

An interview with Geoff and Denis Sparks about their grandfather Alick Sparks and father Tommy Sparks. An extract from **'Many a Good Horseman'** – A survey of traditional music making in Mid-Suffolk by John Howson. Published – Musical Traditions (1985), revised edition – Veteran Tapes (1993).

Geoff: 'Our grandfather was called Alick Sparks and he bought the dulcimer from a street player in Oldham in about the 1880s, before he got married.'

Denis: 'Yes, he told me he heard him play it, and he bought it off him. The reason he bought it off him was because he liked the sound of it. He was up there because his future wife, who was a Rattlesden girl, was up there in service, and he worked up there a year, and then brought her home. Now he had heard one before because I can remember my father saying that one of the Bendalls had one, and he played it up the village hall. They lived at High Town Green Farm.

My grandfather played in the Half Moon public house which was in Rattlesden. It was burned down. I think they had what they called the 'slate chip' there, and it was there that the stepdancing took place.

I've never seen stepdancing apart from when I was at school. Old Joe Plumber used to do it, whether he's still alive, I don't know - he's moved away. But my grandfather used to say there was two men, and they'd go forward and back, and start off with a sort of shuffle. I can remember my grandfather on the farm where they had mainly brick floors, and he'd wear big hob nailed boots, and I can remember him; he'd get the clickety clickety-click. He could do it, but I don't think he was any great shakes at it.

Now Dad, Tommy Sparks, he probably didn't do a lot of it because the era had passed, but he had the ability. Grandfather was a very good player, better than Dad. Grandfather played it a lot.'

Geoff: 'Yes, with both hands. I don't know how he learned it, or where it came from.'

Denis: 'At the Hollybush Farm where we used to live, which was a big old farm house owned by a farmer who didn't live in the Parish, we had some good old Christmas do's.'

Geoff: 'Yes, that's when I remember Granddad playing, at Christmas, all the family would come - perhaps thirty or forty people.'

Denis: 'He'd get the dulcimer out, and have a few polkas and waltzes. Then schottisches and hornpipes. Now my dad, he really only ever played at home, he never took it out. While Grandfather would often take it to functions.'

Geoff: 'Well, I think Granddad could play well enough - he had confidence. He was never a shy person, and he knew he could do it well, or if he couldn't he'd cover it well. Whereas Dad would be better in a room on his own, and he'd really get going, but he couldn't get going in company.'

Denis: 'Yes, he was a bit hesitant about it, but he did really play well when he was on his own, so not many people heard him, only the family.'

Geoff: 'Now I believe Grandfather used to play concertina, but we never did hear that. But the Sparks family as a whole, going back over the years, the vast majority of them played the accordion. There was Uncle Tom, he played it well, so did all that family.'

Denis: 'Yes, there was talk of the harvest hokey at Hollybush, and I reckon Dad would play at them.'

Geoff: 'But Dad was a good dancer. I remember the Heel and Toe. As a young man, he danced everything there was in old-time style. Yes, he danced when our grandfather played, and he played before he married, but after he married he didn't so much.'

Denis: 'Of course, he didn't have the dulcimer until Grandfather died, which was 1953, although he must have played before the old man died. We asked him many a time to write down what he knew, songs and tunes, and he always said he would, but he didn't.'

Geoff: 'I did write down what I could remember he played. One was "Redwing," but round here amongst the old farm workers that was a favourite one. Oh yes! Old Charlie Howard used to sing it; he was a horseman at the Hollybush. He also sang "If I Was A Blackbird". Now other tunes Father played were "Little Brown Jug", 'Dark Eyed Sailor" - he used to sing that very well; "Turpin Hero" - that was one that was very popular at the horkeys. That was one that Broacher Mansfield always did, but that was half-sung, half-talked. He was a local thatcher; his son is still alive, that's Joe Mansfield. He lives in Whelmetham - he's coming up to his eighties. "The Milkmaid" - I think that's a very old song, and that had a great number of verses; he never remembered them all at once? "Come and Face Your Lover" was another Father played, and then "All Around My Hat" - Grandfather used to play that. You say the of the Everitts from Tostock used to sing that? Well, Dad would have known the Everitts because I've heard him say he'd go over to Tostock dancing, but he danced all over - well, just after the First World War. Yes, the old-time dancing was really going great then.'

Denis: 'Dad's best friend was Tunky Gowes. He could stepdance, but he died this week, but his sister, who is Mabel Dykes, still lives in Rattlesden. She must be over 70, and they kept the Brewer's Arms for years.' She lived her whole life there, and her father and mother was there before her.

"I Passed By Your Window" was another; then the "Volunteer Organist," the tunes - "Buffalo Girls," "The Girl I left Behind Me." Some old songs he played were "Dolly Gray" and "The Shade of the Old Apple Tree," then a Scottish one he used to love to sing was "Mary of Argyll"; the "Two Little Girls in Blue" and "The Miner's Dream" but most of his songs weren't as old as "The Dark-Eyed Sailor".

Geoff: 'I don't think he sang much out, but I remember him saying they went to Bury on a Saturday night on the Perrys' bus from Rattlesden. This would be around 1918 time, and he often used to sing solo on the bus. They'd say, "Come on, Tom. Sing us this one."

Denis: 'We don't remember the harvest horkeys, but from what we've been told it was a sit down meal, and all the tradesmen who had any connection with the farm, such as the thatcher or anybody else, would be invited. Then after the meal, most people in those days had a party piece, such as old Tom Rowe, he'd sing. Then they'd have a dance - a polka, a schottische, a hornpipe, or whatever the wish was of whoever was there. Plenty of beer, and that was the scene really.

Now along the top road here lives Louie Sparks, she's a good singer, but whether she can remember any old songs, I don't know. She lives in the first thatched house on the top road, as you come in from the end on the right. She's 90.'

Geoff: 'Reuben King used to play the accordeon, and so did his brothers. Johnny's still alive, he lives in Bury now. He plays mouth organ now, but he never was the standard of Nat King; he was a real virtuoso on the accordeon. They were from Rattlesden, and their mother was a Sparks - I think that's where the accordeon playing came from. Reuben's wife still lives in the village.'