

West Gallery Choirs: Evidence from Lucy Broadwood's Letters

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Lucy Etheldred Broadwood (1858-1929) was a major figure in the folk song revival around the turn of the last century. In 1898 she was one of the 110 founder members of the Folk Song Society, of which she later became secretary, journal editor and, in the 1920s, president. In 1889 she published *Sussex Songs*, with accompaniments by her cousin Herbert R. Birch Reynardson. This contained the 16 songs first published by her uncle, John Broadwood, in his pioneering collection of the 1840s, together with 10 more pieces harvested by herself. In 1893 there appeared *English County Songs*, an influential collection compiled by Lucy Broadwood and J.A. Fuller-Maitland, and arranged by the latter. Then in 1908 came *English Traditional Songs and Carols*, collected, and this time set to music, by Lucy Broadwood herself. In addition, in the words of one of Lucy Broadwood's obituarists, "scarcely a number of the *Journal (of the Folk Song Society)* has appeared without some valuable contribution from her hand, and many have been almost entirely her own from beginning to end." [1]

The Sussex Archaeological Society at Castle Gate, Guildford, has two letters which Lucy Broadwood wrote to the Rev. K.H. MacDermott, author of *The Church Gallery Minstrels of Old Sussex* (1922) [2]. The letters are dated 20 December 1925 and 25 February 1926. In the second, Broadwood gives us an eye witness account of morris dancing. In the first, she writes about West Gallery music. This is what she had to say about it, and about church music-making more generally:

What a wonderful revelation you give us of the bands in the village churches! My mother was a Norfolk woman (b. 1815), my father - whose home was Lyne near Rusper (in Sussex) was born in 1811. Both used to describe the agonising noises produced by the village church bands and choirs. The effect was beyond words ludicrous and nerve-racking. So - sad to say - their disappearance may be for the best. However, nowadays, when musical festivals have leavened the villages and small towns in most parts of England, it might be possible to get together a musicianly little church orchestra, since villagers can usually have musical teaching if they choose.

What you tell about the barrel-organs is very interesting, and for the most part new to me. Newdigate (just in Surrey) is one of our two parishes at my old home, Lyne. As a child I remember singing the hymns to the wheezy barrel-organ which was all that Newdigate Church had at the time (I think it must have been used till the late 70s, but am not quite sure). Unfortunately the rector was anxious to enlarge the repertory of sacred verse, and not having a musical ear, he saw no difficulty in arranging that the congregation should sing "Abide with me" to the tune "Old Hundredth", or "Jerusalem the Golden" to "Helmsley" ("Lo He comes").

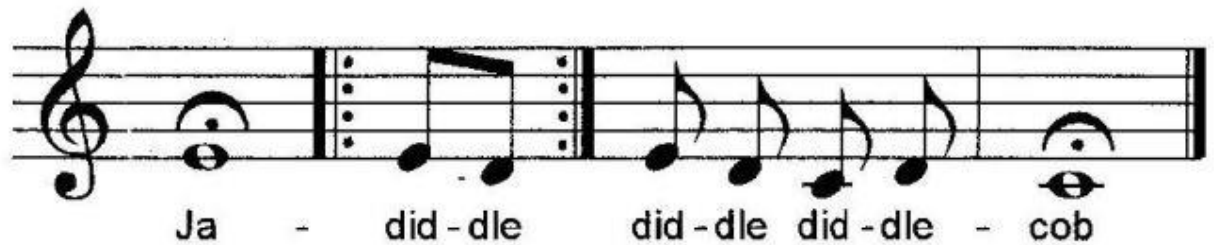
As our parish-churches, Newdigate & Capel, were farther from Lyne than Rusper we, as a rule, went to the latter church. A very eccentric old Mr. Gore was our parson for many years at Rusper. He had stepped straight out of the 18th century, & being devoted to that & the 17th century he used to "egayer" us with the unexpurgated Homilies. The only music we had for many years in church there was unaccompanied. Mr. Gore gave several astonishingly loud coughs and having announced the number of the hymn started it (in any key that came uppermost in his mind) in a very piercing nasal tone like that of a bagpipe. We had only about 3 hymns throughout the year (apart from "O come all ye faithful"). "New every morning" was the favourite. When Mr. Gore pitched too high or too low the effects were very funny. But, I am grateful for this queer experience, for "O come o come Emmanuel" sung in rough unison took such a hold on me, that I date my love for "modes" & plainsong from hearing the villagers shouting that tune. Another red-letter day in my musical life was that same raucous bellowing of "All glory laud & honour"; Mr. Gore making a noise like an oboe.

