

John Robbins and the Shakespearean Bidford  
morris tune repertoire

*Elaine Bradtke*

---

Excerpted from:

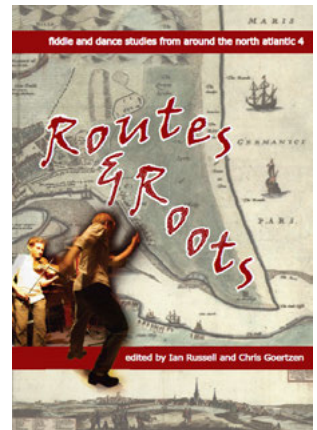
Routes and Roots

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 4

*Edited by Ian Russell and Chris Goertzen*

First published in 2012 by The Elphinstone  
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert  
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-7-3



---

About the author:

**Elaine Bradtke** is a member of the James Madison Carpenter Project team, based at the Elphinstone Institute of the University of Aberdeen, and manages the online catalogue of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. The traditional music and dance of England are her main areas of interest.

---

Copyright © 2012 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



## 4

# John Robbins and the Shakespearean Bidford morris tune repertoire

ELAINE BRADTKE

### **Introduction**

In the 1880s, singer, conductor, composer and ‘thoroughgoing romantic’<sup>1</sup> Ernest Richard D’Arcy Ferris (1855-1929) became interested in morris dance as an outgrowth of his interest in English customs and traditions. In addition to being a professional singer, he produced and appeared in pageants – a mixture of history, fancy dress, music, and dance. In these pageants, he combined his antiquarian interests with his musical and artistic abilities and his apparent fondness for appearing in costume.<sup>2</sup> In late August 1885, D’Arcy Ferris attempted to reconstruct morris dances from historical accounts as part of a two-day Elizabethan-style pageant.<sup>3</sup> Dissatisfied with the result, but intrigued by its possibilities, he began to research and make plans for a full-scale, stand-alone production featuring morris dancing.<sup>4</sup> As Judge wrote: ‘This then was not simply a matter of restarting one village group of dancers. It was rather concerned with recreating the genuine archetypal English Morris Dance.’<sup>5</sup> To this end, he began searching for a pipe and tabor,<sup>6</sup> sought out retired morris-men to help him enliven the dance and lend it an air of authenticity, and began recruiting local performers. In the winter of 1885–1886, Ferris formed a troupe of men from Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, to perform in the ‘ancient’ style as he called it. These were to be rustic men performing rustic dances. In order to dispel the disrepute associated with previous generations of morris dancers, Ferris drew up a list of rules by which his men would abide until the end of their contract, 30 June 1886.<sup>7</sup> They were intending to tour the Midlands, and if plans went well, the continent. Ferris played up the Shakespearean connection, and the publicity certainly had a touch of Merry England about it.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers were re-invented, based partly on history and partly on fantasy.

Bidford native, seventeen-year-old John (sometimes known as Jack or Tom) Robbins (1868–1948), was their musician. Robbins came from a musical family, was musically literate<sup>9</sup> and was a proficient violinist when Ferris recruited him. His father (also John) was an amateur musician and boot and shoemaker, and young John

followed in his father's footsteps on both counts. Ferris felt the pipe and tabor, with its historic links to morris dancing, was more suited to the Shakespearean theme than the violin. Early in 1886, Robbins was sent to Ilmington (also in Warwickshire) to learn to play the pipe and tabor, and acquire the morris tune repertoire from James John Arthur (1828–1906).<sup>10</sup> There was a great deal of difficulty in obtaining a pipe for him to use on a permanent basis. Robbins, therefore, often played fiddle instead of pipe and tabor.<sup>11</sup> Once the formal contract with Ferris had finished, the troupe retained their name and continued to make public appearances into the early part of the twentieth century. Robbins performed with the Shakespearean troupe for many years after their tour, as the group developed into an independent entity. From photographic evidence,<sup>12</sup> it appears that Robbins continued to play the pipe and tabor for morris dancing at least some of the time.



**Figure 1** Bidford Morris Dancers, Redditch, Worcestershire, 8 August 1906.

*Photo by Cecil Sharp, from Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance Song Society*

