

# The Mary Neal Project

*In the Winter 2006 issue of EDS, Lucy Neal wrote of her quest to find out more about her great-great aunt, folk dance pioneer Mary Neal. Two years on, Lucy Neal writes about the culmination of that quest.*

**January 7:** A month to go. Plans for Mary Neal Day in full swing. On 7 February, The Mary Neal Project and the EFDSS will mark the handing over of Mary's archive to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library with the first ever public celebration of Mary's life and work. A folk revivalist, suffragette, journalist, magistrate and adoptive mother, Mary Neal CBE (1860-1944) was also a party girl. Celebrations will be inspired by her sense of inclusivity and fun.

The day marks the symbolic start of a reconciliation between the stories of the folk revival's main collaborators, Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp, and feels historic. We'll open an old box to create something new. The occasion acts as a catalyst to bring musicians, dancers and singers together from contemporary arts and folk worlds, along with makers, bakers and children to explore living traditions today. Everyone involved seems excited.

Temperatures below freezing. I think how cold those Somerstown sewing girls would be and how welcoming the Espérance Club would have been.

**January 8:** 'Morris dancing is dead'. The 'news' sits oddly in our house where morris dominates. Mary's old papers upstairs. Downstairs we wrestle with html language, audio clips and jpegs so [www.maryneal.org](http://www.maryneal.org) can be launched on the night. A hidden history made globally accessible.

An e-flyer inviting people to the celebrations produces positive responses. Richard Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst's son, from Addis Ababa: 'My mother used to speak in admiration of Mary Neal and her work – I wish your gathering every success.'

**January 10:** We book the Russell Hotel for Vida Brown and Rhett Krause coming from the States. The three-year trail to uncover Mary's story has produced some thrilling discoveries and 86-year-old Vida is one of them. Youngest daughter of Florrie Warren (Mary's most prominent dancer and teacher who learnt morris dancing from William Kimber and from whom Cecil Sharp notated his first dances for *The Morris Book*) Vida's own story as



Mary Neal in 1905

dancer and ballet mistress with George Balanchine is remarkable.

Contracts go to the day's 189 participants. There's no time for rehearsals. They'll meet on the day. I catch up with some on the phone. Laurel Swift is a morris dancer and Freddie Opoku-Addaie a contemporary choreographer. Their different dance backgrounds give the project a fresh sense of discovery and re-invention. In the Somerstown and Hampshire schools they've been working in, the children *remember* songs and dances learnt before Christmas. As Mary Neal discovered, children learn quickly when having fun. Ally's made an audio tape of the children: the sound of their jumping feet and laughing is infectious and joyous. Mary's legacy lives on! Jim Moray will sing 'Poverty Knock' about women mill workers. Alistair Anderson will bring his Northumbrian pipes and concertina: 'Mary Neal is a woman after my own heart. She understood creativity and diversity. This is an important day!'

**January 11:** Tony Legge calls. Fourteen Abingdon men want to come. They'll bring the original concertina given them by Mary Neal. Their oldest member, Les Argyle, once a baker, is delighted we're building a brick oven in the garden to bake

bread in on the day. I relish these simple human connections and feel Mary would as well.

A new photo arrives of Espérance girls. It goes straight on the cover of the souvenir programme. Also, Mary on the bottom step of a Cumberland Market omnibus full of Espérance children. Will more come to light?

**January 20:** Ruth has questions about cake. Her mother Mary's to bake for 300 and they're ordering tins. Baroness Helena Kennedy QC confirms she'll talk about the law and Mary's commitment to social justice.

**January 31:** *Time Out* journalist, Bella, is excited: 'it's a *great* London story'. *The Guardian* want an article, connecting Mary's story to the 'Morris is Dead' story. They ask me to 'beef up the feud' which depresses me. Must Mary's history always be wedged into the Sharp conflict? We'd rather celebrate what they had in common: a passion for English folk song and dance.

I'm kept awake at night. Will anyone come? Do people know what they're doing on the day? In the morning, I buy serviettes, paper table cloths and daffodils. All a bit unreal.

