



The author with his group "Trotto" at Christchurch Folk Festival, 1973.

"That's what I call a striking sound"*

— The Dulcimer in East Anglia

by David Kettlewell

The Dulcimer has for many years been a source of pride in East Anglia. Pronounced 'dulcimore' locally, and spelt so by some, its name—like the instrument itself—is very old and widespread, probably deriving from the Latin *dulcis* (sweet) and Greek *melos* (song). Although it has long had a very special place in the music of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex, it is also current in many parts of the British Isles and America; in the US it is now called the hammer(ed) dulcimer, to differentiate it from the Appalachian instrument, which has the same name but is otherwise quite different. It crops up as *dwysmel* in Welsh, *doucemelle* in French, *dulcema* in Spanish and *dolcimela* in Italian, and indeed is widely known and played all over the Northern Hemisphere.

The Instrument

The shape of the East Anglian dulcimer is trapezoid. This results in strings of varying lengths, so they can all be of about the same thickness, the notes getting lower as the strings get longer. The harp uses the same idea, whereas on the fiddle and guitar, for example, the open strings are all same length: in this case the notes get lower as the strings get thicker. Half the strings, the bass ones, are stretched over the whole width of the body, whilst, to economise on space, the other half, the treble strings, are divided in two by a central bridge or bridges, so that each produces two notes (figs. 1, 2, 3). Earlier dulcimers had a pair of continuous bridges, running the whole length of the table†, dividing all the treble strings in the same ratio—usually 2 : 3, producing the interval of a fifth between the two parts; but as

Fig. 1.—End view of Bass strings.

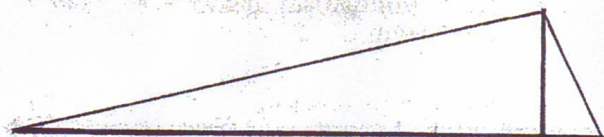


Fig. 2.—End view of Treble strings.



Fig. 3.—Treble and Bass strings together.



* Quote from Mr. Moore of Watton, Norfolk.

† The flat top sounding board of the instrument.

‡ Group of strings played together as one, as e.g. on mandolin, lute or 12-string guitar.

Fig. 5.—The author's 19th Century English dulcimer, showing separate bridges as used in East Anglia. (Photograph: Evan Jones).

semitones became more commonly needed, so these continuous bridges became divided, each course‡ having its own movable bridge so that the intervals could be varied to a fourth, sixth, seventh or octave (figs. 4, 5).

Separate bridges are also used in dulcimers of Eastern Europe, Persia and India, though the continuous type are usual in America, Western Europe and China. The number of strings to each course is commonly four or five in East Anglia, though elsewhere it varies between two and eight. The number of courses also varies between 13 and 30, though about a score is usual in East Anglia, giving a total range of about two-and-a-half to three octaves.

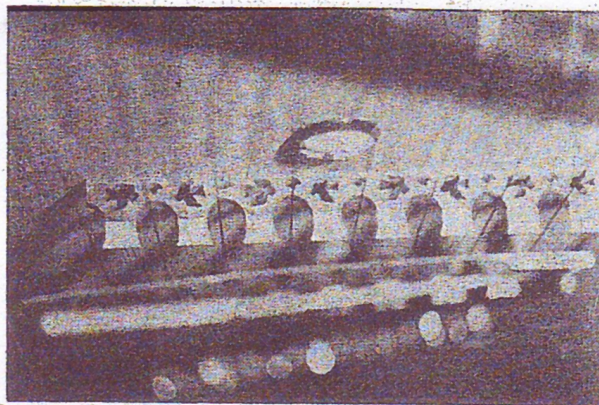


Fig. 4.—Example of continuous bridges on a finely carved Chinese dulcimer, Yang Chin, from Bill Lewington's, London. (Photograph: David Kettlewell).

In earlier times iron wire and gut strings were used, but for the last 100 years or so it has been standard practice to use steel, and brass for the bass register; nowadays, however, brass wire is rare. About his own strings, Billy Bennington of Barford, Norfolk, says: "I should think some of them have been on there 50 years—I just put them on if they break..."

The instrument itself may be quite plain, or decorated with moulding or beading, or perhaps with delicate marquetry using woods, ivory or mother-of-pearl. Even the starkest instrument often has something special about the soundholes, sometimes a carved rose or an inlaid star.

The hammers or beaters are home-made from cane (Walter Geary of North Repps, near Cromer, Norfolk,



recommends crab-pot cane) looped over at the playing end and wound with wool (fig. 6). Elsewhere every player has his own preference, though many choose hammers with a carved finger-grip; materials used include wood, whalebone, spring steel, plastic and ivory, and the playing end may be softened with leather, felt, cork or even velvet.



Fig. 6.—Cane Hammer, wound with wool.