In 1907, John Graham published his notations of the Bidford tunes and description of the dances.<sup>13</sup> The Bidford morris dances and tunes were among the first that Cecil Sharp collected in 1906. He had seen them perform at Foxlydiat House, Redditch, on 8 August 1906, photographed them and collected some of their dances (see Figure 1). In 1907, Cecil Sharp included some items from Bidford in the first edition of *The Morris Book*.<sup>14</sup> It was only later, after corresponding with Ferris that Sharp discovered that these dances were not as old as he had originally believed,

and he withdrew them from his second edition. Mary Neal also published a Bidford dance in the first part of the *Espérance Morris Book*.<sup>15</sup> After an initial flurry of interest from outsiders between 1886 and 1910, the Bidford morris dancers were left up to their own devices. Though the First World War put an end to the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers, Robbins continued to play at local musical events.<sup>16</sup> James Madison Carpenter recorded nine tunes from John Robbins onto wax cylinders in 1933, nearly fifty years after the troupe had formed.<sup>17</sup> All of Carpenter's recordings were of his fiddle playing, and it is assumed that he had ceased playing the pipe and tabor when he stopped playing for morris dancing. The tunes in Robbins' repertoire (see list below) run the range from the ubiquitous 'Constant Billy' and 'Cuckoo's Nest' to the tune he used for 'Merry Go Round' / 'Morris Off', which was not known to be used by any other morris musician of his generation.

The history of the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers has been researched by Roy Judge,<sup>18</sup> Keith Chandler,<sup>19</sup> and J. Philip Taylor.<sup>20</sup> However, up to this point, scrutiny of the repertoire has been from an historical standpoint – based on archival evidence and interviews, rather than musical analysis. Sharp believed Bidford's repertoire was derived from Ilmington, but Judge felt that some of it was learned from Ilmington, some derived from Bledington, and some of it may have been native to Bidford. Roy Judge points out that William Trotman, who worked closely with Ferris, supplied some of the music, and taught the Bidford dancers their steps; he came from the Bledington area and may have been a conduit for the Bledington tunes.<sup>21</sup> In addition, there is archival evidence that Ferris was in contact with elderly Bidford morris dancers who had ceased performing decades earlier. There was also archival evidence of Ferris' interest in the Brackley morris dances, and, of course, his own highly developed artistic imagination and input from historical sources to further complicate matters.

This paper looks at the music as collected from John Robbins and asks if it is possible to learn how he acquired his repertoire by comparing his versions of the tunes with those collected from Ilmington, Brackley, and Bledington.

### **English Morris Music and Geography**

Collectors generally have a geographical focus. As the morris dances were collected and then published and taught, much emphasis was put on the original village from which it was collected. There is a tendency to think of each village's repertoire as a discreet entity. In reality, there was movement between villages of both musicians and dancers, cross-fertilizing as they went. The villages under discussion are not that far apart. It is approximately 12 miles between Bidford and Ilmington, and the morris dancers from both villages were known to have encountered each other on occasion.<sup>22</sup> For convenience, the geographical nomenclature will be retained in this paper.

BRADTKE *John Robbins and the Shakespearean Bidford morris tune repertoire*

*John Robbins' Morris Repertoire*

Of the tunes performed by the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers, there is music for the following, all collected from John Robbins:

'Abraham Brown'  
'Billy and Nancy' / 'Brighton Camp'  
'Bluff King Hal' ('Staines Morris')  
'Constant Billy'  
'Cuckoo's Nest'  
'Devil among the Tailors' (fragment)  
'Heel and Toe'  
'Merry Go Round' / 'Morris Off' (Aarbeau's 'Morisque')  
'Old Trunko' ('Trunkles')  
'Old Woman Tossed Up'  
'Princess Royal' / 'Cross Caper'  
'Shepherd's Aid' ('Shepherd's Hey')  
'Town Morris' / 'Green Garters' / 'Morris On' ('Hey Diddle Dis')  
'We Won't Go Home til Morning'

Not all of these tunes that Robbins played for the Bidford Morris were collected. Some had been dropped from the repertoire by the time the collectors began their work. For a list of the contents of the first and second programmes, see Figure 2.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| First Programme 21 January 1886, performed at the Falcon Inn, Bidford: | Second Programme as performed on the 21 <sup>st</sup> day of January and repeated in diverse towns. |
| 'Town Morris'  | 'Town Morris' or 'Green Garter'   |
| 'Constant Billy'   | 'Shepherd's Hey'  |
| 'Shepherd's Aid'   | 'Billy & Nancy'   |
| 'Cross Caper'  | 'Princess Royal'  |
| 'Heel & Toe'   | 'Heel & Toe'  |
| 'Merry-go-Round'   | 'Merry-go-Round'  |
| 'In Wooden Shoon'  | 'In Wooden Shoon'   |
|  | 'Bluff King Hal'  |
|  | 'Young Colin'   |
|  | 'Devil among the Tailors'   |
|  | 'Morning Star'  |
|  | 'Valentine'   |
|  | 'Old Trunko'  |
|  | 'Saturday Night'  |
|  | 'Constant Billy'  |
|  | 'Old Woman tossed up in a Blanket'  |
|  | 'Black Joke'  |
|  | 'Molly Oxford'  |
|  | 'We Won't Go Home till Morning'   |
|  | 'Brighton Camp'   |

