



Photo: John Howson

Billy Bennington

Interviewed by John Howson at
Barford, Norfolk 22/2/82

When did you first get interested in the dulcimer?

When I was about 6 or 7 my grandmother bought me a glockenspiel. I think it was a 16 note one and that was made in Germany and on the back was three and sixpence. It wasn't called a glockenspiel, it was called a metallicphone. Well, my mother was an accordion player, and the old girl she could play really well and my father was a tin whistle player and the old wooden doil would come out on the board. Well my father was very keen on the dulcimer 'cos when he was a young man there was an old boy in Wymondham who played the dulcimer. His name was Cecil Ely and his father made them. He worked at Pages the wood factory in Wymondham. Well Elijah made them and they were home made and rather thick, mind you they were good dulcimers but the one that Cecil played was made by Marshall. Then in 1912 I went to the show at Hingham and Billy Cooper was playing there. His father was a dulcimer player and he *was* a musician because he was the bandmaster of Hingham and Watton band and the organist in the church and his daughters used to play as well. They were all musicians.

What instruments did they play?

The old man used to play euphonium in the band and the organ. Billy used to play dulcimer and he could also do a little bit on the violin. Then one sister would play zither and the other one used to play the piano. That was the combination. Anyway he used to play with Walter Bulwer the violinist and Jack Bun. I knew Jack Bun from schooldays. Walter Bulwer was a blacksmith although he played six years at the Empire Theatre Brighton, but he couldn't stick the starch and stiff collar, cuffs and bows and things, he'd rather be in the company with a jar. He'd do ten or twelve pints before he'd start to play and the sweat would start rolling. Then he'd be right up in the seventh position. Oh yes, he was a tradesman. Billy Cooper was in the army and he took his dulcimer and he formed a drum and fife band and was a corporal. He also played with a banjo player who came from Runton, his name was Harry Balls, I think.

How did you learn to play?

Old Cooper the father taught me how to play and of course he taught after the bandmaster style. He used to stand by the side of me with his little baton and if I went wrong I got a tap. Of course me being a boy I was a bit nervous of him. I used to bike to Hingham and I was so afraid I was going to make a mistake I used to get off about a mile before I got there and get into a gateway, take the dulcimer off my back and have a tune at the side of the road to get myself ready before I got there. Well then he got me

going, but you know he wouldn't let me play a tune until I could play all the scales. Anyway there was a flower show at Wicklewood, this was about 1913, and I could play a tune or two. I could play a polka and a waltz. Anyway there was a village band playing and the old boy said that we'd play one together and give the band a rest. So we played away and I was proud of myself. With me playing and them dancing. Unbeknown to me the old man left off. Anyway I started to pull up so he started up again. Then we had another go and we played 'Dulcie Bell', that's one he composed himself. Anyrate we were both playing and he left off again and I played it right through. When we'd finished he said, "There you are, you've done that very well, from now on you're on your own", and that's how I got started.



Billy aged 19 (1919)

Now is there anything else I can tell you about the dulcimer?

Yes, tell me about playing with your fingers rather than hammers.

Well, Billy Cooper did it. He was the first man I saw do it, you don't see many people play with their fingers. I've seen them play with a plectrum but that's back and forwards, but with your fingers you've got chords. So I picked it up off him and improved on it and I play more with my fingers now, than with hammers. The problem is if I break my nails off, I've had it for a time, so I always carry a couple of fingers off a glove, stick them on the end when I'm doing gardening or a bit of carpentry.

Were there many other dulcimer players in the area?

There were dulcimer players all about this area. You can start right in Norwich, which was full of them because that was where they made them. There was an old maker called Mark Widdows, then there was Woods of Dove St., they used to sell them and string and tune them and in those days they were £5 and that was a bit of money in 1900. Then there was Holmes and there was only 3 that I know about made by a man called Marshall and they were lovely dulcimers. There was one in Wymondham and I tried to find it out

but they won't part from it, for love or money and it's a big dulcimer and the ends are done in brass on the corners and it's got wound wires on, it's many years ago now. You rarely saw a cabinet made one. They were mainly homemade ones, apart from Marshalls, Holmes, Widdows, and there was Will Lawrance in Comberton near Cambridge, he used to travel around. In my day when they made them, the very narrow ones were tuned in A and if they were a little bigger they were in G. Then you come onto D. With a Bb you were getting quite long. Of course mine is a D instrument and I pulled it into G which is asking for trouble, it's getting to bend a bit you see. The reason I tuned it to G was I had another one, a six string one tuned in flats so that when I went out playing with a piano I had them both on a table and I could play in any keys sharps or flats.

