

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/42959/>

Published paper

Greig, Ruairidh (2004) *Joseph Taylor from Lincolnshire: a biography of a singer*. In: Folk Song Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation. Occasional Publications (3). The Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen , Aberdeen, pp. 386-392. ISBN 0-9545682-0-6

Joseph Taylor from Lincolnshire: a biography of a singer

RUAIRIDH GREIG

The sixth North Lincolnshire Music Festival was held in the Corn Exchange at Brigg in April 1905. For the first time it included a folk song section, offering a prize for 'the best unpublished old Lincolnshire folk-song or plough-song'.¹ The judge, Frank Kidson, awarded the prize for the best song to Joseph Taylor of Saxby All Saints, for 'Creeping Jane'. Joseph Taylor's subsequent contact at the festival with Percy Grainger led to the phonograph and commercial recordings that continue to delight and inform later generations of singers far beyond his native county's borders.² My first contact with his singing was through his granddaughter Marion Hudson who lived, as I did, in Grimsby and to whom I was related by marriage. Mrs Hudson played me her precious 78s and let me read her collection of press-cuttings. She was born in 1894, daughter of Joseph Taylor's eldest daughter, Betsy Ann. Although her family lived in Barton-upon-Humber, some eight miles from Saxby, she was a frequent visitor to her grandfather's house and had treasured memories of those years of her life. She was very keen to emphasise to me that her grandfather was not a 'country bumpkin' as he was sometimes portrayed, but an intelligent, highly respected, and responsible member of his village community. This paper is a summary of my continuing research into Joseph Taylor, his family, and background, and the social context in which he and Percy Grainger's other Lincolnshire singers (in particular, George Wray, George Gouldthorpe, and Joseph Leaning) should be viewed.

Joseph Taylor was born at Binbrook in the Lincolnshire Wolds, an area of rolling chalk hills, on 10 December 1833, second son of James Taylor and Mary Ann Smith of Barnoldby le Beck. James and his elder brother John moved to Binbrook in the 1820s from Fotherby near Louth. Binbrook was an unusual place, an 'open' village in an area of 'closed' villages where most of the land and property were owned by a single estate. It was for this reason that it was home to the seasonal labour force needed by the large local farms at certain times in the farming year.³ Joseph's elder brother John is listed as a gardener in the 1851 census. His father, James, was noted to be an agricultural labourer. The National School was not opened until 1843 and so

it is unlikely that Joseph would have had formal education beyond that which was offered by the local Sunday school.

One consequence of being an 'open' village was that Binbrook had its own hiring fair, the 'Stattis' or Statute Fair, at which local farmers would select their labourers. Joseph's early working life in the area was as an agricultural labourer. In 1851 he was one of twelve labourers employed by John Fieldsend on his farm at Orford, a hamlet north of Binbrook.⁴ At the age of seventeen, he was already taking an interest in music. According to Mrs Hudson, in her unpublished biography of Joseph Taylor, he would often walk to Grimsby and back, a round trip of about twenty miles, to attend a concert.⁵ He was also learning songs from gypsies who used to come and camp in the chalkpits that dotted the landscape: 'One evening when he returned from work, his mother told him that the gypsies had arrived, as they did each year at that time ... He had been awaiting their arrival with impatience, since he loved their singing. So as soon as possible he dashed off to the 'pit' where he knew they would make camp.'⁶ That he was learning songs at this time is confirmed by an anecdote noted by Percy Grainger. When Joseph Taylor's mother asked what his new-born brother should be called, he replied, 'Christen him Bold William Taylor', this being the title of the newest addition to his repertoire of 'ballets' (as they are called by the rural singers) ... and his advice was followed.⁷

His brother William was born in 1853, when Joseph was nineteen years old. As I recently discovered, it was also a time in his life when Joseph spent three months in prison, convicted for stealing wheat cake and powder from Binbrook farmer William Croft.⁸ The turning point in his life may well have been his marriage in 1856 to Eliza Hill, from Huttoft on the Lincolnshire coast, who was six years older than Joseph. They settled in Ranters' Row in Binbrook, where their first two children were born. It was in 1863 that the family moved to Saxby All Saints, a pretty little village on the western slope of the Wolds, between Brigg and Barton-upon-Humber. There he worked and trained as a carpenter and joiner for Mr Dudding, an independent tradesman who worked mainly for the Hope-Barton family, owners of the village. Here the Taylors had the rest of their family of seven children and Joseph's love of singing found an outlet in the church choir, to which he belonged for forty-five years.