**Figure 2** Titles listed on the first and second programmes for the performances of the Bidford Morris Dancers, 1886

Roy Judge attempted to pinpoint the origins of the Bidford dances, and attributed them thus:<sup>23</sup>

*Ferris* – ‘Merry Go Round’ / ‘Morris Off’ (Aarbeau’s ‘Morisque’), ‘Bluff King Hal’ (‘Staines Morris’)

*Old Bidford* – ‘Constant Billy’, ‘Shepherd’s Aid’, ‘Cross Caper’ / ‘Princess Royal’, ‘Town Morris’

*Ilmington* – ‘The Old Woman Tossed Up in a Blanket’, ‘We Won’t Go Home till Morning’ & ‘Cuckoo’s Nest’ (separately or combined), ‘Abraham Brown’

*Bledington* – Judge points out that William Trotman, who led the dancers, supplied some of the music and worked closely with Ferris, grew up in the Bledington area.<sup>24</sup> Judge also mentioned that titles that appear on the second programme, but subsequently ceased to be performed may have been derived from Bledington (‘Black Joke’, ‘Molly Oxford’, ‘Morning Star’, ‘Young Colin’, ‘Saturday Night’, ‘Valentine’).<sup>25</sup> However he makes no connection between the long-term core repertoire and Trotman’s Bledington influence.

### **Methodology for Musical Analysis**

In comparing transcriptions of the Bidford tunes, it became apparent that John Robbins’ melodies were very stable, and minor differences in note durations (dotting) are due to the interpretation of individual transcribers. The collected repertoires of Bledington, Brackley, and Ilmington were examined to see where they overlapped with Bidford. The list of Brackley dances in the Ferris MS was a false lead. Brackley was soon eliminated, as there were few titles in common, and their tunes were markedly different from the others. The tunes they held in common were transcribed in parallel notation, transposing as needed to aid in comparison.

The two main areas for attention were pitch and melodic contour. Pitches on strong beats are especially important, as weaker beats may be occupied with ornamentation of the basic melody line. Melodic contour was taken into account, as a similar line in transposition may indicate an adaptation. The Ilmington tunes used were collected from Sam Bennett, a fiddle player who had also learned his morris tunes from the Ilmington pipe and tabor player.<sup>26</sup> James Madison Carpenter recorded both Bennett and Robbins in the spring of 1933. The Bledington tunes were from various sources. Music notation in the Ferris MS was also consulted.

### **The Tunes**

*‘Abraham Brown (the Sailor)’*

Notation of ‘Abraham Brown the Sailor’ appears in the Ferris MS (42) without reference to the source. The tune was not collected from Bledington, nor does it appear elsewhere in the morris context. Judge notes that according to an 1886 newspaper account, the Ilmington morris men performed a dance with this title, but, unless the notation in the Ferris MS came from the Ilmington pipe player, it was never collected from Ilmington under this title. However, Robbins’ playing of ‘Abraham Brown’ bears a very strong melodic resemblance to ‘Bumpus o Stretton’,

an Ilmington parody of the well-known song. ‘Bumpus o Stretton’ was only collected from Sam Bennett, who may have created the parody.<sup>27</sup> While the two tunes share many traits, the third and fourth bar from the end have no notes in common. The rhythm of ‘Abraham Brown’ is simpler, reflecting the unsung text of the original song (see Figure 3). Robbins opts for a narrower range than Bennett, avoiding both the low *d*’ and high *d*''''. Bennett played the Ilmington version in G, and this was transposed up to match Robbins’ key of D. The tune hints at the close relationship between the Bidford and Ilmington morris repertoires. Although it is in the same tune family as ‘Merrily Danced the Quaker’s Wife’, it does not appear in any guise elsewhere in the morris genre. This item was not listed on either programme.



**Figure 3** Extract from B section of ‘Bumpus o Stretton’ and ‘Abraham Brown’ showing limited range and fewer notes in the Bidford rendition

#### *‘Billy and Nancy’ / ‘Brighton Camp’*

‘Brighton Camp’ appears to be the tune used for a dance called ‘Billy and Nancy’ though both titles are listed on the second programme. Also known as ‘The Girl I Left Behind Me’ it was a hugely popular tune, though there is no record of it in the Ferris MS. Neither Bledington nor Ilmington had a morris dance to this tune. But ‘Brighton Camp’ was used for a ribbon dance display by Sam Bennett’s Morris Dancers (a group of village girls). The transcription used for comparison is from Sam Bennett’s performance in a 1926 sound film.<sup>28</sup> The Ilmington and Bidford tunes are nearly identical in the A and B parts (see Figure 4). However, Ilmington also included a C part that was not recorded in Bidford. This tune could have come from Ilmington, and been modified to fit the Bidford dance.

