



Morris Dancing at Bonchurch School

This week we revisit Bonchurch School in the early years of the last century. In 2016 we published a story about the days when the Stears family ran the school. Thomas Stears was headmaster from 1883 until his death in 1903, and he and his family played a significant part in the community life of Bonchurch until the school closed in 1919. This photograph shows the children dancing round a maypole in the school grounds in about 1890. The photographs we used in the article had been given to us by Sheila Anderson, from Somerset, who was Thomas's great granddaughter, and was on the Island in 1990 researching family history.



We are now in touch with Sheila's grandson Ian Armstrong (Thomas Stears' great great grandson), who is a musician and writer, with a particular interest in English folk music, and who has been researching the connections his family had with the folk music revival in the 1900s. His interest was

pricked when he found the name 'E A Stears', cited as the source of songs given to Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1904; Emily Agnes Stears was his great grandmother, and there is plenty of other evidence of the interest the family had in folk music and tradition. Thomas Stears' uncle, Joshua, was a violinist who also worked as a music teacher, and as a 'Music Seller' in Melville Street in Sandown in 1865, and Thomas himself was a renowned singer, who encouraged traditional dancing and music at the school.

The second picture here, taken in about 1898, shows Thomas's daughters Annie on the left and Elizabeth in the centre wearing Morris dancing costume complete with bells and sticks, and it has been suggested that these are 'Esperance Club' costumes. The Esperance Club was set up in London in 1895 by Mary Neal, daughter of a wealthy Birmingham button manufacturer, who found Victorian family life a 'pageant of snobbery' and developed a growing concern about social injustice. The club taught folk songs and dances to the 'sewing girls' of St Pancras, whose wages were about £1 a week, and whose lot was a future of drudgery, sweated labour, or worse; it played an important part in the English folk music revival of the early 1900s, and from 1907 started sending girls who had learned the dances in the club into schools around the country to teach children Morris dances.

We haven't found any evidence of an Esperance teacher coming to Bonchurch, but perhaps the Stears sisters travelled to a school in the South of England to learn the dances. However, this would date the photograph as 1907 at the earliest. Annie and Elizabeth would have been 21 and 26 respectively then - and they look younger than that. It is a puzzle. Ian Anderson will be talking about his family and the history of traditional music and dance on the Island in an evening event at East Dene, on Thursday 17 January 7.30 pm, and would be very pleased to see anyone who can provide information about Bonchurch or how Morris dancing was introduced to the Island at this time.

Thomas Stears died in 1903, and his wife Susanna in 1916. Elizabeth and Annie both worked as teachers in Bonchurch. Annie later taught at Ventnor School, and when she died in the Flu epidemic that followed the First World War the National Schools closed on the day of her funeral, as they had when her father died. They were a well respected family.

