

Notes from TSCD607 'English Country Music'

William Frederick (Billy) Cooper was born on 15th December 1883 at 10 Bloomfield Road, in the East End of London and registered at Mile End Old Town. How long the family had been up in London is not known, but shortly after Billy's birth they moved back to Hingham, where his father, Frederick William (Billy) Cooper, continued his trade as a shoemaker. Shoemaking seems to have been a family trade, as a John Cooper is listed as a shoemaker in Hingham in the county trade directories from 1868 until 1912. By 1929, Billy's father was listed as a shopkeeper, and Billy himself was a greengrocer when he retired, probably having taken over his father's shop. Certainly Billy assumed his father's mantle as an organiser and a well-respected member of the village community

Billy's father was the first musical member of the family, the bandmaster and a euphonium player with Hingham and Watton Band and a dulcimer player and concertina player of some repute. In an area where dulcimer players were relatively thick on the ground. He showed Billy how to play a scale and left him to work out the rest for himself promising him a dulcimer of his own if he could play a tune by his tenth birthday... and, of course, he was able to play three or four tunes by the set date,

As a young adolescent, Billy palled up with two other young lads, Jack Bunn who played an auto-harp made by Billy's father, and Walter Baldwin who played the fiddle. Walter Baldwin was to become the blacksmith in Hingham, though he spent some time as a professional pit orchestra musician away from home. He was musically literate, reputedly able to play any type of music (whatever that might mean), and was fully deserving of Billy's comment much later that he was "the best working player I have ever heard." They formed a black-face minstrel band, which played at dances for years before and after the Great War. The centre-fold photograph shows the band outside Hingham Royal Oak before the war, with a mandolin player, who Billy's daughter Flora thinks was called Seaman; Walter Baldwin, fiddle; Billy Cooper holding the auto-harp; Jack Bunn holding the dulcimer hammers, although he couldn't play the dulcimer and Bob Felton on the bones.

Billy spent some time staying with his brother in the Suffolk town of Bury St. Edmunds, where he was employed as a job master for Smith & Sons, handling their fleet of horse-drawn vehicles for hire. During that time, he played the fiddle at many dances with his sister-in-law (who most probably played the piano). The war came and in 1915 Billy joined the Suffolk Regiment with hidden prospects of an awful time ahead in Flanders. Yet music still features in the small amount of anecdotal information that has come to light about his war service. He was appointed corporal in charge of the fife-and-drum band. This must have called on both his musical and organising talents, as there was no formal training for fife players in the Army they were expected to teach themselves from a tuition hook. He played the dulcimer for army church services, and later, while in France, he built his 'trench banjo' which is still in existence.

Billy had met Billy Bennington at Hingham Show in 1912, when Billy was 29 and Billy Bennington was just a lad of twelve learning the dulcimer from Billy's father. After the war, Billy worked for a while in Wallace King's furniture shop in Norwich and lodged with Billy Bennington's family in Barford King's Head mid-way between Hingham and Norwich. Together with Walter Baldwin, Billy and Billy Bennington played in that and other pubs on Saturday nights and, in season, at harvest suppers, travelling all around the county on a motorbike and sidecar. For services in Hingham church the trio was augmented by Billy Cooper's sister on the autoharp and zither and his father on the euphonium. Billy Bennington eventually found outlets of his own, as he liked to play on his own at concerts and the like, while Billy Cooper and his other friends preferred pubs and socials. It would seem, however that the personnel of the black-face band never actually broke up, as Billy retained his association with Walter Baldwin into the 1950s and Jack Bunn until even later. Around 1946-7, Jack Youngman, who played a bit on the dulcimer himself, invited Billy, Ernie Barber (fiddle) and Jack Dunn, who by

this time was playing the guitar, to Wells-next-the-Sea, setting a pattern that continued for several years. Originally booked for a football club dinner, they stayed on for a week in Mrs. Youngman's boarding house, playing every night across the road in the *Shipwrights*. Later on Billy's son-in-law Paddy Sinnott used to drive him up there alone and collect him when he decided to come home. There were other notable engagements during this time at Wicklewood *Cherry Tree* and Banham *Cider House* on the way to Diss.

Billy had several dulcimers in his time, one of which his father had made and he used to do repairs for players, as he said, "all over Norfolk". He kept two instruments tuned to the piano in Hingham Eight Ringers; each one had over 120 strings and when he played in Shipdham he had to re-tune one of them to Daisy's piano. He could complete the task in fifteen minutes flat and he quite happily reversed the operation in the pub in the evening. He had an amazingly sharp ear for a tune, and while he was able to vamp and play parts to anything he heard, he altered his style to suit the company he was in. For dance tunes he struck the strings with cane mallets and for song accompaniments and waltzes he plucked the string with his first finger and thumb. He had once played a lot on the Anglo-German concertina, and I heard him briefly try out an old concertina he found in the back of Mervyn's car. He played a single melody line on *In and Out the Windows* in a style reminiscent of Scan's. He could also play the one-string fiddle, the auto-harp and put over a comic song. For many years, back to the time when Billy was playing regularly with Billy Bennington and his own father on the concertina, he held musical evenings in his home on Sunday evenings. He had a piano in the house, though it was scarcely touched — one of his daughters (Like his sister) played the zither and auto-harp rather than the piano — and the evening served partly as a band practice to keep abreast of the latest tunes. After our Shipdham sessions Daisy and Walter went over there several times, and Daisy is remembered by Billy's daughter Flora for her ability on the piano.

In his later years, Billy played mainly at the Eight Ringers with Jack Bunn on the guitar, Nancy Jones on the piano and Ernie Barber on the fiddle. When I heard them in 1960, without the fiddle, the timing and the rhythm were set by the piano lead, and the band, in perfect accord with the patrons, ran through a great selection of songs from the 1920s to the 1950s. In spite of Billy's dulcimer, however, there was no hint of the punch and fire of our Shipdham hand. In November 1959, Billy went to the BBC: Birmingham studios for a radio appearance on *Scan*, and a year later he appeared on Anglia Television, having met up with Daisy and Walter, they went out together to play at old people's clubs, and Billy's last engagement was at a British Legion old people's home in Cromer in November 1963. He died at the age of eighty on 19th January 1964.

Reg Hall, July 2000