Now in Norwich there was a well known dulcimer player called Dolly Gray and he used to push his dulcimer on a pram in St. Giles and St. Benedicts. Then going back to my boyhood days there was dulcimer players starting at Costessey then come to Bawburgh, then Marlingford, go on to Barnham Broom, then right through to Welborne, to Mattishall, to Shipdham, then to Dereham. Then over here at Colton there were all musicians. There was the Donalds, they were all dulcimer players but I don't know where they've gone to 'cos you can't find them anywhere. There was an old chap who made them called Arthur Burgess but they were heavy. Then there was an old chap called Ladbrook, he was a noted dulcimer player. Him and his wife used to play, she played the piano. In every parish you went into there was dulcimers, most of them were homemade.

Now an old lady brought me one and her father made it for her when she was 14, she lived in Sheringham. You know that was the oldest bloody thing I ever had anything to do with. That was made alright, but an old man once told me the end blocks should be made of beech but never of oak because oak will make steel rust. Anyway this one had oak blocks and it had been in the attic for years and it had got salt air in it. You know I couldn't move one of those pegs. The two I tried snapped off so I took it down to the old blacksmith and he heated them and we loosened them. But do you know on that thing there were 4 different kinds of pegs. I had to use 4 keys to tune that up. Some of them were high, some were short, some you could just get on with the key and some of them were even left hand. Wasn't I glad to see the back of that! Anyway I tuned it up but in a couple of months she was back, it had gone out of tune and she'd been trying to tune it and when she brought it back it was a damn sight worse than when I started on it.

Then another one I did up for an old lady who lives in Yaxley now. That was another homemade one that had six strings and it had solid oak blocks as big as the arm of this chair. Anyway someone had strung it up with brushwire, soft stuff, they couldn't get it in tune and instead of bits of wire on the bridges they used bits of tin and folded them over, you've never seen such a mess in your life, and woodworm, the wife said:

"You can take that out of the house".

Anyway I had a go at it and they'd tried to tune it up with a spanner so of course the pegs were all round. Well I got it going a bit and I said:

"Don't bring that here no more. As much as I like to help, but!"

You know I've done up over 20 dulcimers for various people in the past years and not one of them can play.

Anyway a bloke came here last May, he came up the path, and I thought here's another one with a dulcimer. So he came in and he asked if I could tell him something about a dulcimer. I had a look at it and said:

"Oh Christ not that one again!"

It was that same one I told you about. He said that he'd recently bought it (and I thought they should have given it to him to take it away). I said:

"How much did you give for it?"

He said "Thirty five pounds."

"You got a bargain there!" I said.

Anyway I tuned it up for him and he asked if I would learn him to play. But you know what John, talk about backing a dead horse. He came here every Tuesday night. He used to bring some beer

which was the best part about it. I had five months of it and I said, "Look here, you're wasting my time and I'm wasting yours. I'd like to learn you but I can't. I used to have to tune it for him every time so I asked him where he kept it and he said:

"On the window sill."

Which of course was in the sun, so I said that it's no good there, that's what's taking it down. So he said:

"Oh well next time I'll put it against the wall by the heater."

And I said "Why don't you put the bugger on the fire, that's where it should be."

But I like to teach anyone, anything I know, who ever they are, where ever they come from as long as they've got it in them.

Have you bought many dulcimers yourself?

Yes I've had many. I've been in the Cornhall and I've picked up one for 5 bob and one for 7/6d. They were good dulcimers but nobody bid for them. Then I went into old Moore's, he's an antique bloke, old Major Moore, he's supposed to be a very cute man. So I went in there and he'd got a dulcimer in there.

"How much do you want for that?"