**Figure 4** Extract from ‘Brighton Camp’ showing very similar melodies

*'Bluff King Hal'*

'Bluff King Hall' is the Bidford title for a tune more widely known as 'Staines Morris'. It did not occur elsewhere in the morris context until the 1950s. It was in the Ferris MS (40) annotated with the statement 'Handkerchiefs – arranged not genuine'. This item was created by Ferris, an old tune to which he added choreography. Judge believes Ferris acquired it from Chappell.<sup>29</sup> In comparing Robbins' playing with the Chappell version, it becomes apparent that he changed it from melodic minor to a major key (see Figure 5). The possible reasons behind this will be discussed later.



**Figure 5** Extract from 'Bluff King Hal' / 'Staines Morris' showing altered modality

*'Constant Billy'*



**Figure 6** Extract from 'Constant Billy' showing raised note in Bidford rendition

'Constant Billy' is probably the most popular melody in the morris genre. There is a copy of it (but only the A section) in the Ferris MS (40), it was used in Ilmington and a version of it was known in Bledington as 'Billy Boy'. When all the renditions are lined up, there is very little difference between them, and what there is occurs on unstressed beats. Statistically speaking the Bledington tune differs from the Bidford tune in twice as many places than the Ilmington tune. The Bledington melody replaces the longer notes with passing tones and arpeggios. In five places Ilmington and Bledington use the same pitches, while Bidford uses a different one. Robbins raises the leading tone to the dominant in a certain stepwise run, where the



other two do not (see bar four of Figure 6). Robbins originally played the tune in D; whereas Bennett played it in the more usual key of G. Do a few passing notes more or less point to the source of a tune? It seems a bit risky to say, given that it is one of the most commonly performed morris tunes. As there is no archival evidence of the old Bidford music, there is no proof to support or deny that it came from the old Bidford morris repertoire, as Judge suggested.

*'Cuckoo's Nest'*

This is another widespread melody, which can be very diverse in interpretation. Robbins' 'Cuckoo's Nest' only uses one strain of the tune, what is usually the B part in Britain. The A part is present in the Ferris MS, but the notation bears scant resemblance to what Robbins played. His tune is more closely related to the Ilmington version; yet again he avoids the minor mode. In bar 5, where the lines do not coincide, they follow the same contour, and Robbins continues this motif instead of following either of the other two lines very closely (see Figure 7). Judge suggested this tune came from Ilmington. If so, the tune diverged between Arthur's teaching and Robbins' and Bennett's performances.



Figure 7 'Cuckoo's Nest'

*'Devil among the Tailors'*

A popular social dance tune, but not in common use among morris dance musicians. The melody was only collected by Sharp in 1906. The tune does not appear in the Ferris MS, or on the first programme, and, given that neither Graham nor Carpenter collected this item, it seems to have had a very brief tenure in Robbins' repertoire.

*'Heel and Toe'*

'Heel and Toe' describes the footwork used in the dance. This same melody is known as 'General Monk's March' in Bledington, but was not collected in Ilmington. The

two versions coincide on all the strong beats, and many other notes as well. This title was on the first programme, and musically and historically speaking it is highly likely that it came from Bledington.

*'Merry Go Round / Morris Off'*

In MS 55, Ferris noted next to this tune 'The air of the Morris dance sometimes – an exact copy of the original – rather odd!', and the music appears two other times in the collection. It was originally published as 'Morisque' in Arbeau's *Orchesography*<sup>30</sup> in the sixteenth century, though Ferris cited Smith's *Festivals, Games, and Amusements* as his source,<sup>31</sup> only Bidford used it for morris dancing, but it persisted throughout the Shakespearean team's life. When Sharp collected it, he believed that it was living proof of the unbroken history of the morris genre. He wrote in the first edition of *The Morris Book*, 'Here in truth is a signal instance of that persistence and continuity which is always cropping up, to the lasting amazement and delight of the student of Folk-music'.<sup>32</sup> Robbins' playing does not vary from the original notation. This item is an unabashed Ferris invention combining an ancient tune with unusual choreography.

*'Old Trunko' ('Trunkles')*

Sharp collected 'Old Trunko', though it seems to have been on its way out of the repertoire because Graham and Carpenter did not collect the tune. It was a late addition to the tour, as the title is absent from the first programme, and present on the second. The tune was not found in Ilmington, though it was known in Bledington. Between the Bledington and Bidford versions, the A and C sections of the melody are nearly identical, but the B sections are distinctive; matching up only in the last two beats of the second bar, and the final bar. Unlike other instances of divergence, this is not a case of transposition. The tune was fairly common in the morris context. Perhaps this is evidence of the pre-revival Bidford?

