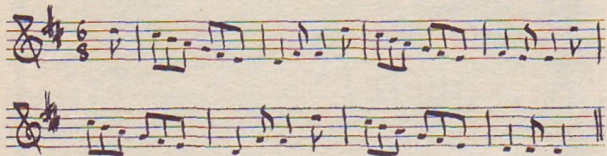


# “That’s what I call a striking sound”\*

## —The Dulcimer in East Anglia

by David Kettlewell

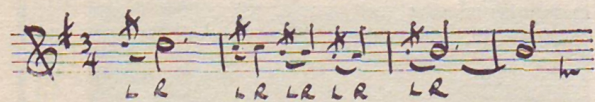
Apart from this the dulcimer seems to have played whatever music fitted the occasion. As well as the old popular songs, hornpipes, polkas and marches are fairly common; Walter Geary also has a tune for the Long Dance in jig time ( $\frac{6}{8}$ ) (Ex. 3). Several players have used



Ex. 3. “The Long Dance” from Walter Geary.

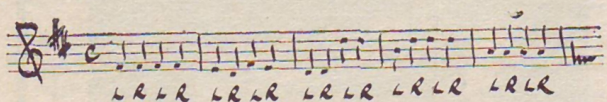
tricks, and the most common is the placing of a scarf or cloth over the strings, the player thus being effectively ‘blind’. One couple in ‘The Ship’, Cromer, remembered Walter Geary playing the dulcimer behind his back; however he himself was not sure if he had done so or not, and when he tried it at home it certainly looked fairly impossible.

The hammers are held between thumb and first finger of each hand and used in a variety of styles. Some players play the tune basically as on any other instrument or as written, but perhaps with embellishments to fill empty spaces; John Youngman plays the tune in its normal rhythm, but with both hammers to each note (ex. 4). Walter Geary maintains a steady L-R-L-R



Ex. 4. “Home on the Range,” as played by John Youngman.

rhythm, whatever the lengths of notes of the tune (ex. 5).

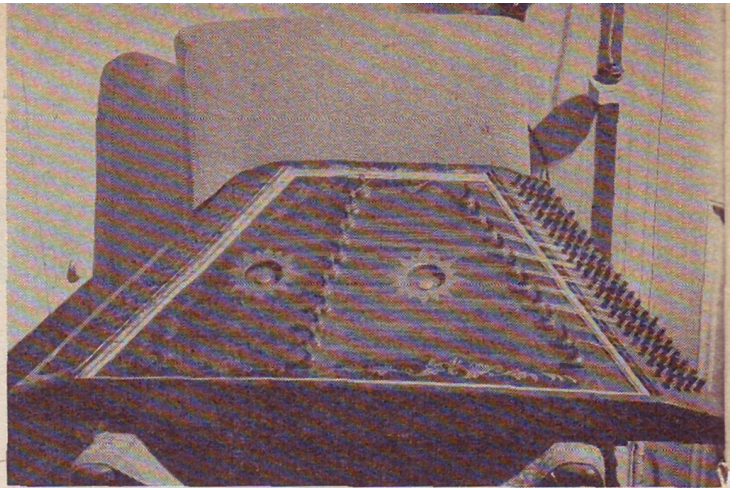


Ex. 5. “Swanee River,” Walter Geary’s constant crotchets.

The more accomplished East Anglian players use fingers, mainly for waltzes and song tunes (Ex. 6); three- and four-note chords can be played, along with melody and bass. Billy Bennington keeps first finger and thumb-nails long for the purpose, and uses one finger of an old rubber glove to protect the nail whilst working as a gardener.

A few tutors were published in the old days, but East Anglian players have mostly learnt one from another and the general idea seems to have been to ‘bash away’ at tunes until they were mastered. Walter Geary played two hours a day for ten years, and Billy Bennington used to take his dulcimer to bed with him. He remembers his teacher, Billy Cooper, saying “Before I’m going to teach you tunes, you’ve got to learn them scales, otherwise you won’t know where you’re getting to”; and an

\* Quote from Mr. Moore of Watton, Norfolk.

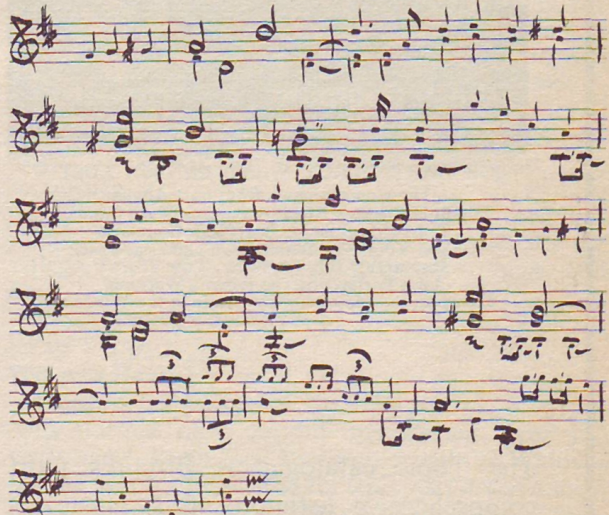


John Youngman’s dulcimer, Wells-next-the-sea. A typical East Anglia dulcimer.

