

## **Discussion about Alex Helm and his Collection.**

*Recorded by Doc Rowe and transcribed by Ron Shuttleworth*

### **Principal Speakers**

Eddie Cass, Norman Peacock, Christopher Cawte, Peter Millington, Paul Smith, Derek Schofield

### **Eddie Cass**

If there was one man who was responsible for keeping the concept of the study of traditional drama alive in England in the period after the Second World War, it was Alex Helm. Helm unfortunately died tragically early, just short of his fiftieth birthday in 1970, and although there are people here who met Helm, and were therefore able to work with him and assess what he was doing, for the majority of us, we can rely only upon the books that were published in his name and with his colleagues.

It has been said that we would no longer accept the theoretical structure which underpinned some of Alex Helm's conceptual work, but we have to remember that it was part of the discourse of the time. I think that it was Christopher Cawte, in discussion with me on one occasion over a dining table in Manchester, who said that had Alex Helm lived until now, he would have changed his views on what the origins of traditional drama were.

Given the fact that Christopher and Norman Peacock were both going to be here at this conference, we thought that this was an ideal opportunity to have them talk about the way that they worked with Alex Helm. What we want to do is to start off a discussion in that way and then eventually we want to lead up to a brief discussion about the index to the Helm Collection which was produced by Paul Smith and Ervin Beck way back in the late 1970's - early 1980's and the work which Peter Millington and I would like to continue towards refining that index. I think that the arrangement between Norman and Christopher was that Norman would speak first and talk about his meeting with Alex Helm. Norman -

### **Norman Peacock**

Well, I am going back even earlier than that because I thought it might be useful if I perhaps read a bit of what Christopher wrote in the *Folk Music Journal* as an obituary for Alex, to give you the background of who he was, where he came from. He was born in Burnley, and he was the son of weavers and he went to St John's College, York, as a trainee teacher just before the last war. I, in fact, as I found out later, had owed something to him and other people because he used to go up Wharfedale with the then teacher of physical education at Settle Girls' High School, doing country dancing and some morris around Whitsuntide and this would be presumably in 1938-39 or so. In 1952/53, the Leeds Morris Men started doing tours in that area and we found it quite easy to do it. The Sergeant of police's wife had

been one of the country dancers, you see, so we had a way in, and it was very useful, so things do work out that way. Anyhow, the war came along and he enlisted and he was actually put into the Ordnance Corps where he rose to be a Major and I believe he had control of a lot of the 'Lend-Lease' material that came into India at that time, and it was there that he developed certain things which Christopher will talk about in due course.

He returned to England after the War and he married Sunny, who was an Indian,<sup>1</sup> and after a time, having been in Kent for some time, he moved to Danesford School, which was an approved school. It had some notoriety recently I believe - it was an approved school in Congleton, and there he was the teacher particularly of - shall we say - handicrafts, printing and so on. He did book-binding and printing. And this was a very important part of course - there are all sorts of printed things that you'd never have got at commercial rates which helped the *[Geographic] Index* very considerably. He helped Margaret Dean-Smith sort out the Ordish papers in what was then, I think, the Library of Cecil Sharp House - it was not even then the Vaughan Williams Library - it got that name later, and there, of course, his knowledge of printing and binding was very useful. When he came to Cheshire, he took up a suggestion to investigate the souling play and from that he developed an interest in plays in general. The first letter I had from him as I discovered, maybe the first time - maybe had one earlier - was on the first of November 1954, by which time he had already done quite a bit in writing of little books for the Manchester branch of EFDSS. I had this letter from him requesting a copy of the Greatham play and dance which I had recently collected also something about the *Yorkshire Evening Post* on Yorkshire plays. That was also interesting because I discovered that there was a newspaper cutting in the copy of Tiddy's book in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds (this is how you pick things up, of course). Anyhow, he asked me about that and - oddly enough at the same time I'd come across this American who had visited Tom Armstrong at Greatham. So I had questions about this American - who was he? Nobody knew who he was. Alex suggested it was Baskervill, but I noticed that on the tenth of November I had a note (typical one, this) from the Library to say that Maud Karpeles said that it was a man called Carpenter 'not very reliable'. *[Laughter.]* Very obscure, of course. I was told about the same time that he had all his cylinders in a sack under his bed, which I believe was true. Anyhow, that was my first correspondence with Alex. At that time, I note also that it was 'Dear Mr. Helm' and 'Dear Mr. Peacock'. Well, this correspondence went on and I arranged in due course, in 1955 there were frequent letters, I arranged to visit him in August 1955 when I was on the way to a Travelling Morris tour. I offered to put up my tent on his lawn if he didn't have room [for me] to stay there. His house was very interesting. When you went in, you found that you were ushered into the back room. If you wanted to go into the front room, you opened the door and you had to raise a drawbridge on his electric railway, you see, which ran right round the sides of the room - and that was another of his interests.

That was my first visit. Thereafter it was 'Dear Alex' and 'Dear Norman' you see, but the correspondence continued and it is an amazing amount of letters - something about so thick - up to the end of 1969. I find that the first mention of Christopher in this was somewhere towards November 1955, but they may have been in contact before that. By that time Alex had sent me something of some forms for entries about customs - some forms that he'd printed that said 'County' - things like this.