*'Old Woman Tossed Up in a Blanket'*

'Old Woman' was in the Bidford repertoire from the second programme onwards. Judge thought it may have come from Ilmington, as it appears in the Ferris MS (54) in a rough state, which implied it was noted in the field. He cited a newspaper account of Ferris taking down unnamed tunes from unidentified old men, location also unknown. This could have been one of those tunes, but it gets us no closer to identifying the source. This tune is also known as a nursery rhyme. Bidford, Bledington, and Ilmington all had versions. When the three collected tunes are compared (see Figure 8), there are a few more notes in common between Ilmington and Bidford, but not enough to say conclusively that it came from Ilmington. In bars where Bidford differs from the others, Bledington and Ilmington are often in agreement, while Bidford has the same passage transposed down a fourth or fifth. The B section of the tune in the Ferris MS differs substantially from the

version Robbins played. Whatever the source, Robbins appears to have made some adaptations, mainly transposition.

The image shows a musical score for the tune 'Old Woman Tossed up in a Blanket'. It consists of three staves for each of the three locations: Bledington, Bidford, and Ilmington. The music is in 6/8 time and one sharp (F#). Section A covers measures 1-5, and Section B covers measures 6-11. Measures 12-15 are also shown. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp, and a 6/8 time signature. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and ties. A box labeled 'A' is above the first staff, and a box labeled 'B' is above the second staff. Measure numbers 6 and 12 are indicated at the start of their respective lines.

Figure 8 'Old Woman Tossed up in a Blanket'

*'Princess Royal / Cross Caper'*

'Princess Royal' is another widely distributed tune with many local variations. In Ilmington it went by the title 'Nelson's Praise'. This item appears in Robbins' repertoire from the first programme through to 1933 when Carpenter collected it. A fragment of the tune is included in the Ferris MS (54). The title on this page is 'Cross Caper' and this was a descriptive title associated with the choreography. The Bidford and Ilmington versions are both in a major key; Bledington's is not (see Figure 9). The Bidford version is more ornamented than the Ilmington version, however they almost always coincide on the strong beats. Musically speaking, there is variation enough to indicate that all three renditions had different sources. We cannot claim an Ilmington origin because Ferris did not meet the Ilmington men, and Robbins did not go to Ilmington until after the first programme was printed. If, given the chronology, it did not come from Ilmington, and musically it does not appear to be from Bledington, then Judge's proposal that it is of old Bidford stock looks very attractive, though unverifiable.

Figure 9 'Princess Royal' three distinctive versions

*'Shepherd's Hey'*

This is another popular morris tune, and again the three collected melodies are very close, as is the tune in Ferris' MS (40). Robbins' version is exactly the same as that which appears in the Ferris MS. The first programme lists it as 'Shepherd's Aid' and the second as 'Shepherd's Hey', the latter being the usual title. According to Judge, 'Sharp suggested later that the Bidford "Shepherd's Hey" was derived from Ilmington, but this seems doubtful in view of the fact that at the beginning of the tour Ferris had not yet met Joseph Johnson the foreman, or any other of the Ilmington men'.<sup>33</sup> He also suggests that this may have been from the pre-Ferris Bidford morris,<sup>34</sup> though without providing solid evidence. The Bidford, Ilmington,

and Bledington melodies are nearly identical, so there is no way to determine the source by studying the music. While unlikely that it came from Ilmington, it could have easily been from Bledington.

*'Town Morris' / 'Green Garter' / 'Morris On' ('Hey Diddle Dis')*

Judge wrote, 'In 1910 de Ferrars gave Sharp the tune for what he called "Bidford Town Morris", which may seem to indicate some kind of local connection for this dance.'<sup>35</sup> Judge surmises that because Ferris called this 'Bidford Town Morris' it may have been part of the original Bidford heritage. Despite its alleged local origins, it faded from the repertoire and was not collected by Carpenter, nor was it ever collected in Ilmington. Passing notes aside, the Bidford and Bledington renditions are nearly identical until the last three bars. In the penultimate bar there is again an example of the same melodic shape transposed down a fourth. As it is not a widespread melody, the close correspondence between the two variants may indicate that the music, at least, was heavily influenced by Bledington and adapted by Robbins (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 'Bidford Town Morris' / 'Hey Diddle Dis'

*'We Won't Go Home til Morning'*

This was a popular song tune that entered the repertoire of dance musicians. To complicate matters, this tune was combined with 'Cuckoo's Nest' in Bidford's performances. Judge believed both tunes may have come from Ilmington, though only 'Cuckoo's Nest' appears in the MS. As a morris tune, 'We Won't Go Home til Morning' only occurs in the Bidford repertoire, however, Sam Bennett's Ilmington Morris Dancers (pre-teen girls) were filmed performing a hand-clapping dance to this melody.<sup>36</sup> The Ilmington and Bidford versions of the tune include several identical bars, the Bidford version being generally more ornamented. Even when they differ, the strong beats still agree. Judge asserts that it represents part of the Ilmington influence.<sup>37</sup> It could have come from Ilmington, but as it was such a well-known tune outside of the morris context, it is hard to discount another source.