In 1875 Joseph joined the Hope-Barton estate, initially as a woodman. From this job he was subsequently promoted to under-steward. He also became parish clerk in 1874. His duties in this role included winding the church clock, gravedigging, collecting the Church rate from cottagers, and the all-important task of responding 'Amen' in the church services. As his family grew up they also found good jobs and made good marriages. His son James followed his father's trade as a woodman on the Heneage estate at Hainton; his daughter Annie married Thomas Allen who was a skilled woodcarver on the estate; son John became a farmer; the youngest daughter, Mary Ann, became a teacher at the village school.⁹ Their lives were also touched by tragedy. In 1880, at the age of fifteen their son Joseph was

Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation

drowned in the River Ancholme, within sight of the village. His headstone stands beside that of his parents in the village churchyard.

When Joseph Taylor sang at the North Lincolnshire Musical Festival he was, according to Percy Grainger, 'neither illiterate nor socially backward ... He was the perfect type of an English yeoman: sturdy and robust, yet the soul of sweetness, gentleness, courteousness and geniality. At the age of 75 (in 1908) his looks were those of middle age and his ringing voice – one of the loveliest I ever heard – was as fresh as a young man's.'¹⁰ Photographs show him wearing an enamelled pin in his cravat in the shape of a pheasant. This was his personal emblem, which featured in the topiary in the front garden of his home, Pheasant Cottage, as Marion Hudson describes: 'Had he been a Lord my Grandpa's crest would have certainly been a pheasant, for in his stock, whether in his immaculate weekday grey freize [*sic*] or in his Sunday black, he always wore a beautifully coloured enamel pin in the form of a pheasant. In the centre of his front garden was a bush which he had trained, also to the shape of a pheasant.'¹¹

Saxby All Saints was a musical village. In addition to the church choir in which Joseph Taylor sang, the village had a choral society which for many years took part in local competitions. His children James, John, Annie and Mary Ann were all singers. So when Gervase Elwes, a nationally known tenor, his wife Winifred and her brother Everard Fielding wanted to gather support for the first North Lincolnshire Music Festival in 1900, Saxby was an obvious point of call. The organisers initially cycled around the area training village choirs and then acquired a motorbike, behind which Lady Winifred was towed on her push-bike.¹² At the Festivals prior to 1905, the Taylor family had competed in a number of sections. In 1904, for example, John won the tenor solo section with the song 'Come Ye Children', and Annie and Mary Ann, with Miss Ashton, came second in the female voice trio with 'Queen of Fresh Flowers'. The Saxby choir came first in the hymn and chant sections that year.¹³

Winifred Elwes gives the credit for introducing the folk song section in the 1905 Festival to Percy Grainger and her brother Everard Fielding, 'who had become infected by Mr Cecil Sharpe's [*sic*] enthusiasm'.¹⁴ According to Marion Hudson, her grandfather had to be persuaded to enter: 'No compliment had any affect and Grandpa was adamant – he wasn't a public singer, he only sang because he wished to. Lady Elwes and her brother cycled from Brigg many times and at last, to please *her*, much against his inclination, he at long last, consented.'¹⁵ It was after the competition that Percy Grainger noted the tune to 'Brigg Fair' from him, which was subsequently published in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*.¹⁶ Grainger then returned to Brigg in September 1905, when he spent a week collecting songs with Lady Elwes's sons: 'Percy used to jot down the tunes on bits of paper, while Geoffrey or Rolph caught the words.'¹⁷ Shortly after this trip, during which Grainger called at Saxby, a correspondence started between the collector and Annie Allen, Joseph's second daughter, which continued until her death in 1937.¹⁸

At the 1906 Festival, Joseph Taylor was again awarded first prize, but this time he had to share it with George Gouldthorpe of Goxhill:

The results were of such interest that the judge, Miss Lucy Broadwood, felt justified in awarding eight prizes. Mr G. Gouldthorpe sang a ballad entitled 'Six Dukes', which from internal evidence must be over 450 years old, and has not yet, as far as is known, been published. 'Brigg Fair' and a beautiful tune to 'William Taylor' obtained the next prize for Mr Joseph Taylor.¹⁹

This continuing success led to a certain amount of local celebrity status for Joseph Taylor. Marion Hudson paints a typically rose-tinted picture: 'Famous musical people wrote to visit him and all agreed that his singing was unusually beautiful as they fell beneath his spell.'²⁰ The Allen correspondence provides evidence of his being invited to perform at a local concert at South Ferriby in October 1906. Annie Allen wrote to Percy Grainger asking for the loan of his manuscript book of words.²¹ A subsequent letter thanks him for the loan of 'The Kidson book' (possibly *Traditional Tunes*). She writes: 'I am taking down lots of words from it for my Father, it is surprising what a lot he knows when he has the words, the tunes come back to him.'²² Grainger also gave another song book to Joseph Taylor in August 1909: 'My Father sends you many thanks, he looks at it and sings for hours.'²³ It is interesting to note that Grainger was apparently not concerned about the possible influence of other collected versions on his informant's repertoire.