He started the Index, in many ways, in order to index his own notes, because he kept very careful notes - these are the ones that are in various volumes in University College Library now. But to some extent he was indexing his own notes - notes he'd made from the Ordish Papers and from many other sources. So he wanted to do this and this was really how the Index started up. Various people were sending things to him. I was interested from the point of a new list like Needham's list of dances, because it was obvious that there were a lot of gaps in Needham's things and there were a number of things that were clearly wrong, so the two things came together. We started up the Index at that point. I note that also Roger Marriott in fact suggested some amendment to the layout of the forms so I'm not quite clear how it all came out, but Alex printed them and Christopher has here examples of the original index. Well, I think at that stage I will leave it to you to continue.

**Christopher Cawte**

OK. How I started is an even longer story [and] I'll miss that out, but at a Ring Meeting probably around '54, I guess, I met a post-grad, a PhD

**Eddie Cass**

Can you tell us what a Morris Ring Meeting is? Some people may not know what the Morris Ring is.

**Christopher Cawte**

A Morris Ring Meeting is a meeting of -- The Morris Ring consists of a number of Morris clubs - Morris-dancing clubs - some three hundred when I last heard, but it's probably more than that now - and they have three or four meetings a year in various places, and people turn up and dance and drink beer. If it's somewhere like Lichfield, with Burton beer or round Newcastle, with Newcastle beer, the people from the South of England always seem sort of faint towards the end of the evening - never know why. I remember at Lichfield they were actually under the tables, weren't they?

**Norman Peacock**

I've seen them there sometimes!

**Christopher Cawte**

The Deputy-Head of the primary school at Ibstock, as I later found out, was the chap that I met trying to play the whistle and drum for a team in the street, and he could only play one note. [*Laughter.*] Anyway - well anyway - I met this chap who was doing a PhD on synthetic textiles at Leeds, and he was in the Leeds Morris Men and he was taking an unconscionable time over his PhD, but he was getting a lot of good sword-dance research done in the meanwhile. In some degree, he took me under his wing. He sent me off to Tom Armstrong at Greatham to collect songs, which we didn't get on very well with. That's why he took me to Ripon and to meet a few people where he wanted tunes noted and so on, and as far as research, this really got me going, although I had compiled my first index in 1954.

In due course, Alex sent an account he found in the Ordish Collection of a sword dance at Rothbury in Northumberland, sent it to Norman with a copy 'You better send it on to Christopher Cawte cos this is the rapper area, and he knows about that'. So of course I wrote back to Alex at once and said that it was quite wrong, it wasn't in the rapper area at all - I had a certain charm about me in those days. [*Laughter.*]

That was how it started and I thought it was '56 and Norman thinks it's late '55, and as he's got the letters, he's probably right. Anyway, it was round about there, and I'm sure it was in 1956 that we started to compile the Index.

Now, there are one or two bits to fill in. He [Helm] trained and got a commission - when he started his National Service, then he and two others were sent out to India, and they had an interview with some senior army officer who asked them what they were hoping to do. They all three said 'Well, we're hoping to go in the navy', which is not the most tactful thing to say to the army, so he was put in the Ordnance Corps, which is almost a punishment posting in itself, cos it's full of quartermasters. However, when the army was advancing into Burma, he stayed in his office for three weeks. He had a charpoy in the corner and, I rather think, an Elsan, and for three weeks he was managing the distribution of all the army's transport for the advance into Burma. The army must have got the idea that he was quite good at administration, I think.

That is where the Index started, because when I did my National Service a bit later, I recognised where he got his initial methods from for the Index - which I'll describe. He also found that when he started at Danesford he taught physical education. That was his first subject when he was doing his teacher training. And the lift-up for the railway - he told me quite a different thing about it. He said 'Making a model railway with your children is a very good way of getting on with them and getting them chatting to you'. So there's another little insight into Alex. Another one, in passing - he did almost no field-work - he had no car. I'm not sure he could drive. I did once persuade him to go to Betley to visit the brother of the professor of history at Durham, both of whom had been in a Morris team at Betley. But that was one of the rare ones.

What he did was, he printed these little forms (I'll hand these round in a minute). I picked up these files purely because they were small and light and I'd got to get them to the Lake District before I got them here, so the subjects aren't particularly striking. It was a little form like that with, as Norman says, space for the county, location, Grid reference, the custom (and different classes of custom got different colours), classification, time of appearance, da-di-da and a reference, and any suitable information down below. He used to type these things out, five copies, for Norman and I and himself and Roger Marriott, who started with us, and Margaret Dean-Smith. Margaret Dean-Smith told him at a fairly early stage that she'd thrown her Index away because she hadn't got enough time for it, or something like that, and Roger went to Canada, and that's why we ended up with three. Anyway, he started out with five, and he would type these out, one 'top' and so many carbon-copies, and post them out once a month or thereabouts. I remember Roger Marriott saying 'I've just received another brick from Alex' because he used to send a great slab like this - it was a parcel, not forms in a letter - a parcel.

