

Lives Remembered

Ken Sheffield 07.03.1931 - 05.07.2017

In his Foreword to volume 1 of what became ten volumes of dances 'From Two Barns', Ken Sheffield wrote that his dance research began when he was shown the vague instructions for a dance called Sun Assembly in Thompson's Compleat Collection of 1757; Ken wanted to make it a workable dance, and published his widely enjoyed version of that dance in 1982, as one of ten dances in Two Barns volume 1, issued in that year specifically to mark EFDSS Golden Jubilee. Further volumes followed rapidly, and the tenth and last volume appeared in 2005. Introducing volume 10, Ken explained that he had worked to produce ten books with ten dances, 'in each case the tune had been the inspiration for the inclusion or composition of a dance'.

While researching dances, Ken became a competent performer on the concertina, and in recent years enjoyed being part of Richard King's Donkey House Band. Band member Frances White heard Ken explain the origin of 'From Two Barns':

'Ken had access to the private library of the Misses Briggs, who lived in a house in Burford called "Barn House". This was the "first barn" which gave rise to the title "From Two Barns" - the second was Ken's house, Hall Barn. One of the Misses Briggs was the folklorist Katharine Briggs'.

Another Oxford Band, the Quarry Turners from Headington, recorded the first three Two Barns collections; John Graham, founder and leader of the Quarry Turners, knew Ken well over many years, and has contributed these recollections:

'Ken hailed from Buckinghamshire around the Aylesbury Area. He was an engineer and designer by profession and as is so often the case this led to a very keen interest in music and folk dancing. In his younger days he held a strong interest in Morris Dancing and was a member of the Whitchurch Team for many years. He organised functions at The Walton Hall in Aylesbury and White Cross Hall in Monks Risborough, where he held regular dances with The Chiltern Ramblers Band led by Alan Robertson. During the 1970s he formed a dance display team to perform at Missenden Abbey and Civic functions, and for this purpose he engaged the services of Mrs Moreton-King, a dance teacher from Shabbington near Thame. They soon became very efficient and were duly named 'The King Pins'.

Ken worked in the design department at Plessey in Swindon, where he was a leader in the team who evolved the vital instruments in the Harrier Jump Jet, enabling it to perfect its unique vertical take-off. During this time, he moved with his family to live in Witney.

We recorded the music for the Two Barns dances in Oxford University's Laboratory in Osney, where Peter Lund was the Senior Lecturer in the Engineering Department and also a folk-dance enthusiast. The sound proof qualities of the laboratory made it ideal for recording purposes. The band arrived at the stated time, with all the recording equipment, but Ken discovered that the lab contained a Rolls Royce 'Merlin' engine (a la spitfire) which led to the first half hour of the sessions time taken up with Ken inspecting this engine in great detail. He was the proud possessor of a 1936 MG, named 'Nonesuch', which he drove competitively in his younger days. His son Timothy drove 'Nonesuch' to lead his funeral cortege.'

At the Stonesfield Folk Dance Club Weekend in June 2016, David and Kathryn Wright introduced a special session to celebrate the work of Ken Sheffield and his 'Two Barns' dance collections, with John Graham and the Quarry Turners as musicians. The following year Stonesfield club compiled an oral history on cd, from previously recorded interviews with Ken himself, and new oral interviews with John Graham, members of the band Wild Thyme and Susan Swann who, with Peter Swann, provided many of the music arrangements for Ken's dances, particularly those set to historic tunes from Turlough O'Carolan.

Ken was introduced to Pamela, who became his dancing partner and eventually his wife, famously, as Ken loved to recall, with the words: "This is Pam. She's twenty, and she's tough." That occurred at Long Crendon in 1951 when he arrived for a dance, not knowing what style of dancing it would be, and discovered English Country dancing. Pam always supported Ken in his dance pursuits. Together they held residential weekends at Green Park Centre in Buckinghamshire for dancers to assist with his newly prepared dances prior to publication. Later they hosted August weeks of Playford dancing at Halsway Manor with musicians Susan and Peter Swann, playing as 'Merry Conceit'.

Stonesfield Folk Dance Club assembled 80+ dancers at their dance venue on 25 March 2018 to celebrate the life of Ken Sheffield, dancer, caller, musician, dance researcher and dance writer. The programme included dances from all ten Two Barns volumes plus the dance 'Nonesuch', and also 'Beauty in Tears' and 'Light of My Life', both as yet unpublished.

VMcF, IMcF