### **Judge's Suggested Sources versus Musical Analysis**

Of Judge's suggestions, the musical evidence supports Ferris as the source for 'Merry Go Round' / 'Morris Off' (Arbeau's 'Morisque'). 'Bluff King Hal' ('Staines Morris') may be also safely viewed as a Ferris addition, with adaptation on the part of Robbins. The latter tune shows how the notations in the Ferris MS do not always reflect the melodies as played by Robbins.

The musical evidence is not very strong for Judge's conjecture that 'Constant Billy', 'Shepherd's Aid', and 'Town Morris' were relics of the older Bidford repertoire. 'Constant Billy' and 'Shepherd's Hey' were too widespread and not distinctive enough to warrant such a conclusion. The latter could have come from Bledington, though, musically speaking, it does not differ significantly from the Ilmington tune. 'Town Morris' on the other hand may have been derived from Bledington. 'Old Trunko' differs significantly from the Bledington version, which may indicate an old Bidford origin, as this tune was not found in Ilmington. 'Cross Caper' / 'Princess Royal', while closely resembling the Ilmington version, was in the repertoire before Ferris and Robbins met the Ilmington men, which makes Judge's assertion of its Bidford origins a strong possibility. But as there is no extant music attributed to the old Bidford tradition, the source of these tunes is still a matter of speculation.

Of the dances he ascribed to Ilmington, 'The Old Woman Tossed Up in a Blanket', is chronologically possible, but the musical analysis is inconclusive. If it came from Ilmington, it was changed during transmission. 'We Won't Go Home til Morning' and 'Cuckoo's Nest' (separately or combined) are feasible. The former was not collected in Bledington and the latter agrees more with the Ilmington version. 'Abraham Brown', when compared to 'Bumpus o Stretton' is a distinct possibility, given the otherwise rarity of the tune in the morris context and its late introduction to the repertoire.

The items that Judge associated with Bledington were never collected from Robbins and are not included here. Of the rest of the tunes, 'Devil Among the Tailors' is a complete unknown, as it did not occur elsewhere in the morris context, and was not in Ferris's notes. 'Billy and Nancy' / 'Brighton Camp' is musically close to Sam Bennett's Ilmington version of 'Brighton Camp' but lacking the C part. It could have been from Ilmington, adapted by Robbins. 'Heel and Toe' bears a strong resemblance to the Bledington tune and was not collected from Ilmington.

### **Musical Observations**

Some generalizations can be made from the results of the musical analysis. When there is a close correspondence between musical examples, it is usually a very well known melody, such as 'Shepherds Hey' and 'Constant Billy'. The points where the Bidford tunes differ from the others fall into the following categories:

1. The Bidford examples often feature transposition of a melodic line ('Old Woman Tossed up in a Blanket', 'Town Morris').
2. The Bidford examples may avoid chromaticism, especially in the raised and lowered pitches of the melodic minor scale ('Bluff King Hal').

3. Although a skilled fiddle player, there are times when Robbins limits the range of pitches he plays ('Abraham Brown', 'Heel and Toe').
4. Robbins sometimes plays in keys not favoured by other morris fiddle players ('Abraham Brown', 'Cuckoo's Nest').
5. Robbins sometimes omitted entire sections of well-known tunes ('Cuckoo's Nest', 'Brighton Camp').
6. Robbins did not always play the tunes as notated in the Ferris MS ('Bluff King Hal', 'Cuckoo's Nest').

All of these traits are evidence of some form of adaptation of the tunes. Abbreviating the melody by leaving out sections was likely done to fit the needs of the choreography. The other adaptations may have derived from Robbins' use of the tabor pipe as a melody instrument.

### **The Pipe and Tabor Connection**

The English tabor pipe was well on its way out of use by morris dancers by the time Ferris began to reconstruct and revive morris dancing.<sup>38</sup> For the earliest performances of the Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dancers, Robbins played the fiddle. But in mid-February 1885 he was sent to Ilmington to study with James Arthur, the local piper. Sam Bennett, the Ilmington fiddle player (and three years Robbins' senior) had also learned the Ilmington morris tunes from Arthur. According to a letter written after the fact from Ferris to Sharp, the instrument used during the tour was in poor playing condition due to age, and he fiddled for most of the dances.<sup>39</sup> It appears that Robbins went on to play the pipe and tabor for at least some of the dancing that took place after the tour. There is a photograph taken by Sir Benjamin Stone at Stratford-upon-Avon of the Bidford dancers and John Robbins with pipe and tabor.<sup>40</sup> Bennett was photographed on two occasions with a tabor drum (but no pipe), and there is no evidence that he played the pipe and tabor in performance.