Now then this is one of his original files that he made, and as you can see it has had a good deal of wear, but that's by the way, he made this. Bookbinding comes in here, of course, but it's modelled on the army style. If we wanted to add to it any amendment - - if you want to find one quickly, look up Leicestershire, because there are only about two or three Leicestershire sheets and one of them has been amended. And that is how it would get amended. You can look anywhere else you like but I thought that's one you can find fairly quickly. So, he would send out - - this is one I happened to find from a rather later date, and it's on the back of a waste page from a

Guiser Press publication, and he would send these out with all these little amendments to be made. Then I think he also - no he didn't - he did make amendments which you could cut out and stick in - I'm not sure if that was just my idea - and if it was something really big he'd put out another sheet. So there was an entry of one or more sheets for each custom and each place, and you can see that I put lines through mine until it was done, and then I threw them away. For some reason I never actually got this one finished, so that's why I kept it.

He used to print little amendment-sheets, of which I've got three samples here to show you the sort of thing. He printed on any old paper - waste paper again - this is not waste paper for some strange reason, but sometimes it was old newsprint - unused, but it wasn't very good paper. So we got the sheets, we sent in these things, either amending what he sent or of course with our own information as well, and then back it came and you checked it and said no, no, no, the Grid reference is wrong, put that right. And so it went on. Would you like to pass those around? That's how we got the article compiled for the [index] of Morris dances and sword dances and whatnot for the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* in 1960. Having started in 1956, the original idea was that we would publish the whole outfit as a - I can't remember Maud Karpeles' birthday, but a multiple of five came up somewhere about 1960-61 and we were going to have the whole thing [and] publish it as a sort of memorial volume - which hasn't actually turned out 'cause we haven't actually finished it yet, have we? [Laughter.] But this was all the - - it was seasonal ceremonial customs - morris, sword dancing, play, plough customs, animal disguise and so on and so on.

**Norman Peacock**

Rushbearing.

**Christopher Cawte**

Rushbearing of course, which goes with Morris in the North-West

**Norman Peacock**

And a Miscellaneous Section.

**Christopher Cawte**

Oh yes, the Miscellaneous Section.

**Norman Peacock**

It had everything in. I had a letter from Alex complaining it had become a rag-bag, what were we going to do about it.

**Christopher Cawte**

And there was a foreign section as well - brown paper. Anyway, bluntly the effort in 1960 was not very good, but it does perhaps illustrate a point that Alex said that he was very sorry that he had got a reputation as someone who knows about the play, because he reckoned he was studying seasonal ceremonial customs, and the play was one bit of it. Of course, when *English Ritual Drama* came out, this attracted a certain amount of attention. Once we'd done that, we agreed that - - well he said the pieces of paper were too small. So out came - this happens to be the last volume, therefore it's not got so much in - of the morris and rushbearing sections, as I've indexed it. Now, I made this folder, this file, but he made similar ones. So, it was bigger pages and - let's come to Glamorganshire - it's very handy because

Lancashire won't fit in one of these, but its easier here - Glamorganshire. He first prints a sheet with all the references. Group A are original ones, Group B are - I can't remember now, I think they were important ones or something.

**Norman Peacock**

They were the important ones.

**Christopher Cawte**

Group C were ones that merely quoted other people. We reckoned to put everything in because otherwise someone will pipe up later, as indeed did one reviewer of *English Ritual Drama* and say 'But they haven't got *Tales of Tenby* in'. Well *Tales of Tenby* was a reprint of something which was quoting something else - I know I worked it back to something ended up in *Archaeologia* - what's the Latin for Wales? *Cambriensis* - thank you very much - and that was what we quoted, so anyway, in here we put all [the] sources we could find. The drawback of this, of course, was that if you put the reference on here and then you get three more references, you've got to re-type it, there isn't space to insert. Then each place has a thing like the forms that are going round, which is, if you like, the database of the principle features. It is a database - this file - except it's on paper instead of the more conventional one these days. At that time remember, we had neither photocopying nor computers, and then the contents of each reference is on subsequent sheets in order, and if you hunt through this, actually, [from] Glamorgan onwards we weren't so active with, you could very well find a second or third edition of some of these sheets because they've been re- and re-typed. Eventually, this was completely revised and instead of having a sheet or set of sheets here for each place for each custom, it became a sheet for each reference to each custom in a place and that meant once you'd typed a sheet and you'd said 'A quotes B, C, D and E', it stays there and if someone looks up E, you write a new sheet, and that was a much better way of doing it. If you like to look at this, again it's pure chance, I hadn't worked it out, but if you look for Papa Stour, very near the end you will find it's one easy way of finding what went on. Look for Zetland, and there you will find - wait, he typed 'Shetland' for that, which is rather naughty of him, but never mind.

**Norman Peacock**

I had an argument with him over that. [*Laughter.*]

**Christopher Cawte**

Well anyway

**Norman Peacock**

He tried to put 'Orkney', tried to say that Zetland was the name for Orkney, or something.

**Christopher Cawte**

Oh well, we all make mistakes. Then again there's Group A, Group B, Group C, and then references, a top sheet and then the succeeding references, of which there are quite a number. And then you will find that after a bit he changed onto system number three with individual sheets. Actually he didn't, but I did, but these are the sheets that he printed. I was er - yes he has, yes, cos they're in date order, these ones. That's the other feature, of course, once you've got a sheet for a reference, you can arrange the sheets in date order of the references.

**Norman Peacock**

And I had to tell him to put the date on the top right-hand corner, because he didn't do so at first.

