



Institute of Cornish Studies Conference 2012 Merv Davey

Introduction

“Folklife” is about the dialect, the folklore, the traditional songs, music, dance, crafts sports and costume that a community uses to understand its history and express its identity.¹ What I argue here is that Folklife underpins a distinctive sense of Cornish identity and that a dedicated archive would serve to celebrate and promote this identity. I argue that digital technologies address issues of storage and accessibility and that there is both an academic and a business case for the Institute of Cornish Studies to house and manage such an archive.

Folklife and the process of tradition

In discussing folklife it is important to understand folk tradition is a dynamic process, driven in the first place by a sense of continuity and identity but also fuelled by contemporary experience and the prevailing social climate. A couple of examples will help to illustrate the process of folk tradition in action:

Example 1 The Furry Dance



The transition of the term Faddy > Furry > Flora > Floral is good example. The earliest written reference found to date for the Furry dance in Cornwall is a letter published in the Gentleman’s Magazine of 1790. This makes clear that the dance is understood as the Faddy and takes place on “Furry Day”:

“It is called the Furry – day supposedly Flora’s day; not I imagine, as many have thought in remembrance of some festival instituted in honour of that goddess, but rather from the garlands commonly worn on that day. About the middle of the day they collect together to dance hand-in-hand round the streets to the sound of a fiddle playing a particular tune, which they continue to do till it is dark. This is called the “Faddy”.²

By the latter half of the nineteenth century the terms Furry Day” and the “Furry Dance” were indistinguishable for folklorists such as Hunt³ and Courtney⁴ but Hunt is already subscribing to classical romanticism and connecting the dance to the Roman Floralia.⁵ Both Baring-Gould in 1891⁶ and Sharp 1913⁷ refer to the dances as the Furry not the Faddy or Flora.

The natural rhyme of Flora with Truro was too good to miss for the Tea Treat and Regatta culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries:

“Jan said to me wan day
‘Can’ ee dance the Flora?’
Iss I can with a nice young man
Ere we’ m off to Trora”⁸

The Celto-Cornish movement challenged the correctness of the term “Flora” in the correspondence pages of the Western Morning News and the Mercury. In 1931 the Old Cornwall Society published a booklet discussing the origins of the Furry in detail⁹ and this is referenced to and expanded upon by Toy in his history of Helston.¹⁰ For all the Celto-Cornish movements’ preference for the term “Furry”, “Flora” became embedded in popular usage. The Helston Flora Day committee today takes the position that the day is “Flora Day” but the dance is the “Furry”.¹¹

The use of the term “Floral” can be dated to Katie Moss’s composition, “The Floral Dance” which was inspired by her visit to Helston in the spring of 1911. Although to all intents and purposes this was an entirely new composition with Edwardian lyrics celebrating the rural idyll, the Furry Dance tune from Helston was employed as a recurrent theme by Moss.¹² Peter Dawson recorded it on a 78-rpm disc in 1912 with a number of subsequent re-issues due to its popularity. By the nineteen sixties the term “Floral” had become inextricably linked with the Furry Dance and used interchangeably with “Flora”. This link was subsequently popularised and reinforced by the

Brighthouse And Rastrick Band LP recording of 1977 and Terry Wogan's 1978 Top of the Pops performance. This was not altogether well received in Cornwall:

"Helston's Furry Dance tune has been raped from its home town and given a place among the best selling L.P. records, flooding the media with its haunting melody. Although irritating no doubt to many who think it a breach of west-country unwritten copyright, it has the advantage of free advertisements. It also brings a whiff of sanity to the cacophony accepted by many as music. The popularity will pass; in time it will become again Helston's own tune, and we who love its unique appeal conjured up by true Cornishmen will be joining the crowds in the old town's revelry as usual."¹³

Whilst the popularity may have passed, there has nevertheless been an impact upon tradition in that the term "Floral" has replaced the term "Furry" in many locations of this tradition. For example, it was the express wish of the Boscastle archive to have their photographs of the Village Furry dance to be labelled as the Boscastle "Floral Dance" not "Furry Dance".¹⁴ There are also practical problems with the Brighthouse And Rastrick arrangement of Katie Moss's "Floral Dance" in that the pattern of bars and tune make this very difficult to dance a conventional Furry Dance to.¹⁵

It can be seen that over a 200 year period a range of different fashions and interpretations have influenced what we call the Furry dance.

Example 2 Padstow Mummers

It can be shown that the black faced tradition of the Padstow mummers has its origins in the guize dance traditions of 19th Century Cornwall and was based around a mummers play which incorporated popular songs and a step dance.¹⁶ By the 1950s the tradition it was being led by Charlie Bates and his band of "Merry Makers", they retained the tradition of black faces but lost the mummers play in favour of a street procession, still very much part of the guising tradition. In the process of becoming a street band some of the original songs such as "Old Daddy Fox" and "Mrs Nipper Nopper" were lost in favour of popular tunes that lend themselves to processions which included American "minstrel" songs.