He said "50 shillings."

"What for that thing?" I said.

"Well" he said "I don't know anything about them."

"No! Good job as well. The blasted thing's full of woodworm for a start" I said (but it was just a few dart holes, it didn't matter).

"Well I didn't notice that, I don't want that in my shop" he said.

"I'll tell you what," I said (as I thought I'd better make a bargain quick) "I'll give you a crown for it. 5 bob!"

"No!" he said "A pound."

"I'm not daft. I've got plenty of woodworm at home. I don't want to buy them. I don't want to change the stock".

Anyway it finished up I got it for 7/6d. Then I said "Have you got a bit of old sheeting and a piece of string to tie it up?"

So he tore up half a blanket and wrapped it up. Then I said, "Cor, I've been talking to you and I've missed me bus. It will be gone in 10 minutes, I can't get there on time now."

So he says "Where do you catch your bus?"

"Top of St. Stephens."

"I'll drive you there" he says.

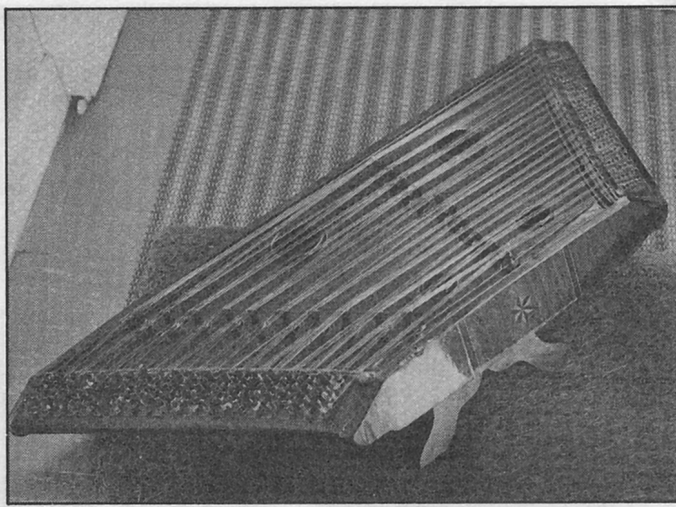
"Look!" I said "If you drive me home. I'll play you a tune."

That one didn't work John. They used to say, "Old Billy, he'd talk himself past Satan!"

Where did you get the dulcimer you play now?

Well I'll tell you. I bought it in 1922 from an old gentleman in Norwich called John Rose and he was a professional dulcimer player of his day. He used to play in a pub called the "Pigeon" which is down in St. Benedicts but the last time I saw it, it was an off-licence house. The old man was 85 when I bought it from him and I was 22 and he told me his father had had it before him and gave it to him when he was a boy. He said he could remember his father playing it, when he was just big enough to see onto the table. That was a few years ago. His father was a sailor so it could be foreign, I don't know. The old boy used to play in the Pigeon when times were slow. You see he was in the boot trade (now I'm going back to before the 1900's). He said that he kept his wife and 4 children on his dulcimer and he'd say, "you know sometimes I'd come back with as much as 4 shillings a day and I'd get me beer and bacca free and food, I'd be better off playing than in work. Well he made boots and he'd make the uppers during the day and take them home to stick and he'd sell them for 2 shillings. Hard times you know.

When I brought the dulcimer away I gave 35 shillings for it. That was a week's wages on the farms. Anyway I felt sorry for him 'cos there sat the poor old lady well over eighty and the old man said, "mother there goes our bread winner." Anyrate I'd only got 2 pounds in my pocket. That was the week before Christmas so I hadn't the cheek to ask for the five bob change, so I gave it to him.



Billy's Dulcimer

Photo: John Howson

Where did you used to play?

Well, I used to play with Billy and I used to go to Hingham every Saturday night. Then the war came along and cut me out for four years. Soon as the war finished in 1919 Billy came home and my father and mother kept the pub down here, the Barford King's Head. We used to get in there Saturdays and it's there I palled up with the rest of them. We played at all the village dances. I used to play for harvest suppers and I even played in church, harvest festivals, Mothering Sunday and of course all the carol services. I've played Wramplingham church, Barford church, Bawburgh church, Barnham Broom church, Hingham church and I played there with all the Coopers as a band. Well there was the organ and the old man playing the euphonium, then there was Walter on violin, there was Billy and I playing dulcimer and his sister was playing autoharp, she played that as well as the zither. Then in the early days I did a bit of busking but poor old mother didn't like me busking, she thought that was degrading.