**Christopher Cawte**

So did I - that's interesting. Oh well - two against one - it works. *[Laughter.]*

**Norman Peacock**

Anyway, I just happened to find Papa Stour illustrates all the - - what goes on. There we are. Look through any of the others that you're interested in. That's a pretty solid file - it's hardboard inside there.

Now, I shall say a little about Alex's own books of notes, because they are referred to there, you'll find there's a little field, bottom left corner of the printed area, I think, where it says 'Reference'. The first few books of his volumes were - - he copied various published texts into school notebooks and then he bound them in the conventional way. But when he started collecting loose sheets which were all his typing - I mean, if someone sent him a letter, sadly he didn't keep the letter. He made a copy and threw the letter away - well, it's so much neater when it's typed, isn't it? Well archives aren't meant to be tidy. Anyway, that's how things went. I think in the later years you'll find he did keep original documents, but not to start with. And he used to put them in larger [binders] - in principle the same as the dark-red one I made, with screw binders - those brass things - and then in due course - I was interested in bookbinding too, and I found that Dryad had published a little book on doing 'Perfect' binding, so I lent it to him and he started binding all his, so if anyone says 'Well, how did he bind them?', you can say 'Well, there's a little book from Dryad that tells you all about it'. The system he had was he had a thing like this [a folder], and whenever he had a bit of paper, he put it in, he put it at the back, and I think he numbered them as he put them in, whatever it was, and then when the file got too fat, he'd take it out and bind it and start another one. So broadly speaking, the papers in his bound volumes of notes are in chronological order - chronological in the sense of the time at which he acquired them.

There's something very funny happened with the numbering round about sixteen or eighteen, and he had - let's say it was sixteen - he had sixteen and then sixteen A, sixteen B, sixteen C. He did explain why once, and I've quite forgotten why. But then having decided it wasn't a very good idea, he then jumped to nineteen - or something of that sort, and I think subsequently he treated them as if the sixteen A, B and C were seventeen, eighteen and nineteen. I've got the principle right but I probably haven't got the numbers right. This may help someone when they find there's no volume eighteen - I think I'm on fairly sound ground there - but he's referring to a volume eighteen that doesn't exist - and you want sixteen B. Something on those lines, and I did try to work it out once after he died and I couldn't, but perhaps someone else can. It may be useful to know when you do the indexing - again. *[Laughter.]*

Yes well, I used to keep Alex's letters and then after a bit I threw away the ones that didn't contain what I regarded as useful information, but that was at a pretty early stage and I've got a wad of letters from him like that as well and one day I'm going to read them like you have. *[Laughter.]*

**Norman Peacock**

It's very interesting because it's also family history for my family and his family because quite a bit of it was personal notes so it was quite interesting.

**Christopher Cawte**

Correspondence got even more busy when he decided to print things - books. It started because there was nothing on paper about the Murton rapper dance and I was asked to go and teach it at Hexham and so I asked him if he could print me some little booklets about it and that's how the first Guizer Press publication came into existence. One member of the Leicester Morris Men was a book designer and he told us various useful things about how to do it properly, and thereafter correspondence ran thick and fast, because I used to check his proofs for him and the last proof that I checked arrived in the post the day after he dropped dead.

**Eddie Cass**

It's interesting to hear you talk about all this correspondence and so on because I mean, I've been recently looking at the Ethel Rudkin Collection at the Museum of North Lincolnshire Life near Scunthorpe and there is naturally a great wad of correspondence between Alex Helm and Mrs Rudkin. There are no replies from Ethel Rudkin, of course, but the letters are there and it indicates that he was constantly talking to her and being a supplicant in many ways for copies of the plough plays which she was collecting and offering information that he could provide her with. You talk about him binding, isn't there a story that when he used to go courting Sunny he would take a pile of papers.

**Christopher Cawte**

That's right – yes.

**Eddie Cass**

When he was courting his wife he would take a pile of these papers with him - he would sit sewing these papers when they were courting?

**Christopher Cawte**

That's right - yes - yes. He also said that he used to go down to the little shops in whatever town was there, run obviously by Indians, looking for materials and so on, and he was greeted with great cordiality cos they couldn't quite understand it. Here was a British officer, who actually did something with his hands, and they'd never met this before and they didn't think that British officers actually, so to speak, did anything. *[Laughter.]*

**Derek Schofield**

Can I just ask a question?

**Christopher Cawte**

Sure.

**Derek Schofield**

Was he getting all these books, when he was copying things out, on Inter-Library Loan, or was he borrowing them from the Vaughan Williams Library or the Folklore Society?



**Christopher Cawte**

I think - well that's a story in itself. I think he started probably from Vaughan Williams, or rather from the Cecil Sharp Library, as they called it. He did get books from the county library, but with great difficulty. The Cheshire County Library must have been the worst in the country. He did get one complaint that he was asking for too many books, to which his reply was-

**Eddie Cass**

Shuttleworth gets that complaint today.

**Christopher Cawte**

Well, in those good old days, he simply replied 'Oh, I thought that's what libraries were for'. [Laughter.] He did tell the story of carrying - does anyone know Earwaker's *History of Cheshire?* - carrying it home from Chester, I think on a bus. He asked for a copy of Sternberg's *Dialects and Folklore of Northamptonshire* and was told it didn't exist. That was a great ploy of county librarians. When I was in Leicestershire and started on this - I mean King's College Library was beautiful. Hull Public Library was even more beautiful in some ways because the reference librarian realised what I was up to and let me take books home from the reference library for a week, where I microfilmed them, or at least the bits that mattered. When I came to Leicestershire it wasn't so good and I used to look up all the books I wanted, I used to look them up in the British Museum catalogue in Leicester Reference Library before asking for them, because I reckoned if I gave them the British Museum reference they wouldn't say it didn't exist, which they did quite often for me. Life was not all roses.