If these two men learned at least some of the tunes from the same person, why are their renditions different? Bennett learned directly on the fiddle. Arthur probably instructed Robbins to play the tabor pipe itself, imparting both technique and repertoire. The differences between the two instruments used in the learning process may account for some of the differences in the final performance.

Not being a piper, the author consulted with two experts on the English tabor pipe, Steve Rowley, chair of the Taborers Society, and Norman Stanfield, an ethnomusicologist. In an e-mail Rowley wrote:

We can usually determine pipe and tabor tunes by the way in which they fit on the pipe [ . . . ] At the turn of the century there were a number of pipes around with slightly (or sometimes greatly) different thumb hole positions and limitations in the upper range. Tunes were adapted to work with these restrictions.<sup>41</sup>

Passages in certain tunes where Robbins plays what appears to be transpositions into a lower register, or alterations to avoid chromatic notes may be due to the restrictions of the tabor pipe. Conversely, Robbins' unusual use of the raised pitches in 'Constant Billy' suggests that this tune was not learned on the tabor pipe, but rather on the fiddle. This may be confirmed by its presence in the first programme – before he went to Ilmington to learn the tabor pipe.

Where the tabor pipe influence is most strongly felt is in Robbins' version of 'Bluff King Hal' ('Staines Morris') (see Figure 5). Taking his cue from the raised f'' and g'' in the first bar, he plays it in a major key, ignoring all the f'' and g'' and c'' naturals in the original melodic minor. This seems odd given Robbins' otherwise proficient fiddle technique. Stanfield explained, 'The pipe has a devil of a time playing music with any chromatic changes, even if it's the two penultimate notes of melodic minor'.<sup>42</sup> Rowley agreed, and supplied a clue as to what sort of pipe Robbins may have played. He wrote,

It ['Staines Morris'] is not easy on an 'English' tabor pipe, which uses a TTS (tone, tone, semitone) fingering system. To get the g'' sharp you need to play an a'' and place your little finger over the end of the pipe to lower it.<sup>43</sup>

He said this was not a technique used on the common English tabor pipe. However, there was another type of pipe known as the galoubet (which used a tone, tone, tone scale), most widely found in Provence. Rowley wrote 'On a galoubet the Bidford version it is a doddle. The g'' sharp is an open thumb hole.' and 'That version of "Staines" is exactly what you would play on a galoubet. So easy.'<sup>44</sup> Ferris had tried on several occasions to obtain a working English pipe from retired morris musicians with no success. However, the galoubet was commonly found in England and appears to have been a viable alternative.<sup>45</sup>

In answer to the inevitable question, why play a tabor pipe adaptation on a fully chromatic instrument like the violin? Rowley replied: 'I find that the tabor pipe versions become the versions that I play on other instruments, e.g. concertina, even though those instruments don't have the same constraints as the tabor pipe.'<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The attempt to discover the origins of John Robbins' morris repertoire through musical analysis has produced mixed results. Although sometimes the music supports the archival evidence, in just as many cases the outcome is inconclusive, or even contradictory. The more popular tunes are so similar to other versions that the slight differences could be a matter of individual style. It is dangerous to put too much emphasis on such minor points of similarity and divergence. Moreover, the restrictions of the tabor pipe used while learning some of the repertoire may account for many of the distinctive passages in Robbins' melodies. While it is tempting to attribute the pipe and tabor influenced music to James Arthur and the Ilmington tradition, it is important to understand that this was not the sole source. Robbins