Considering the success of the folk song section in the North Lincolnshire Music Festival in 1905 and 1906, and the local and national interest it attracted, it may seem surprising that it did not continue in subsequent years. However, there was no Festival in 1907. It was cancelled following the death of Gervase Elwes's mother, Mrs Cary-Elwes. Gervase and Winifred then moved to Billing Hall in Northamptonshire where the family also owned an estate. The Festival restarted in 1908, now held in Brigg and Scunthorpe, with no folk song section and no Elwes family involvement.²⁴ Lady Winifred was at the 1909 Festival, but again there was no folk song section. Annie Allen and her brother John Taylor came second in the tenor/contralto section, singing 'Can I Not Find'.²⁵ Mary Ann Taylor continued to take part in the Brigg Festival for many years.²⁶ The Festival still exists as an annual event and it does, once more, have a folk song section. Tom Glossop, youth leader and former mayor of Brigg, regularly performed in it in recent times and won the section with songs from Joseph Taylor's repertoire.

Percy Grainger's link with the Taylor family did continue, however. Joseph Taylor went to Grainger's home in Chelsea on more than one occasion. One of these visits was in March 1908 when he went to the first performance of Delius's rhapsody *Brigg Fair*. Marion Hudson was keen to deny the legend that Joseph Taylor got up and sang during the concert. Her comment to me was: 'Well he might have hummed the tune a bit, but he certainly didn't get up and sing.' However, we do know that Joseph Taylor sang during his London visits. Rose Grainger, Percy's mother, wrote to Annie

Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation

Allen from Sloane Square, Chelsea: 'Your dear father is here – safe and sound and is at present singing delightfully after our dinner – (about 8.30 – now)'.²⁷ In June and July 1908 Joseph Taylor recorded nine of his songs for the Gramophone Company, the first commercially issued recordings of an English folk singer. The Gramophone Company not only gave him a set of the records, but also a gramophone on which to play them.²⁸ The fact that no further commercial recordings were made might suggest that they were not a great financial success, despite a local advertisement which bore his photograph, subtitled 'Your Friend Mr Joseph Taylor, Saxby'.²⁹ The following page in the *Brigg Annual* advertised the 'Genuine Gramophone, from £3 10s, Come and hear Mr Taylor of Saxby'.

During a visit to Brigg Horse Fair on 5 August 1971, I met two elderly residents who remembered Joseph Taylor and Percy Grainger's visit. Richard Baines played trumpet in the orchestra at the Festival and recalled how Grainger had asked him for the A for the orchestra to tune up when in fact he should have asked the oboe. Matt Hutchinson, retired undertaker and joiner commented: 'Taylor never sang a good song because he didn't know one!'³⁰ Perhaps this reaction reflects a degree of local scepticism about Joseph Taylor's reputation as a singer, and a belief that his folk songs did not have the intrinsic quality of the accepted classical repertoire. There is not enough evidence to confirm that view but it is a possible explanation for this negative response.

Joseph Taylor's new-found status as concert performer and recording artiste did not last long, for within two years he was dead. He had suffered a great personal loss when his wife, Eliza, died in November 1909. Marion Hudson, then nineteen years old, recalled the funeral and her grandfather's courage: 'I know the rest of us poor stricken people felt unable to produce a note of the hymn, which we knew was her favourite. He, however, with tears unheeded, led the singing, lifting up his voice with the same clear, melodious voice and we simply had to follow. I shall never, never forget that experience.'³¹ The following May, five years after his first appearance at the North Lincolnshire Festival, he was involved in an accident that was to cost him his life. The *Lindsey Star* reported:

SAXBY – FATAL SEQUEL TO AN ACCIDENT – On Wednesday Joseph Taylor, aged 78 years, the local steward for Mr Hope-Barton, of the Hall, died somewhat suddenly. Deceased, it appears, whilst driving out on Tuesday was thrown out of the trap on to the horse, through the animal shying at something on the road. The man, though bruised on the shoulder, continued his further five-mile drive, and drove back another 10 miles. After fetching some cows from a field, he complained of severe pains in the pit of the stomach, and went to bed. Dr Morley, of Barton, was sent for, but before his arrival death had taken place.³²

Annie Allen wrote to Percy Grainger to inform him of her father's death: 'In deepest grief I write to you. Our dear Father had a trap accident on Tuesday, but seemed little the worse until yesterday he was taken with great pain and suddenly passed away, the Dr says heart trouble and shock.'³³ So ended the life of the first and, arguably,

still the finest commercially recorded English folk singer. He was buried in Saxby churchyard next to his wife and son Joseph, near to the family plot of the Hope-Barton family whom he had served for so many years.