**Derek Schofield**

I mean, one of the monumental things he must have done was just go through- did he just go through *Notes & Queries* page by page almost. I remember being...

**Christopher Cawte**

He did, he did.

**Norman Peacock**

He got them from Barrow-in-Furness I think - I think that was what - - He made very complimentary remarks about Barrow-in-Furness at one point and I think that was where he got *Notes & Queries* from.

**Derek Schofield**

Cos I was - I remember a librarian at University College when I went to look at them, being astounded when I actually said 'Well of course, he just copied all this out from *Notes & Queries*'. He couldn't imagine because there is just volume after volume after volume.

**Christopher Cawte**

Well, he was a very good administrator, he was an enormously - and you may gather that from his work in India - he was also extremely hard-working, wasn't he?

**Norman Peacock**

Oh yes. The amount of typing he did.

### **Christopher Cawte**

Oh yes. Sunny said that he'd come in from work. he'd go into the front room and he'd start typing, and he'd go on typing until it was time for a meal. I think it was a getaway or an escape, if you like, from the experiences in the school, some of which were very disagreeable. He did tell me one or two, and I won't tell you, but these were boys of twelve up to fourteen, something like that, mentally and emotionally very, very disturbed and adolescent. He had some - - you know - - there were some very unpleasant things went on. Even though there were two sets of staff - there were the teachers and there were the people who looked after them as a home - quite separate. Even so, he came across some very disagreeable things.

### **Norman Peacock**

And he also worked very difficult hours. He would say 'I'm on from eight in the morning to nine-thirty at night on occasions, or he was on at weekends. He had to fill-in for other teachers, so he really had quite a tough time of it. And with regard to the printing, he'd say 'Well let's get a lot done just now, I've got a good lad here, who can do things'.

### **Eddie Cass**

The outcome of all of this work came in two forms, really. One of them is the most accessible form as far as we're concerned, and this is *English Ritual Drama*. Unfortunately we don't have a copy on the table - we ought to have brought one - but it did make available-

### **Paul Smith**

Could I have something to say, Eddie that I have a ...

### **Eddie Cass** [*loudly and forcefully*]

No! I'm not going to say that, Paul, I'm not going to say that, I'm not going to allow you to boast about the extension to your library. No! [*Laughter.*]

The most accessible form was *English Ritual Drama* which made available to students of English folk drama an enormously wide range of textual resources which had never been available before, and there are still two copies on my shelves which I constantly refer to. The second output of this enormous collecting was the archive itself, and the archive now resides in University College in London, in the Rare Books Room at University College in London. One problem about that is that it's like Carpenter - it's difficult of access. It has been microfilmed, but the microfilm in itself is difficult to read - partly because of the coloured paper which was used, and also the colour of inks which were used, and you really have to see the original document to be sure that you are seeing everything which actually appears on the page. I know from my own work in the Helm Collection that - - I thought 'Well, 'This ought to be here' when I read the microfilm, and then I had to go in to London and find that it is there but it is in red ink and it doesn't appear on the microfilm.

One of the projects which was done at NATCECT in the 1970s and 1980s - late 1970s, early 1980s?

### **Paul Smith**

Eighty--er two.

**Eddie Cass**

'82 was the Beck and Smith Index of the Collection - do you want to talk about that, Paul?

**Paul Smith**

Yeah. This was a while ago. As you've been talking I've been trying to remember and patch this together. For obviously there is a lead up to that, it didn't just happen overnight. Alex had died - Christopher, I think you had some of his books and notes at the time - and somehow we got a request and we also thought it would be feasible for us to make a microfilm of it because of course it was- that still seen as neat technology. We must have done that in the late '70s - I don't have any of the documents with me because I didn't really know we were going to talk about them, and that included the notebooks but not the index It also included his photographs and the various drawings which he gathered from his daughter and plates for books, and things like that, which were done separately, they were done in colour. In 1981 Ervin Beck from Goshen College came as a visiting Fellow with his family, to Sheffield, and from arriving, he -- he basically arrived cold, and wanted to do things but he'd also got an agenda - he was interested in customs, that and the other. I should also say as an aside that it was also Ervin who was part of the movers and shakers for next week's conference as well in that he really came first of all with the idea of the Contemporary Legends Conference. After he'd been working a few weeks, and then he came in one day and said- and I still don't believe he actually said it, 'Don't you think we should have an index for this microfilm?' and it's like 'Yes, sure we should - but.' I don't have that much time in my life.