Many, many years afterwards I found that the hymn-tune must derive from Byrd's "Sellinger's Round". Alas! the day came when an American organ was presented to Rusper Church, and I, as a girl of 14, was made organist. There were some 5 or 6 boys & a man or two in white smocks who sang (in very harsh unmelodious tones) in the so-called "choir"; & strangers used to think that we had a "surpliced choir."

One of my grandfather's old tenants was a Street. He gave my grandfather or father several old things, amongst them a Playford Dancing Master. Later, some of my father's tenants & labourers gave a flute & a 'cello (and a fiddle, I think) to my brothers, as relics of a time when someone in their family could play them, and in church. I have a letter, written to me years ago by a Rusper man, Wm. Boxall, at the time the American organ was introduced. I quote his words in p.iv of the Preface in English County Songs, where he deplores that part-singing has died amongst the Rusper folk.

I have a Dorset MSS book of Carols, etc. which belonged to the late Mr. H.E.D. Hammond, one of our excellent folk-song collectors. The instrumental & vocal scores are hopelessly faulty in barring, notation, etc., and some of the carols (late 18th century) may well be the compositions of local untrained musicians. The texts are correspondingly ill-spelt.

P.S. My mother said that it was incumbent on the part of the Parish Clerk to sing ornaments and introduce shakes, in leading the psalm-singing. Tradition said that one old clerk, not being gifted with a very flexible voice, had to shake on the word "Jacob." He got over the difficulty by singing....



The quotation (referred to by Lucy Broadwood above) from William Boxall reads:

I have no one on the place to sit down together happy, and sing 'Life's a Bumper,' or The Jolly Full Bottle,' 'The Witches Glee,' 'The Gypsies' Glee,' and many more; 'While Shepherds watched their flocks by night,' and The Virgin Unspotted,' 'The Old Ninth Psalm,' your good father's favourites at Christmas; but there is no voices nor part-singing now at _____ ; it is all over.

The original letter from which this quotation is taken is undated but was possibly written between about 1860 and 1870. It was not to Lucy Broadwood but to her father, Henry. It confirms that the unnamed village at the end of the quotation was indeed Rusper. It also includes some interesting reminiscences about the group of Christmas singers from whom John Broadwood gleaned the folk songs for his famous *Songs of the Peasantry of the Weald of Surrey and Sussex* (184).[3]

A number of different constructions could be placed upon the information contained in these two letters and the associated correspondence. Here is mine. According to Lucy Broadwood's parents the local West Gallery choir was incompetent. She herself goes on to say that local people were giving musical instruments to her brothers because, unlike their forebears, they could not play them. There seems to have been no high church vicar bent on suppressing West Gallery music to strengthen the grip of bourgeois cultural hegemony. Instead, the choir simply got worse and worse until it was abandoned as an embarrassment. We are also told that, on the evidence of H.E.D. Hammond's manuscript, some West Gallery scores were erroneous and inadequate. As for other forms of music performed in local churches, they were similarly dire. The conclusion to all this is an unfashionable one. Perhaps, in the second half of the nineteenth century, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and new organs played by musically literate organists were not entirely bad things.

1. Walter Ford, "Obituary: Lucy Etheldred Broadwood," *Journal of the Folk Song Society* 33 (December 1929): 168-9. This first paragraph is replicated from Lewis W. Jones, "Lucy Etheldred Broadwood: Poet and Song Writer," *English Dance and Song* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 2-3.

2. I am indebted to Harry Mousdell for making photocopies of these letters available to me, and to Christopher J. Bearman for informing me that the originals are lodged with the Sussex Archaeological Society.

3. Surrey Record Office 2185/LEB/1/442. I am indebted to Chris Bearman for this reference too, and for giving me the approximate date of the correspondence.