Tell me about the busking. Where did you do it?

Norwich Hippodrome, and the theatre, and I had another young fella who played the banjo and he'd go round with the hat, not me, but you know John it's one of the best paid games going. There was no hard up buskers, you'd be surprised. Then we also went to Yarmouth, this was about 1924. We stayed at a hotel and we started busking and of course we got moved on for holding up the traffic. So then we went down to the front where the people were, down by the Oyster bar. Then of course along comes the old sergeant and shifted us on again. So what we thought we'd do was play in the Oyster bar amongst the cockles and mussels. But there was a bigger crowd blocking the pavement, and the old boy give us a dressing down and told us off and he said:

"Now look, I don't want to be unkind to you boys. Just go down to the station and you can get a 'Grislers' licence. It will only cost you five bob, and they'll give you a pitch, and you can play there as long as you like and nobody can move you 'cos you've the permission from the Chief Constable."

So naturally enough we went down and got the 'Grislers' licence, paid our 5 bob and the blessed pitch was just round behind the bus station. We started playing there, but as soon as a bus came, you had to move. We were on the shift all the while. Anyway the old boy came through that way and he was grinning and he said:

"Alright boys? Are you happy? Are you sitting comfortable?"

And he walked away with a wide grin on his face.

Then we moved away from there and went and played in that pub on the corner of Regent's St. I can't think of the name of the

place, it's a big hotel. Anyrate we had a tune up there and a little old boy got the ticket and he went round with the hat, so of course we treated him to a drink and when more came in he went round with his hat again. You know John we were down there that week and when we finished up we paid our hotel bill about £3.50. And when we got back to Norwich station we had a roll call in the cloakroom and poured out our coppers, pennies and things and they'd gone a bit green with the vinegar from the cockle stall. You know we made six pounds and half a crown and in 1924 that wasn't bad going. So we had a free holiday, free food, everything.

Then us two used to play on the boat from Foundry bridge to Codham Hall on a Sunday night and to Bamerton End and of course that was a noted place in those days. There was teas on the greens and the gardens were all lovely. What we used to do is get off the boat and have a tune on the green at the side of the river, but while we were out there, there was no-one drinking in the pub, so out came the old landlord and he invited us in and gave us a ten shillings for the both of us to play inside and of course we handed the hat round as well. But it wasn't long before someone else got on the bandwagon, then someone else and we had to give it up as a bad job. But you fancy we had to cycle away from here to Norwich and leave our bicycle at the station, hop on the boat to go down there. We wouldn't be back 'till 12 o'clock with the last boat at night. Then cycle back home, and work again the next day. I wish I could do it now!

Did you play for stepdancing?

Well I used to play at the Barnham Broom Horseshoes, it's shut now. The old boy who had it used to be an old butler. We used to play there and it was a real place for old time dances. They were all dancers down there. They used to like the Long dance, the Schottische, the Heel and Toe Polka and the ordinary Polka. There were one or two old boys who'd step-dance but not a lot, they'd rather have a Schottische or a Waltz of course. Mind you some of those old women they could dance. They'd up their skirts in those days and they'd have a Schottische.

Tell me more about what went on in the pubs.

This old landlord down in the pub said that at nine o'clock, after the hat has gone round and they'd had a good drink, out would come the bowl of pickled onions. And of course they'd eat these and of course it would make them dry. He said to me one day, "Look you're a good boy and you play well but what I want you to do is, when they've had the pickled onions, I want you to play in the highest key you've got, 'cos the higher they sing the drier they get and it's good for trade."