Norman Blake who was Head of Department at that time, because he'd been working on all these Chaucerian manuscripts had this huge whizzy microfilm reader - slept two - enormous bloody thing it was and Norman wanted it out of his office. So we stole it and fitted Ervin up in a room and he assiduously went in for several hours a day, and began work. We sort of invented a very elementary database, because in those days I don't think the School of English or much out of the Engineering Department actually owned anything you could laughingly call 'lap-top'. In fact, most of the computing we did at that time was on a, like, 128K main-frame, which took up about twice as much space as this room and was slightly less intelligent than your average calculator. So the original index was only upper case printed on 120-column paper, and generated on punched-cards. I think the punched-cards actually may be in seven large cupboards, and I've got the key and they're across in the Geography Department. We did - - we started this - or Ervin started this, and he would go in there and work page after page and- you know- we- I- I think we all are terribly grateful that he made this first onslaught from a different perspective because when we actually got it in, at least if we put it into something like an elementary word-processing program, we could look up Lichfield or something, we could get to a word as long as we'd got something elemental to look for. We never did get that set of programs, although it was structured in a database, we never did actually get it into a database to make it work. It was very crude - it was rough.

A part of the problem with that is, acknowledging again that- you know- Ervin came from Indiana. You know- he didn't know the names, he didn't know the place-names, he didn't know the scholarship and everything, it was really grunt work for him, to sit there for hour after hour and then we'd go print chunks of it and bring it

down the office, then we'd pore over it and try to make sense of it and. Eventually - well actually I don't think we got it all done because I have since discovered that, as I've been going through in the last few years, that maybe the odd hundred pages got missed off the back of the volume. The sticker had obviously got put on the wrong page when we thought we'd finished it. So there were a few inconsistencies like that.

We generated copies. We then gave the copies to the various members of the Traditional Drama Research Group, and Christopher and various other people who had been involved or used the material over a period of time and said 'Could you please help us out here - suggestions, corrections and anything else', and of course there was an awful amount of stuff that came in. I then - Ervin had gone by then - so I made the initial foray into beginning to do these corrections. And also, going through, we had a - - Oh God, there's a scary thought, my computer terminal at the time, coupled up to the mainframe, was an old telex teletype printer, you know, one of these things like a typewriter on legs, you start typing on it and your fingers disappear about three inches into this machine. We weren't quite certain what we were doing, but the guys wrote some macros, to try and at least sort and systematise so that if we got something like a line that said 'journal', I could type the code for 'journal' and then '*Notes & Queries*' and it would check whether '*Notes & Queries*' was spelt correctly all the way through, and just simple stuff like that, because of the mass of material in there. So we did routines like that to try and get the kinks out, and we did all the corrections we could but life basically took over and we ended up on different things. So, scattered around there are various copies of this, and you will be pleased to know that I dragged three copies of that damned thing to Canada with me. Now, Peter [Millington] has got a nice, much smaller, cleaner thing, but I also still have, probably, I would guesstimate at over a thousand pages of corrections

### **Eddie Cass**

Perhaps one of the things which we ought to be aware of, which links last night's session with tonight's session in fact, is how much we are still indebted to scholars of the past in terms of the information, the sheer amount of information which they collected. Something which came out of Peter's analysis of early play texts this-morning is the way that the computer makes it much easier these days to grasp that information and to begin to make sense of it all. And just as with Julia Bishop's project with Carpenter, we have started to think we really ought to get a handle on the Helm Collection again. It's not satisfactory to have it only in the form of a virtually unreadable microfilm copy. And so Peter, do you want to take up on what you've done with the work?

### **Peter Millington**

Yes, just carry on the chronology really. I managed to get hold of an electronic copy of what Ervin and Paul had done and I fed it into some more modern programs on a PC at home. Actually, it must have been at work, but into a PC. First thing I did was to actually change it to mixed case rather than capital letters, which is quite interesting. Global searching was very helpful - I spent about three days and I might have made some other changes. I tended to adjust the reference schemes in all four volumes because when it came to producing indexes, which I also did then, the earlier ones are a bit too cumbersome to work with, but they are compatible. I "re-pointed" it basically, and I produced a printed inventory - which is this volume here

which you are welcome to look at - I'll pass it round if you like - which is just the listing as put in by Ervin and Paul. And I also - because the fields were tagged for various things, I also printed some indexes, so I had indexes to dates, names and the various publications things appeared in and also - well basically the key-words as they appear. It's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. That's quite a popular phrase this weekend, I notice.

The place-names are not really done very systematically as they stand. So you can search for, say Eckington, you had no idea which county that's going to be in unless you happen to know it's in Berkshire

**[Voice]**

Derbyshire.

**Peter Millington**

Also, as Paul mentioned, with Ervin not understanding British place-names, some of them are just basically wrong. There's quite a few cases where a couple of hyphens indicate that he half-recognises the name, but doesn't know the rest of it, so it might say '--ington' but he can't read whether it says 'Hill' or 'Mill' so there's things there.

So I created that and we had a plan when I first did this to try and get the corrections from everybody who's produced some of the corrections and get them done. And that sort of ground to a halt, for reasons which I can't really explain - it seemed to happen that way. But then when I created the first version of the Folk Play website I put my own database of Nottinghamshire material on and thought shall I go ahead and mount the Helm material too. The end result is that all the material that's in that binder is actually also on the Folk Play website, listed as it is there. But also the website uses its own search-engine so you can search keywords. There on the bottom of the home-page, you'll find there's a search form too. It's a bit clunky - that's the technical term for it. So that's what's currently available now - to everybody in the world, really, I suppose, and I get a lot of queries come through as webmasters ask me about these and I send them down to University College London or wherever.