As the wider social climate changed it was perhaps inevitable that blackened faces would lead to accusations of racism but following a Police investigation in 2004 the Crown Prosecution Service found there was no case to answer. However unfounded the accusations might have been they

nevertheless resulted in a name change to “Padstow Mummers” and greater care to ensure that the guises adopted would not cause offense.

PADSTOW MUMMERS



“It’s just face painting and dressing up in funny costume”

“It is a fertility rite for midwinter.”

“It is something to do with miners or people blacked up with coal dust from the cargo ships”



“A slave ship was wrecked off Padstow and the villagers blacked up to confuse the slavers and help the slaves escape.”



Another impact of this outside influence was greater reflection on the part of participants and observers on the meaning of the tradition. In 2005 the following impressions were recorded:

- This is a local tradition that has gone on for a long time
- The custom has merged with other things over the years and any offensive language associated with minstrel songs has been removed.
- It’s just face painting and dressing up in funny costume
- It is a fertility rite for midwinter.
- It is something to do with miners or people blacked up with coal dust from the cargo ships
- A slave ship was wrecked off Padstow and the villagers blacked up to confuse the slavers and help the slaves escape.
- It was also observed that there was a sense that the people of Padstow were claiming back their own territory from the realm of tourists and second homers. In a way this might be interpreted as exclusivity, but if so it was directed at “outsiders” and at worst the “English majority over the Tamar” rather than any specific ethnic minority group.¹⁷

What is interesting here is the variety of meanings ascribed to the tradition. These can be understood as “lore” rather than history and significant in that what people believed about the event provided greater evidence of its innocence of racism than any history of origin I could have provided as a researcher.

In both of these examples there are historical and contemporary narratives to be recorded. My argument is that Folk tradition is a process and not a stasis, so that a folklife archive should capture moments of both history and the present day.

Folklife in Cornwall

These examples are from my own, fairly narrow, field of research and using the definition in the abstract above a Folklife archive would broaden out into a wide range of different streams including:

FOLKLIFE IN CORNWALL:

Cornish Carols

Choirs ,

Community Singing and

Pub songs

Brass Band Music

Chapel Culture

Wrestling

Gig Racing

Surfing

Dialect

Mining terms

Kernewek

Place names

Surnames

Personal Names

Calendar Customs

Folklore and legends

Droll Telling

Celtic Revival and

Cornish Gorsedd

Spirituality

This is not an exhaustive list but the contents sit comfortably within the definition of folklife. The significance of these examples and thus the importance of Folklife in Cornwall is that they all carry a message of Cornish identity and distinctivity. So what I am proposing is a Folklife archive that will preserve, celebrate and promote a distinctive Cornish identity.

Some of these topics have Doctoral level research undertaken already, some I know to be under consideration and some are my project wish list. What these topics all have in common is that there is

already much information recorded about but spread across a wide range of pamphlets, booklets, private collections, local museums and websites. The information and recording is there but not necessarily very visible or accessible.

The business case for a folklife archive located with the Institute of Cornish studies

1. Identity is a core subject for the Institute of Cornish Studies and over the last 20 years a significant body of research and study has been developed supporting the case for recognition of a distinct Cornish identity. A folklife archive would fit well with the ethos of the ICS and compliment both the existing library of Cornish Studies material at Tremough Campus and the project sponsored by the Gorsedd to encourage Cornish authors to donate their work.
2. Once a working format was established the archive could develop organically on a project by project basis. For example a post graduate researcher on the Cornish Carol tradition might be invited to contribute digital copies of scores and audio recordings to the archive alongside a web version of the thesis.
3. Locating the Folklife Archive within the institutional setting of the University of Exeter would give it a security not shared by the myriad of archive projects which depend upon interested volunteers or grant funding. Web based archive projects can be particularly vulnerable here and only last as long as the webmasters interest or the payment of rental for web space.
4. As well as access to expertise within the academic setting of the University of Exeter, the ICS has a number of potential "Associate Research Fellows" as well as volunteers within the CAVA project with knowledge and skills that could be drawn upon to support and develop a Folklife Archive.
5. The adoption of digital and web based technologies as a format for the Folklife archive would address issues of storage and accessibility.¹⁸ The University of Exeter has the information technology infrastructure to support the development and maintenance of the archive and make it sustainable at a low cost.
6. The ICS is philosophically and strategically better placed to house a folklife archive than the obvious alternatives of Cornwall Council or the Royal Institution of Cornwall both of which are much slower to embrace the culture of a distinctive Cornish identity essential to underpin such an archive. Cornwall Council is at present unclear about the extent to which it will outsource services and outsourcing would make the archive vulnerable to the vagaries of funding.
7. The ICS is nevertheless well placed to work in close partnership with both the Cornwall Council and the Royal Institution of Cornwall as well as a number of other organisations who might contribute to the archive such as the Federation of Old Cornwall Societies and the Cornish Family History Society.