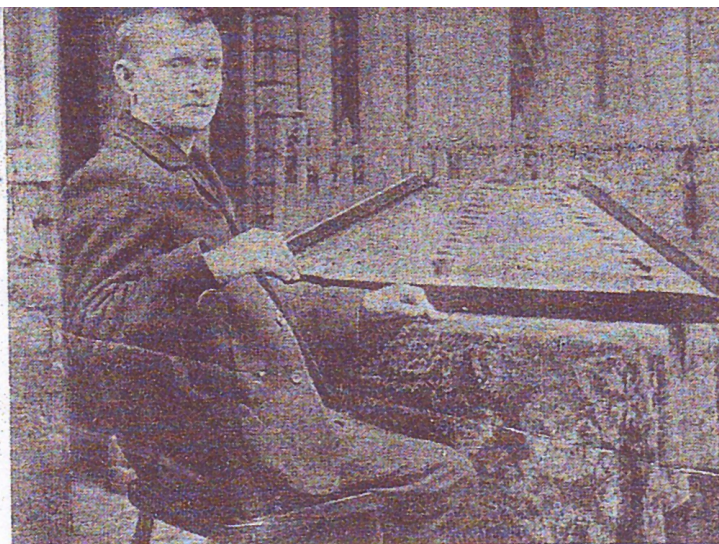
The Players

It is interesting and perhaps surprising that dulcimer players all over the world have been found to be a predominantly male race—nearly 90% of one sample. Ladies are rather more commonly found plucking instruments of the psaltery family, for instance the Appalachian dulcimer or the Norwegian langleik.

Many instruments never leave their owners' homes nowadays, but in times gone by there were many 'public' players who would be paid for a performance, or even earn a living from street busking. Certainly in the pubs and village feasts, the dulcimer player was a great attraction, sufficient for Billy Cooper of Hingham to play every Saturday night at the "Eight Ringers" and for Will Lawrence of Comberton, Cambridge, to take a few weeks from his labouring work and tour the feasts every summer with his instrument slung on his back. Even today, probably 30 years since the instrument has been common in East Anglia, I have been given the warmest of welcomes, particularly in one pub in Biston, north of Norwich. The company, mostly didikais, knew of no local players still active but insisted that my 'music' (instrument) be produced and played, and kept the musician fully supplied with alcoholic refreshment all the while. Most of them spoke of it being "our kind of music" and the man who had taken me there in the first place was particularly well-lubricated and quite convinced that I was "come from heaven to play for us. . ."

Most players did not begin their musical lives on the dulcimer; Billy Cooper's father and Mr. Moore (snr.) of Watton were both silver bandsmen, and John Youngman of Wells-next-the-Sea plays everything from mouth organ to a Rolf Harris stylophone. However for Billy Cooper, Billy Bennington and Walter Geary it was their first instrument, and all started in their early teens. All the known players are, or have been, familiar with at least one other instrument, though few sing ("Lady of Spain when I've had a pint. . ."), and only two sing and play at the same time. Most of the East Anglian players play by ear, although forms of tablature have been used, either note-names or numbers.

Apart from solo use, the dulcimer most often plays with one or two other instruments, depending who is available. When asked about his favourite instrument to play with, Billy Bennington said: "Oh, violin . . . or a piano or banjo . . . guitar, ukelele . . . it doesn't matter so which . . ." [sic] and he has also played with church and electronic organs. Billy Cooper would often go out with Jack Bond on guitar, with other friends taking the lead on piano or fiddle, whilst Walter Geary used to play with his son on the bones. Russell Wortley remembers a village band in Cambridge with dulcimer, fiddle, harp, concertina and tambourine, while several Norfolk players worked with small brass bands. As Billy Bennington put it: "Last night I got the cramp—well, if I'd been playing on me own I should have made a muck-up, shouldn't I. . ."



Albert Fell, c. 1908. His son, William Fell, is a skilled and enthusiastic player, living in Yardley Wood, Birmingham. He uses plectrums and not hammers.

The Music

Only two tunes 'proper' to the dulcimer (i.e. not normally played on any other instrument) have been discovered. One was for the Yarmouth Hornpipe, known by Billy Cooper and his pupil Russell Wortley, and in Iowa by Thomas Mann, whose father was from Norfolk. Surprisingly Billy Cooper's other pupil, Billy Bennington, did not know the tune: his Yarmouth Hornpipe is known elsewhere as the Flowers of Edinburgh, so it seems that names apply more to the dances than the tunes themselves. The second dulcimer tune was also played by Billy Cooper, often following straight on from the Yarmouth Hornpipe; it was called the English Breakdown, and Walter Geary also knows part of it. (ex. 1 and 2).¹

(To be continued in our next issue)



Ex. 1.—"Yarmouth Hornpipe", traditional step dance tune.



Ex. 2.—"English Breakdown", traditional dance tune.