But Eddie and myself have now been talking about actually attacking those views and corrections that have come through. Eddie bravely volunteered to do them and I'm happy with the technical stuff. So we have a backlog of three or four listings of corrections which we will go through first and we also want to add a field basically for the locations as there's no doubt that a lot of the queries are about locations and I've certainly found in a couple of other listings, that having county and place names is very popular, I think. So I'd like to do that as well, and other little bits of tidying up. I should also add that I did a few other corrections in here - format corrections - in some cases the field labels were wrong so things were going in the wrong places. I've also standardised all the journal names as I've probably mentioned, so something simple like having or not having a word 'the' at the front of the title and things like that. But once we've got all those corrections done then - and I don't really have that time-scale timed to the minute - but I need to start soon - then we have to try and get other corrections from other people. One way of doing that might be to do this through the website on-line, because if someone is supplying a reference it'll be quite easy to have a button that says 'I want to send a correction' and then that brings a form up actually on-line where you can put the correct details and enter it into the database. Very nice way of doing that. It's possible to get

automated to some degree, which would be even better still. And that's how we stand at the minute, really.

**Eddie Cass**

Thank you Peter. Paul -

**Paul Smith**

One more thing that came up in the previous conversation that's not actually to do with this Index, but I do have a computerised version of *English Ritual Drama* which includes the supplement and the corrections and additions which Christopher made, which were published in *Roomer* some years ago. It's rough and ready because I simply don't have the hours in my life any longer to sit there and proof-read this, but Ron's been giving me the sharp stick to try and finish it off, but again, that could be something that we could make readily available as a tool.

**Eddie Cass**

Christopher-

**Christopher Cawte**

I in fact have (surprise, surprise) a bound copy of the printout that you sent in. I've put it into a cover. As you know, some people don't, I certainly worked through some of the volumes on my copy of the microfilm, and there are perhaps two things strike me. Given, of course, you've explained why it's happened, sometimes I noticed the documents were mis-identified, because I knew the handwriting - sometimes my own - which he didn't. So that is one thing worth looking out for, and the other was, of course, he didn't know the people. There's a translation of Wolfram's article on *Robin Hood und Hobby-Horse*, from some Austrian journal, translated, he said, by Dick Smith, who is my wife's cousin. Well now, when Alex died, he'd never heard of Dick Smith, and I think Dick was still at school. [Laughter.] In fact it was Alex's translation. I know, because he told me, and having forgotten all about that when I wanted a translation, I went to my wife's cousin who by then was not only a former Squire of the King's College Morris Men or successor title, (I didn't put him up to it - he just chose it) he was also a graduate in Germanic languages and he translated it for me. So I've got a translation, which is in the Folklore Society's Library amongst other places, done by Dick Smith, but the other translation was by Alex Helm. I give this as an example - not a complaint but an example of how things did get tied up.

**Paul Smith**

And also relating back to Eddie's comments about the problems of the blues and red inks and microfilm and this, that and the other, I think we'd have been a lot closer to a final result if we'd been able to work from real copies. But by that time, of course, they were in the accession stages at University College, which seemed to take for ever anyway.

**Peter Millington**

When I spoke earlier, I should have mentioned that I've been in touch with University College about this, because on the website we also thought that apart from the obituaries and some photographs - they took some finding as well, to be honest, of Alex.

**Eddie Cass**

Yes, Sunny provided the only known photograph of Alex.

**Peter Millington**

I've spoken to UCL and they have a hand-list and I wanted to put it on-line, and they wouldn't let me do it. They were going to be producing a new detailed inventory of this Collection - they said - now, I've been trying for the last - four weeks, now - probably, to get in touch with the woman in charge of the archives and I'm getting nowhere. I've no idea what's happened with that particular project. Now this [work] that we're doing may be able to feed into that.

**Eddie Cass**

Maybe you should talk maybe you should talk to Caroline Oates tomorrow, cos Caroline knows Gillian Furlong.

**Peter Millington**

I've a question to ask you, if I may.

**Eddie Cass**

Yes.

**Peter Millington**

What this inventory covers is basically what's in the Collection. So, am I right in thinking there's other materials apart from the index, that aren't in the Collection; from other publications, for example?

**Christopher Cawte**

The Indexes are there, certainly, but I think it was reckoned that it wasn't worth photocopying, partly because they were secondary sources from - not all the material that he'd got - I mean, some of it, don't forget, was Norman's material and my material. But also that there are other copies. Indeed Norman's got one, and I've got one. They went in two batches - I can't quite remember why - but I know I had two trips down -- but they all went into tea-chests in the attic and then I worked my way through them as near as I could just to see what we'd got - sorting it out a bit. Of course I found - he left a folder like this, only I think it was orange, with a lot of loose sheets in, and I knew that was the next volume of his notes. So I bound that for him and put an explanation in the front. It wasn't his binding, so there was no mistaking it, it was held together, rather than loose sheets. Yes, they're there - but someone did once show me some (no names - no pack-drill) did show me some sheets from the more-or-less A5-sized index, in which the holes had been torn through, it being apparently removed from the binder - which I took note of.

**Eddie Cass**

Derek, you had a point-

**Derek Schofield**

I just want to clarify in my mind - there are sets of these volumes with the index sheets.

**Christopher Cawte**

Like these.

**Derek Schofield**

Like those, and there are volumes with the actual material itself.

