

*With the author's
compliments*

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Mary Neal, of Littlehampton, and the folk music revival

AS a part of the Seventh St. Pancras Arts Festival, the English Folk Dance and Song Society presented, at the beginning of this month at Cecil Sharp House, its London headquarters, a Jubilee Exhibition, commemorating the foundation of the English Folk Dance Society by Cecil Sharp in 1911, and illustrating the history of the folk music revival since that date. The opportunity was rightly taken of reminding us of some of the pioneers who paved the way for the great work of Sharp and his collaborators, and one of these, and the most important of all in the field of folk dance, was Mary Neal, C.B.E., who died in 1944 in her 85th year. She is still remembered by many in West Sussex, not least for her 12 years as a magistrate in Littlehampton where she lived.

With the help of Miss Margaret Dean-Smith, of Fernhurst, a former Librarian at Cecil Sharp House, the present Librarian has gathered together some fascinating relics and reminders of this great woman whose services to folk dance and many other fields of social recreation are in danger of being forgotten by the present generation of singers and dancers.

Foremost among the more official exhibits is the noble document recording the award to her of the C.B.E. by King George VI in the Coronation Honours in 1937. The time-honoured epithets seem particularly apt: "Our trusty and well-beloved Mary Clara Sophia Neal, J.P." But a document of even greater interest is a recent letter from Miss Dean-Smith with details of the earliest beginnings of Mary Neal's social work which go back to 1887, when the West London (Methodist) Mission was founded, together with a

broke with Sharp, but for a few years they worked most fruitfully together. The "Morris Book," which appeared in 1907 was dedicated to the Esperance girls and had a preface by MacIlwaine.

Esperance Club members were sent out all over the country to teach the morris dances and two of these young teachers, Florence Warren and Blanche Payling, deserve especial remembrance. It was they who began the now famous "tradition" of Thaxted morris dancing, which has been followed by many other groups, not least in Kent and Sussex. When the break with Sharp occurred about 1909 and MacIlwaine died, he was succeeded as musical director of the Esperance Club by Clive Carey. MacIlwaine left a son Anthony who was adopted by Mary Neal.

SIR SYDNEY COCKERELL'S TRIBUTE

One of the treasures of this Jubilee Exhibition is a letter about Mary Neal written as recently as February 16, 1961, by Sir Sydney Cockerell, who is now 93 and has been bedridden for nine years. For six years (1892-98) he was secretary to William Morris and the Kelmscott Press, and from 1908 to 1937 Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. In this letter to the present Librarian at Cecil Sharp House he describes his "first contact with folk song and dance at a performance given by the Esperance Club which was run for working girls by Mary Neal . . . I was enchanted and went many times. . . this was in 1906 or 7." Soon after his appointment to the Fitzwilliam Sir Sydney made the acquaintance of Rupert Brooke, then

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RECREATION AND EMPLOYMENT

In 1895 Mary resigned and founded the Esperance Club and Social Guild for Girls, where she offered not only recreation but also employment in dressmaking in "Maison Esperance," at 15s. for a 45-hour week (paradise after the sweated labour from which most of the girls were thus redeemed). Not content with providing decent employment for the girls in decent conditions, Mary Neal bought a house at Littlehampton which she called the Green Lady Hostel, to which her girls came for their summer holidays. Seaside holidays for wage earners were then almost unheard of and Mary Neal's great contribution in this field, where the work of the pioneers is so easily forgotten, was outstanding. Her interest in healthful holidays for working folk persisted to the end of her long life. On the day after her death she was due to confer with the promoters of new plans for people's holidays enriched with folk dancing and other social recreations.

Historically, the most fruitful of her activities was the music and dancing which she conducted at the Esperance Club. Her great friend and helper was Herbert MacIlwaine, and it was a visit to Cecil Sharp which he made in 1904 which led to the close collaboration in the folk dance revival of Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp. Miss Neal taught her girls the morris dances from Headington (where there was an uninterrupted tradition) and demonstrated them all over England. She later

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Apart from letters and books, the exhibition included many photographs illustrating Mary Neal's activities. There was a photograph of herself taken by J. White & Son, of Littlehampton, and an Esperance club group with Lord Pethick-Lawrence, Emmeline Pethick, Mary Neal and Herbert MacIlwaine. There was also a Punch cartoon entitled "Merrie England once more" which was presented to Miss Neal at the Ninth English Folk Music Concert given by the Esperance Club at the Queen's Hall, on November 28, 1907. Of special interest were two photographs showing Cumberland Market in 1910 (the Esperance Club met at No. 50) and Cumberland Market as it is to-day, with Council flats in the place of the old houses.

There was much else in this Jubilee exhibition to interest the visitor from Sussex. This visitor was specially pleased to see a fine photograph of his Lewes friend George Townshend, the traditional singer who was mentioned in Tony Wales's recent article on some Sussex folk singers in the "W.S.G." George Butterworth, who collected folk songs mainly in Sussex, Lucy Broadwood and Herbert MacIlwaine were among the fascinating portrait gallery of pioneers of the folk music revival which has come to play such a lively and healthful part in our recreative life to-day.

STANLEY GODMAN

Pipe Passage, LEWES, Sussex

Dear Miss Knowles,

I thought you might care to have this, inadequate though it is as a tribute to Miss Neal

(whom the Editor of this paper knew well in Littlehampton when he was a young man).

*Yours very truly,
S. Godman*

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