth verse.

Heva Heva now the catch is in
Let the dancing singing and the Troil begin
Pilchard, Herring filling up the mauns
Tell the Huers thay can put away their horns

*In the sky see the seagulls soar
From the beach hear the breakers roar
Clear the streets tonight for everyone
And we`ll make merry till the day is done*

Nows the time to dance away your woes
So flip off your shoes and ready on your toes
Mum and dad and gran and uncle Clem
Come and show the youngsters your as spry as them

Shout hooray and hooray again
What's it matter even if we have some rain
Girls from Minor, boys from the Whim
When together don't mind if the sink or swim

Welcome to our visitors from afar
May we hope they think how nice we Cornish are
If they don't well never never mind
Visitors leave happy memories behind

Fistral Bay, Tolcarne, the Gannel too
Lusty Glaze and Whipsiderry all for you

Golden sands and rocks and little pools
If we're not content then we're a bunch of fools

Active, Hope and Rose and Unity
Each name a pride of any company
Good Intent and Tithy, Fly and Spy
Pack your seine nets up you know the reason why.

Moving on to the third generational thread, that of my parents, I have been researching and participating in folk tradition in Cornwall for most of my adult life and my parents have always been interested, but also slightly defensive in that the musical traditions we now seemed to value they had apparently discarded as old and irrelevant. What I seem to find is that in the brave new world of post Second World War, ration bound Britain, people were looking forward to better times and dismissive of a past that had perhaps failed them. This is clearly an understandable perspective and one that I encountered again recently when researching the Snail Creep and Clay other country customs to find that people were surprised, and a little delighted that we were interested in their childhood memories of an event they had confined to an irrelevant past.

An immediate post war influence on my family's musicality was the enigmatic Goonhavern Banjo Band, my mother actually only played with them for a year or so in her early twenties but her brother and sister were active members for until the 60s. Much of my information comes from the recollections of my uncle, Edgar Veal and my aunt, Elsie Millis, whose husband was also a member of the band and played mandolin / mandolin banjo. He had actually spent some time in the states and it is interesting to consider now whether the popularity of the Banjo Band was a reflection on the Cornish diaspora and the number of families which, like my own, extended to numerous cousins in Canada and the USA. The Goonhavern Banjo Band was essentially a concert band which used banjos of all shapes and sizes to emulate a conventional string orchestra. Their repertoire comprised a mixture of popular light classics, popular songs associated with banjos and the American south together with the classical banjo arrangements of Emile Grimshaw. I think it is fair to say that the band were more formal and structured in their approach to performance than the North Cornwall Ceilidh Orchestra in 2008 or the Fish Cellar Dance band in 1885 but I think the imagery conjures up a comparable musical culture.

I was privileged in that a fluke of family history gave me access to my grandfather's world in a way that I did not fully appreciate at the time but have valued ever since. In the best of Cornish tradition my parents became economic migrants and left Cornwall when I was in my late teens. I

elected to stay behind, lodged with various relatives in Newquay for a while and returned to stay with them throughout college days and again on my eventual return to Cornwall. It was during these stays that I was regaled with stories of my grandfather by my aunt, who was 20 years my mother's senior and effectively the previous generation. I was told about my grandfather's ability to do a step dance called lattapuch well into his fifties and about dances in the fish cellars at Newquay called troils. Troil was variously spelt with a "y" or "l" but pronounced more like trall by him. From the perspective of my own increasing interest in folk traditions, these stories were pivotal in the realisation that there was a whole set of folk traditions in Cornwall (and I now appreciate elsewhere as well) that were entirely outside what might be described as the Folk Song and Dance Society orthodoxy. Not the least of this was the recognition that Cornwall had a culture of folk dancing and its own dialect expression for a barn dance in the term *troyl*.

The recent discovery of grandfather's notebook has provided a little more insight into the world of the fish cellar troils of late 19th Century Newquay:

"It was a jolly evening arranged by the Master Seiner of each company. I remember one that I was taken to when I was about 5 years of age. That would have been in the year 1885, it was held in the long room of the Unity Cellars. The Seiner was Stephen Hoare. I went with my mother, my aunt Blanche and uncle Ed Murrish. Mother and Ed played concertinas and a man from Truro played a Fiddle. There was dancing and general merriment in the Long Room. There was a big fire in the corner, the left side at the far end from the door. They were roasting herring on a grid iron. A competition, who could eat the most, was won by Arthur Chegwidden, he eat nine ! They had to resort to herring as there were no Pilchards. The fun went on until the early hours of the morning. There was an unfortunate accident that evening . To get into the long room a platform about 4ft wide stretched from the Plat, a portion of land now used as a car park for the Pavilion, to the door of the long room. Of course it was very dark in those days and Miss Annie Giles went over the side and broke her leg. It was very amusing for me a boy of five watching them dancing the lancers and many old dances including the Latapuch:

*Latapouch, Latapouch in an old Shoe
I can dance Latapouch better than you
Latapouch, Latapouch in an old hat
I can dance Latapouch better than that.*

The fun was, when those trying fell on to their back."

A Simple way to triangulate this narrative is to look at the pictures of the Unity cellar and adjacent malt house and visit the actual site. It becomes immediately obvious that the malt

house was situated above the cellars and the plank described by my grandfather probably went across from near the malt house directly into the sail loft where the dancing took place. This may well explain the misfortune experienced by the unfortunate Miss Annie Giles! Another angle on the atmosphere of the fish cellars if not an actual troyl is provided by the words of Wilkie Collins in *Rambles Beyond Railways* (London 1851, Anthony Mott 1982):

"Here we must prepare ourselves to be bewildered by incessant confusion and noise; for here are assembled all the women and girls in the district, piling up the pilchards on layers of sale, at three-pence an hour; to which remuneration, a glass of brandy and a piece of bread and cheese are hospitably added at every sixth hour, by way of refreshment. It is a service of some little hazard to enter this place at all. There are men rushing out with empty barrows, and men rushing in with full barrows, in almost perpetual succession."

The term troyl was clearly in use as a dialect term in the Newquay area and is recognised in both dialect and Cornish language dictionaries:

- Nance 1923 **Glossary of Celtic Words in Cornish Dialect**
Troyl: *Tinners Feast or a trip around the bay*
Troillia: *to Turn about*
- Jago 1882 **The Ancient Language and Dialect of Cornwall**
Troyl: *A Tinners Feast, A Feast, A short row on the sea*
- Trubner 1880 **Glossary of words in use in Cornwall**
Troyl: *A short Row on the Sea , Old Cornish for feast*
- Pryce 1790 **Archaeologia Cornu-Britannica**
Trailia: *to turn;*
Dho trailia a dhelhar: *to turn back, to tumble over*
- Borlase 1769 **Cornish English Vocabulary in "Antiquities",**
Trailia: *to turn;*
Traillia an ber: *to turn the spit; treyl, id,*
Troill: *A turning Reel; AR, a Term in Hunting*

From the above it is fairly easy to see how a term that combines a feast with a reel or a spin might be used to describe a barn dance in the fish cellars

It is difficult at this distance in time to be certain about my grandfathers' perspectives but he clearly valued what he described as *Old Cornwall* and felt these records were important. Having been presented with his badge by my aunt I know that he was a member of the Old Cornwall Society and I have a slightly hazy memory of being gently chided by him for including England as part of our address. So I suspect that he would be quite approving of his great grandchildren's assertive Cornishness.