**Christopher Cawte**

Correct.

**Derek Schofield**

The stuff that he collected - I know he didn't do field work, but he got letters sent to him and so on by people and by yourselves, and he would copy stuff out, and that's all in separate volumes, but anything that's in there, there's an index sheet for?

**Christopher Cawte**

In theory. I mean I can't say this for everything, but-

**Peter Millington**

And there are also index sheets for other things other than in the main volumes.

\*\*\* 2

**Derek Schofield**

Right. So why don't you, notice I say 'Why don't you' rather than 'Why don't we', take all the index sheets and put them onto a database.

**Peter Millington**

Good idea.

**Derek Schofield**

I realise that's a mammoth task - and it's a glib comment from me about it- but as long as I haven't got it wrong that that would be a desirable thing to do - given that we haven't got time to do it.

**Peter Millington**

What's most interesting if you're seriously thinking about printing the whole inventory, what has happened since we started doing this is that people are doing images, are actually digitising images of archives. This would be a wonderful case, and in the case of the indexing sheets, when they're typed and they are going through an OCR machine, they can be digitised at the same time.

**Derek Schofield**

Ye-es, whether or not quality's good enough.

**Norman Peacock**

It's a good idea to do it on the top copy as well.

**Christopher Cawte**

Mmm. No, other copies would be more accessible.

**Norman Peacock**

Yes, but on the other hand there-

\*\*\*



**Eddie Cass** [To Peter Millington and Derek Schofield]

If you wish to have that conversation between you two, can you carry on in the bar there.

**Christopher Cawte**

May I point out a snag about these indexes. One is, they were done a long time ago. If I may give you just one example. I went to the professional librarian at Hull, which is a very good library, and said 'How should we quote references?' And he said 'Oh, I don't know. There aren't any standards. Now, if there were, I think he would have known - I've got the measure of the bloke, as well as knowing his profession. And that was so and in fact we worked out what I still think is much better than the system other people did - we worked out a system of citing references, and the objective was that if anyone saw one of our references, copied it out, and took it to a librarian, they wouldn't dare to say that it didn't exist. That was our objective. No photocopying, photography difficult - this is why I started making microfilm, because hand copying isn't reliable, and the whole background was very different. Alex went along to Congleton Library and said 'Have you got a copy of *Crockford's Directory* and the girl said 'Who wrote it?' [Laughter.]

**Eddie Cass**

Does anybody have a burning question cos we've been going for an hour now?

**Christopher Cawte**

A lot of these references will be rather inaccurate, incomplete and all sorts.

**Eddie Cass**

Peter.

**Peter Millington**

I hope this isn't an embarrassing question, but could you say a little bit about these formatted codes that seem to appear everywhere for the bibliographical references.

**Christopher Cawte**

Yes. It seemed a good idea at the time. Alex used to make them up, and he had a great big book like that, in which he entered them so he didn't get two [the same]

**Peter Millington**

What was the *raison d'etre*, then?

**Christopher Cawte**

I think he said the School of Scottish Studies used it

**Norman Peacock**

Was that origin of it?

**Christopher Cawte**

Well, that's my recollection.

**Eddie Cass**

Is that right Emily, [Lyle] would you know?

**Emily Lyle**

Not to my knowledge.

**Christopher Cawte**

Not in the first half of the Nineteen-Fifties?

**Emily Lyle**

Well that wouldn't be to my knowledge, then.

**Christopher Cawte**

Of course not - I beg your pardon.

But at any rate, that would be no later than 1956 would be the allegation. He had seen it done elsewhere, and thought it was a good idea.

**Norman Peacock**

He was using it before that.

**Christopher Cawte**

Was he?

**Norman Peacock**

Yes, I think so.

**Eddie Cass**

Well, as I said earlier, it is very interesting that we, as contemporary scholars are still exceedingly interested in the work that was done by past collectors. The contrast between Carpenter last night and Helm tonight is quite important in the sense, as I tried to say last night, Carpenter was a field collector. Helm was not. He was an exemplar of what - was it Georgina Boyes who described them as 'armchair folklorists', and I think it was Christopher who said to me that Alex was a collector of collectors.

**Ron Shuttleworth**

I think 'Squirrel' is the best term for them

**Eddie Cass**

Hmm. But the important thing was that they each of them built up enormously important resources which are still of relevance to us today, and we're still desperately anxious to get them into handle-able forms so we can all begin to understand them then. Over the last few years, it's been one of my great delights to become, not only working colleagues with Norman and Christopher, but friends of theirs, I think, and it's been wonderful to have them here this evening to talk about Alex Helm. I am sure that we are all grateful for the presentation that they put forward this evening. Thank you very much. *[Applause]* The bar is open.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In a letter Christopher Cawte added the following information. ‘Sunny (from her disposition, but properly Meir), was of course an Indian, but also a Parsee, a rather select group. Her father was the first Indian to get a position of major responsibility in the Indian Civil Service. I forget the title, but it was on the lines of a Resident, and she was a well qualified graduate. Alex’s original subject was P.E. We have a friend near Leicester, now well on in his 80s who taught with Alex, also P.E. He and his wife are very fit, and still dance regularly, Alex having introduced them to it. Alex joined the *Indian Army*.

<sup>2</sup> Between the two sets of triple asterisks there are overlapping conversations.