That's one of the old tricks! Most of the pubs had club rooms. In Wymondham all the pubs had them. A nice one was the Falcon but that's closed down. There was the Woolpack, that's closed down. The Hart, they don't use that. The King's Head, that's where Woolworths is. I used to go there to play, 10 bob a night plus beer, but I didn't drink a lot 'cos as you know, if you start drinking a lot of beer you're neither here or there. I must admit though I have played out and I've sat and played the dulcimer and it's gone past me and I've waited until it came past again to have another go. What I used to do, is if a landlord asked me to have a drink I'd ask for a packet of Woodbines, they'd do me just as well. I wasn't a heavy smoker but it meant I had my Woodbines for tomorrow. Really my dulcimer playing kept me in beer and tobacco.

Were the pubs always friendly?

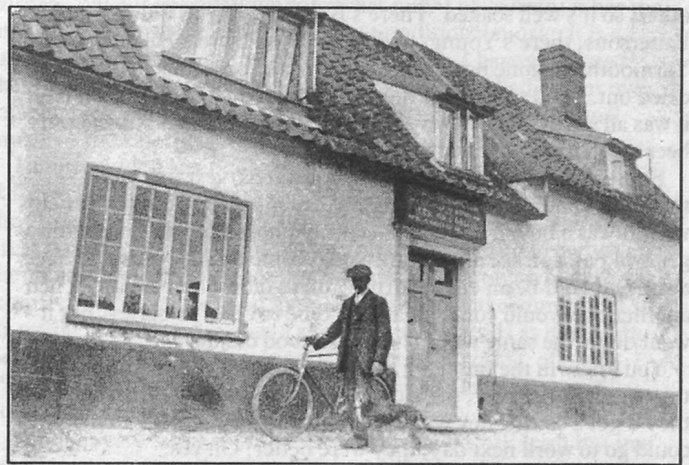
No! there was always opposition between different musicians. You'd be playing in one pub and then play somewhere else and they'd make up another piece on the end, a little bit different. Old Cooper would put something different in, his being a bandmaster so another band couldn't copy him. Next time he'd come he'd have another part in it. There was always a little bit of spite and jealousy.

Was there much fighting?

Yes, I've seen some rough houses especially if one got turned out of another house. Say that was a Crawshaws house and he'd have to come across to a Bullards house. When Crawshaws, and Bullards, and Morgans and Stewart and Patterson got together it was a good mixture. But there always was fights and I suppose there always will be. Bullards would get on top of Morgans and Morgans got on top of Bullards. When the pubs turned out they'd all meet in the middle, but the old policeman was on the corner. But we had one old boy here, he used to come in the door five minutes to ten. You'd see the door just come open, see his hat just come through the door. He'd look in.

"Have you no homes to go to?" he says. "Have you no homes 'cos if you haven't I have and I'm just going down the road and I'll be back and when I come back, I hope you'll all be gone", then he'd say, "You can get your rest and I can get mine. Now be all good boys and good night!"

When he went out the door there were two little windows and there was a bottle stood so he got his drink and you would see him no more. He did like a drink and he liked his gun as well. He used to go rabbit shooting with all the boys. Then when he left and went away we had the sharpest sod you ever seen. Cor! he was a sharp-un. You never knew when he was coming. He was sneaky, you'd see him go past, think he was gone and he'd come through the back door. He wasn't liked but then father had an Airedale and then he would come round the corner, he couldn't get in. You know that old dog, she knew a policeman and she hated a policeman more than anything. She couldn't half bark, so we knew, and he couldn't come past her. Anyway he wasn't here very long 'cos he was promoted to a sergeant and he went to Attleborough. Well they were glad to get rid of him. But that old dog it was a one man's dog. I used to take it out but you got twenty, thirty yards and she'd be back again. But if you did get her out she'd come back with something. She'd either have an old hen or a duck but she wouldn't kill 'em, you'd see her coming down the road with an old duck in her mouth with its head sticking out.



Billy's father outside the Barford King's Head, Circa 1928 (Now Closed)

Was there much heavy drinking?

Well we went out carol singing, and once I went to Hingham. I'll never forget it. I was drunk for three days! I'd been playing at Hingham Ringers, Billy Cooper and Walter Bulwer were all there and someone said, "Come on let's go carol singing." And we played on the green in front of Hingham Hart. It was with the bell ringers and with the dulcimer it goes nice together you know. Anyway it was a lovely moonlit, frosty night and someone said that we were wanted up at the hall. The colonel wanted to see us and he wanted a tune. So we go up to the hall, it wasn't very far, 5 or 6 hundred yards. There was an open fire and the holly and the ivy.