Notes

¹ The American folklife Centre, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/whatisfolklife.html> , accessed 12/09/2012, provides a useful definition of “Folklife”:

“The **traditional songs** we sing, listen and dance to

- *Fairy tales, stories, ghost tales and **personal histories***
- *Riddles, proverbs, figures of speech, jokes and **special ways of speaking***
- *Our **childhood games** and rhymes*
- *The **way we celebrate life***
 - *from birthing our babies to honouring our dead*
- *The entire range of our **personal and collective beliefs***
 - *religious, medical, magical, and social*
- ***Our handed-down recipes** and everyday mealtime traditions*
- *The **way we decorate our world***
 - *from patchwork patterns on our quilts to plastic flamingoes in our yards, to tattoos on our bodies*
- *The **crafts we create by hand***
 - *crocheted afghans, wooden spoons, cane bottoms on chairs*
- ***Patterns and traditions of work***
 - *from factory to office cubicle*
- *The many **creative ways we express ourselves** as members of our family, our community, our geographical region, our ethnic group, our religious congregation, or our occupational group*
- ***Folklife is part of everyone's life.** It is as constant as a ballad, as changeable as fashion trends. It is as intimate as a lullaby, and as public as a parade.*

In the end ... we are all folk.”

² Durgan, letter addressed to Editor, Sylvanus Urban. *Gentlemans Magazine and Historical Chronicle* for the year MDCCXC, p. 520.

³ Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, the Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881).

⁴ Margaret Ann Courtney, *Cornish Feasts and Folk-Lore. Revised and Reprinted from the Folk-Lore Society Journals, 1886-87.* (Penzance, 1890).

⁵ Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances* , p171

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- ⁶ Sabine Baring-Gould, and Rev. H. Fleetwood Shepherd. *Songs and Ballads of the West: A Collection Made from the Mouths of the People*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1891).
- ⁷ Sharp, Cecil J., and George Butterworth. *The Morris Book, with a Description of the Dances as Performed by the Morris Men of England*. Vol. 5. (London: Novello, 1913), p. 102.
- ⁸ John Betjeman and A.L.Rowse, *Victorian and Edwardian Cornwall from old photographs*, (London, B. T. Batsford Ltd,1974), caption to plate 132 "The Furry Dance Helston, 1901".
- ⁹ James Dryden Hosken, *Helston Furry Day*, (St Ives, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 1931).
- ¹⁰ Spencer Toy, *The History of Helston*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 367 - 379.
- ¹¹ Souvenir Programme, Helston Flora Day, 2009.
- ¹² Ian Marshall, *The Amazing Story of the Floral Dance in Words and Music*. (Dobwalls, Cornwall, Songs of Cornwall publications, 2003). Pp. 25 – 32.
- ¹³ "By The Way", Editorial note, *Old Cornwall*, Vol. 8, no.10, (1978), p. 467.
- ¹⁴ Rod and Anne Knight, discussion with author, 28th Aug 2008.
- ¹⁵ "Celebrating Cornwall", primary school workshop and performance, participant observation 17th June 2010. Teachers used the "Brighthouse And Rastrick" Floral dance CD to teach children the Helston Furry with very limited success which appeared to make the dance and not the music, the problem.
- ¹⁶ Merv Davey, "Guizing: Ancient Traditions And Modern Sensitivities." In *Cornish Studies Fourteen*, ed Philip Payton (Exeter, University of Exeter press, 2006), pp. 229 - 244.
- ¹⁷ Merv Davey, "Guizing: Ancient Traditions And Modern Sensitivities." 2006
- ¹⁸ Digital Archive and Web technology issues:
- *An archive that was primarily digital would take up limited space.*
 - *Specialist advice would be needed but the idea seems to be that by using formats that are currently standard such as PDF, JPEG, WAV and MP3 once can be reasonably confident that if these are superseded then software will become readily available to transfer them to the new format.*
 - *Organisations such as the Old Cornwall Societies might be encouraged to provide digital copies of their own archive material so that it was secure for posterity. There are conversations to be had here about copyright issues – for example low resolution, watermarked copies of photographs which clearly identifies the source. This can provide readily accessible research material at the same time as protecting and sign posting the copyright holders.*
 - *If it is not "interpreted" an archive risks being invisible. It may be that projects that contribute to the archive should also be encouraged to have presence in the wider public domain in the form of a performance or community project.*

Website issues

- *Will need to be designed to meet the criteria and preferred formats of the hosting institution.*
- *Will need to have an advanced search engine and web page templates that match this.*
- *Will need to have templates and guidelines that are easy to use by contributors / researchers*
- *Unless indefinite long term funding can be secured to cover the cost of a “webmaster” the web site will need to be designed so that it can be managed, edited and uploaded in the by research staff or volunteers who are not necessarily IT specialists.*