demonstrated, with his unique interpretation of 'Staines Morris', that he was equal to the task of adapting tunes to the tabor pipe scale.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Roy Judge, 'D'Arcy Ferris and the Bidford Morris', *Folk Music Journal*, 4 (1984), 443–80 (p. 444).
- <sup>2</sup> Judge, p. 446, reproduced a photograph of him in an elaborate Elizabethan-styled costume as the 'Lord of Misrule' complete with staff, crown, and a long, ersatz ermine-trimmed cape.
- <sup>3</sup> Judge, p. 447.
- <sup>4</sup> Judge, pp. 447–48.
- <sup>5</sup> Judge, p. 448.
- <sup>6</sup> The pipe is an end blown duct flute with three or four finger holes, played with one hand. The player typically also strikes a tabor (type of snare drum) with a stick held in the other hand.
- <sup>7</sup> Judge, p. 451.
- <sup>8</sup> Photographs of the first and second programmes from the 1886 performances are reproduced in Judge, pp. 450 and 458.
- <sup>9</sup> Keith Chandler, 'Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins of Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire (1868–1948)', *Musical Traditions*, Article MT 189, 2006 <<http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/>> [accessed 13 January 2010].
- <sup>10</sup> Keith Chandler, *Ribbons, Bells, and Squeaking Fiddles: The Social History of Morris Dancing in the English South Midlands, 1660–1900* (Enfield Lock Middlesex UK: Hisarlik Press for the Folklore Society, 1993), pp. 140–41.
- <sup>11</sup> Keith Chandler, 'Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins'.
- <sup>12</sup> J. Philip Taylor, 'Bidford on Avon and Its Morris Tradition', 1982, unnumbered leaf before p. 82. This is a typescript that may exist in multiple copies, one of which is deposited in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library in London.
- <sup>13</sup> John Graham, *Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dances: with an introduction, description of the dresses and the dances, and hints on adaptation to schools* (London: J. Curwen & Sons, 1907).
- <sup>14</sup> Cecil James Sharp and Herbert C. MacIlwaine, *The Morris Book: A History of Morris Dancing with a Description of Eleven Dances as Performed by the Morris-Men of England* (London: Novello, 1907). Piano arrangements were also published in *Morris Dance Tunes* (London: Novello, 1907).
- <sup>15</sup> Mary Neal, *The Espérance Morris Book: A Manual of Morris Dances, Folk-Songs and Singing Games, Part I* (London: Curwen, 1910).
- <sup>16</sup> Chandler, 'Musicians in 19th Century Southern England: No 16, John Robbins'.
- <sup>17</sup> James Madison Carpenter, 'The James Madison Carpenter Collection', Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Archive of Folk Culture, AFC 1972/001.
- <sup>18</sup> Judge, pp. 443–80.
- <sup>19</sup> Keith Chandler, *Shakespearean Bidford Morris Dances: A Source Book* (Eynsham, Oxon: Chandler Publications, 1985).
- <sup>20</sup> Taylor, 'Bidford on Avon and Its Morris Tradition'.
- <sup>21</sup> Judge, p. 449 and endnote 31.
- <sup>22</sup> Judge, pp. 471–72.
- <sup>23</sup> Judge, pp. 455–56.
- <sup>24</sup> Judge, p. 449 and footnote 31.
- <sup>25</sup> Judge, p. 466.
- <sup>26</sup> Sam Bennett, Letter to Douglas Kennedy, 28 January 1948, VWML Library Collection, AL Bennett.
- <sup>27</sup> Bumpus is a popular surname in Stretton-on-Fosse, which is not far from Ilmington, and Bennett had a number of similar ditties in his repertoire.

*Routes & Roots: Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 4*

<sup>28</sup> *Dances by Ilmington Teams in the Grounds of Peter De Montfort's House: Fiddler Sam Bennett* (Lee De Forest, 1926). A DVD copy of this rare sound film is held in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

<sup>29</sup> W. Chappell, *The Ballad Literature and Popular Music of the Olden Time: A History of the Ancient Songs, Ballads, and of the Dance Tunes of England; Also a Short Account of the Minstrels*, 2 vols (London: Chappell, [1859]).

<sup>30</sup> Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchesography: A Treatise in the Form of a Dialogue: Whereby All Manner of Persons May Easily Acquire and Practice the Honourable Exercise of Dancing ... Now First Translated from the Original Edition Published at Langres, 1588, trans. by Cyril W. Beaumont, preface by Peter Warlock* (London: C. W. Beaumont, 1925), p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> Horatio Smith and G. R. Gleig, *Festivals, Games, and Amusements, Ancient and Modern* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1831), p. 263.

<sup>32</sup> Sharp and MacIlwaine, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Judge, p. 455.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Judge, p. 455.

<sup>36</sup> *Dances by Ilmington Teams.*

<sup>37</sup> Judge, p. 466.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony C. Baines and Hélène La Rue, 'Pipe and Tabor', *Grove Music Online*, at *Oxford Music Online* <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/>> [accessed 28 February 2011].

<sup>39</sup> 'Extract from letter of Mr. d'Arcy de Ferrars, Dec. 13th 1910'. Cambridge, Archive of Clare College, Cecil J. Sharp MSS, ACC1987/25, Folk Dance Notes, vol. 1, p. 256.

<sup>40</sup> J. Philip Taylor, 'Bidford on Avon and Its Morris Tradition', 1982, unnumbered leaf before p. 82.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Rowley, 'Bidford and Pipe and Tabor Players', email, 9 June 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Norman Stanfield, 'Bidford Tune', email, 27 June 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Stephan Rowley, 'Bidford Tune', email, 27 June 2010.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Baines and La Rue, 'Pipe and Tabor'.

<sup>46</sup> Stephan Rowley, 'Bidford Tune', email, 28 June 2010.