Well they came round with hot mince pies and meat patties. Then when we'd got going they came round with the 'hot pot'. After that I know no more. I don't think I got sober until Old Year's night, because what they'd done, we didn't know then, they'd mixed a bottle of whisky, a bottle of gin, a bottle of rum, a bottle of port all in this big silver bowl and of course they were handing them out in tumbler glasses. We were dry and we drank it, alright inside! but blast me, I came outside the door and I thought someone had put a wet sack over me. Where I went to, where I slept, I don't know from that day to this. Anyway I came home Christmas afternoon, this was Christmas Eve, sometimes the road was that wide, sometimes it was only this wide. I walked all the way home pushing the bike, I was alright in the air but as soon as I opened the door and got inside, I was gone! Out! My poor old mother, she was worried 'cos I was white. Father said that's alright, let him learn the hard way, it's no use me talking to him. So I went to bed, had a cup of tea and then the bed kicked up this way, then it kicked up that way and I ended up on the floor. Anyway I lost a couple of days work over it and you know, it taught me a good lesson. It was about 1923 and I didn't drink another drop until 1927, no I kept on pop.

In those days they didn't used to treat anyone. You know when you go in a pub and people ask what'll you have. The old boys used to come up with their old pint mugs, they weren't glass mugs in them days, they were china with a couple of images on the side. You couldn't see what was in the bottom but if there was no hops in it they'd say, "Where'd you get this from, the soft water tub?"

And one old boy, when we kept a pub down there, we had to save the hops for him, put them through a strainer and he used to dry them and smoke them. Yes, he used to mix them with his shag. No, they didn't treat anybody but if they saw someone they knew, and they'd just got a pint they'd say, "Here you are partner take the top off this".

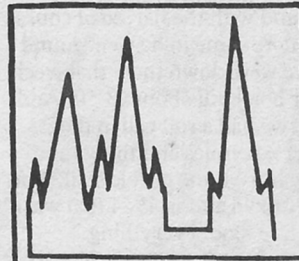
And he'd let him have half of his beer. That was the old fashioned way of treating. I'll tell you though, if I'd have had the beer that has been soaked into the top of my old dulcimer I wouldn't be talking to you now. Of course, beer got slopped over it. I've had beer run in one hole and tipped out and run out of the other, so it's well soaked. There's Bullards, there's Stewart and Pattersons, there's Youngs and Crawshaws there's Lacon's from Yarmouth, all gone now, there's all sorts of beer soaked on that and dried out. I had to strip off the wire on that dulcimer to clean it off, it was all sticky, but they weren't bad days and I'm talking about beer when it was 2 pence a pint!

But it was a shilling a gallon outside. At harvest time and threshing time, I carted gallons and gallons of beer out of the fields when I was a boy. They used to take old horns so that mugs didn't get broken. You see an old boy would come off the fields and have a sup and he'd be an engine driver, there'd be all the grease. Then another one would come off and he'd be covered in barley, but it went down the same way. They were good old days.

You know in the pub they had those big old heating irons and they put it in the beer, put a drop of ginger in. That was when they'd got a cold. They would go home then and sweat it out. They could go to work next day, they were better. Oh yes.

Another one was on a Saturday night, the fisherman would come out and he'd sell bloaters, sprats and red herrings for Sunday breakfast. But he'd sell on a Saturday and they'd eat these blinking sprats raw and red herrings half warm, good god, no wonder they were dry, but it was all good for trade you know. Mind you when they came to clean up! We had sawdust on the floor and they'd borrow a broom to clear away. Then they'd do the broom dance — you know, hopping over the broom. And there was two old boys who'd do a step-dance with one at each end and they'd walk past one another, then meet again and finish off tap dancing again.

I've had some good do's and I've had some ordinary ones, but I can say I've had a long, good, happy, interesting life. I've been travelling 70 years and I've not had a lot to complain about.



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