(Photograph: David Kettlewell)

early short tutor echoes, “When the scales can be played without making a mistake, or striking two notes at once, simple airs may be attempted, but on no account should “scraps” be indulged in . . .”

The instrument usually stands on a table, with its own back rest, the player standing or sitting, but there was also a memory of “one old boy in Norwich here, he used to have a cart on pram wheels, and he used to push it in front of him and play it like that . . .”



Ex. 6. “Turn your face towards the sun and your shadows will fall behind you,” as played by Billy Bennington, with fingers.

### History

The dulcimer has been in Western Europe since medieval times at least; there is a carving in Spain dating from 1184, and English references to it date from “The Squire of High Degree” of around 1400; from about the same date is the angel-caving in Manchester Cathedral. Later on we find a beautiful illustration from a psalter belonging to Henry VIII, showing clear detail of a very human situation. Pepys saw it twice within a month: in May, 1662, he went with his wife “to the puppet play in Covent Garden. . . Here among the fiddlers, I first saw a dulcimer played on with sticks knocking of the strings, and is very pretty”; and in June he “did go to a tavern. . . In the next room one was playing very finely of a dulcimer, which, well-played, I like well. . .”

By the 18th century the instrument was firmly established in court and countryside, and the 19th century saw





Walter Geary, of North Repps, near Cromer, January, 1974.  
(Photograph: David Kettlewell)

the establishment of factories in Eastern Europe and America. In England, however, dulcimer-making remained largely an informal occupation; one Suffolk instrument from those days has this delightful label:

**“ W. FINTER  
PRACTICAL WATCH  
and clock maker, jeweller & c.  
High Street  
Needham Market  
Musical instruments Tuned and Repaired  
Scissors and Razors carefully ground ”**

Although several authors in the 1890s wrote of the dulcimer's decline, it was still a popular Victorian instrument, in the drawing room as well as on the street corner, and quite a normal accompaniment to the puppet show. During the First World War, the late Billy Cooper played for an Army church service on the East Coast, during a time when he was corporal in charge of a fife-and-drum band, and in 1919 his pupil, Billy Bennington, then still a teenager, played for a homecoming:

“ . . . well, the boys picked up and got going again, they had a dinner, and I could play p'raps two or three tunes then . . . 'course, by the time they finished the dinner none of 'em could play, they were all canned: I was a teetotaller, I was the only man that was left, I only knew three tunes and I played them all night . . . them that wasn't playing just sat there nodding. . . ”

In the period between the wars there must have been dozens of players in East Anglia—Billy Bennington listed 24 within ten miles of his own home—and those days are well remembered. Two fishermen in Sheringham talked recently of an old chap coming out from Norwich every summer and playing on the streets; Will Lawrence, Billy Cooper and many others used to take a week or two off work to travel round playing in the streets, village feasts and dancing booths . . . “ Everyone had a dulcimore in them days . . . you could sweep them up with a bulldozer! ”

Sadly, the story of the English dulcimer for twenty years from the beginning of the Second World War

David Williams, dulcimer maker and player, of Totton, Hampshire,  
with the instrument now played by David Kettlewell  
(Photograph: Ruby Williams)

seems to be no more than a ghostly echo of the words of the lady from Ingworth, near Cromer, “ my children are grown up, they're past that kind of thing now . . . ” Some of the older players were still active and the two Billies have both broadcast; but even in Norfolk the instrument was little enough regarded for one writer to find one covered in dust on the floor of a disused warehouse in Swaffham's commercial end, and for it to change hands for “ a shilling or two ”. An antique dealer in Sheringham sold his last dulcimer in 1961, and in 1963 Billy Cooper played his last engagement. He died the following year. Billy Bennington explained the situation, “ Well, you see, the younger generation come along, the older generation went out . . . T.V. come along, wireless come along, then that finished up as Skiffle groups . . . and that went and finished that . . . I mean, what have you got now?—all guitars now, you know . . . can you play a guitar? . . . ”

However the future of the dulcimer is not completely gloomy. There are still older players in Norfolk and Suffolk, and in cities, like London, Birmingham and Glasgow, and there is beginning to be a revival elsewhere, with up to a score of younger folk doing up old instruments and teaching themselves to play, from Scotland to the South Coast. In America there are two regular hammer dulcimer clubs, and of course it is an established tourist attraction in the Alps, under its Germanic name, *hackbrett* (chopping board). David Williams, of Totton, Hampshire, is a busy dulcimer builder, and has produced plans for others to work from; there are also makers in Herefordshire (Bernard Ellis) and Surrey (Hugh Massey). This author is currently preparing a beginner's tutor, as well as a more weighty thesis; enquiries are welcomed, as well as any information, however slight, on players, instruments, or indeed any aspect of the dulcimer.

#### Books to Read

Baines, Anthony—European and American Musical Instruments, Batsford, 1966.  
Galpin, F. W.—Old English Instruments of Music.

Continued on next page