Shortly before she died in 1937, Percy Grainger wrote to Annie Allen. He sent her the programme for the newly composed *Lincolnshire Posy* suite for military band:

The most lovely melody of the 6 I have used is undoubtedly your dear Father's 'R.P. Poachers [Rufford Park Poachers]' which I have long wished to arrange. I always think of that song as so very typical of his exquisitely melodious way of singing ...

I feel that Lincs Posy is one of the best things I have ever done with folk songs and I hope it will (in a small way) express some of the admiration and love I feel for yr father and other English folksingers and their lovely art.

Ever affectionately your
Percy Grainger.³⁴

What of Marion Hudson's resentment of the 'peasant' label sometimes given to her grandfather? Possibly, as a solicitor's widow, she felt it demeaned her status to have him viewed as an illiterate yokel. Whatever the reason, I have some sympathy with her. Too often have some elements of the media and the folk revival looked on 'source singers' with patronising attitudes and assumptions of quaint rurality. This, I believe, has done much harm to the status of folk song and traditional singing in England. I hope to have redressed the situation in a small way for Joseph Taylor; a real person, not just a caricature, a successful, self-made man, a pillar of his local community, with a fine voice and a magnificent singing style which we are lucky enough, thanks to Percy Grainger, still to be able enjoy today.

Notes

¹ *Lincolnshire, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 14 April 1905, p. 6g.

² *Unto Brigg Fair: Joseph Taylor and Other Traditional Lincolnshire Singers Recorded in 1908 by Percy Grainger* (London: Leader LEA 4050, 1972). See also *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, 3 (1908), where Grainger writes about collecting with the phonograph, and songs he collected from Joseph Taylor and other Lincolnshire singers are printed.

³ See R. J. Olney, ed., *Labouring Life on the Lincolnshire Wolds* (Sleaford: Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, 1975).

⁴ 1851 census HO107/2112 153–28

⁵ Original copy of Mrs Hudson's biography in the possession of Peter Collinson, who is Joseph Taylor's great-great-grandson and lives in Kent. I am indebted to Peter for my copy of his grandmother's book and copies of the press-cuttings she collected.

⁶ Hudson biography, Chapter 18, p. 19.

⁷ Percy Grainger, 'The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music', *Musical Quarterly*, 1 (1915), 420. Joseph Taylor sang 'William Taylor' and 'Brigg Fair' at the 1906 Festival.

⁸ Binbrook Lock-Up Records, entry dated 20 March 1854, Grimsby Public Library R26656.

Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation

- ⁹ Mary Ann Taylor (Aunt Polly to the family) was recorded by Peter Kennedy in 1953 and can be heard on *Brigg Fair: Joseph Taylor, Lincolnshire Singer* (Folktracks cassette 45-135).
- ¹⁰ Percy Aldridge Grainger, 'Program-Note on *Lincolnshire Posy*' (August 1939), p. [2].
- ¹¹ Hudson biography, Chapter 2, p. 1.
- ¹² Edward Dodd, *Brigg* (Brigg: Lincolnshire Times, 1973), p. 87.
- ¹³ *Lincolnshire, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 29 April 1904, p. 6g.
- ¹⁴ Lady Winifred and Richard Elwes, *Gervase Elwes* (London 1935), p. 162.
- ¹⁵ Hudson biography, Chapter 15, p. 17.
- ¹⁶ *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, 2 (1905), 80.
- ¹⁷ Elwes, p. 164.
- ¹⁸ Annie Allen was born at Saxby All Saints in 1869. Extracts from the Annie Allen letters are reproduced by kind permission of the Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.
- ¹⁹ *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 11 May 1906, p. 3g.
- ²⁰ Hudson biography, Chapter 15, p. 17.
- ²¹ Allen correspondence, 20 September 1906.
- ²² Allen correspondence, 15 October 1906.
- ²³ Allen correspondence, 23 August 1909.
- ²⁴ *Lindsey and Lincolnshire Star*, 9 May 1908, p. 8d, e.
- ²⁵ *Lindsey and Lincolnshire Star*, 1 May 1909, p. 8d, e.
- ²⁶ *Lincolnshire Times*, 11 July 1953, [from a cutting, n. pag.].
- ²⁷ Allen correspondence, undated.
- ²⁸ Allen correspondence, 23 August 1908.
- ²⁹ *Brigg and North Lincolnshire Annual 1909* (Brigg: Jackson and Sons, 1909), [n. pag.].
- ³⁰ National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, University of Sheffield, tape no. A23-71.
- ³¹ Hudson biography, Chapter 8, p. 10.
- ³² *Lindsey Star*, 7 May 1910, p. 4c.
- ³³ Allen correspondence, 5 May 1910.
- ³⁴ Allen correspondence, 18 March 1937.