**February 1:** I am definitely completely terrified. I feel quite exposed now everything is 'going public'. But the response to the programme is good.

**February 2:** Heaviest snowfall for 18 years. Will people get from Newcastle, Bristol, Wales, Somerset, Dorset and Worcester? The archive is in Tooting; the archivist stuck in Stoke Newington. The children's rehearsal at Cecil Sharp House is cancelled. Production manager, Sid, ploughs on with technicalities, Ruth with schedules and lists. At night, I answer the designer, Katherine's, calls for more website text.

**February 5:** Portland Place. I scrunch through snow, to be interviewed by Jenni Murray on *Women's Hour*. Mary's story goes out live on BBC Radio 4. Ticket sales pick up. Vida and Rhett arrive. Vida looks like Florrie Warren. The connections through the years are very, very real.

**February 6:** Shirley Collins is unwell. She sends a rousing message for the day. Sid's built the bread oven and it's ready for firing up. The weather is bitter cold.

Photo courtesy Lucy Neal





*The Handover of the Mary Neal Papers: Janet Foster, Malcolm Taylor, Keri Myers and Lucy Neal. Inset: Rhett Krause and Vida Olinick Brown (Florrie Warren's daughter)*



Photos: Derek Schofield

#### *New Espérance Morris*

spectacular form. I read Mary's 1906 letter asking the Hemmings brothers to London but to have no beer beforehand. 'They shall have some for supper afterwards.'

Alistair Anderson 'takes his life in his hands', dancing a Morris tune on his concertina. All four of Jim Moray's songs are stunning.

The Glowworms are on and we're up on our feet. Mary wanted 'there to be no spectators' with everybody present 'joining in the dancing'. Vida invites Katy Spicer to dance; my daughter dances with an Abingdon man; Alpha, Abdoul, Moussa and Milad happily re-invent 'Strip the Willow'. Faces from the day spin past. 100 years on and Mary has people dancing. I could not be happier that people, young and old, have claimed her as their own.

Home to a note from Michael in Thaxted, 'New inspiration and new joy is always best expressed in the music of song and dance.' Hear hear! And three thousand cheers for Mary, Cecil and all who dance.

*Lucy Neal was co-founder/director of the London International Festival of Theatre and was awarded the OBE in 2005 for her services to drama.*

**February 7:** The Mary Neal Day is here. Snow falls across the country. At Cecil Sharp House, it's freezing. We'll warm up as the day progresses. Sid briefs the team. Laurel Swift, Freddie Opoku-Addaie, Benji Kirkpatrick, Miranda Rutter, Chris Rook and Azzurra Ardochini arrive and get to work. By nightfall they may have created something new. This idea of inventing and making runs through the day and gives it a wonderful energy. Guests appear. Ron Smedley, Jonathan Burrows, Verity Sharp, Doc Rowe, the sound man, Bill Warder. Kennedy Hall fills with children. The cake arrives. How Mary would have enjoyed all this...

It's 2pm, we have a public ... and we're ready to go. Katy Spicer and I clamber on stage. She reads Shirley's welcoming words about an historic event that acknowledges 'Mary's part in the English folk dance revival of the early 20th century and restores her to her rightful place at the forefront of it. For a shamefully long time she was written out of the story and Cecil Sharp himself has to bear some of the blame for that.'

She speaks of the reconciliation and forgiveness the handing over of the archive represents, the opportunity to bring Mary back to public recognition and affection and wishes everyone an 'inspiring and joyful Mary Neal Day!'

I describe Mary's frustrations with Victorian life. My father, Michael, speaks eloquently of Warwickshire, and his memories of her, quoting from her brother, Theodore's, Arden copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'lulled in these flowers with dances and delight'. On stage, children tell Mary's story; her friendship with Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and opening of The Espérance Club. The day is coming alive. Lal and Fleur sing 'The Seeds of Love'. Rhett announces Vida is in the audience,

and past, present and future suddenly connect. The New Espérance Morris do a wonderful jig. Helena Kennedy speaks of Mary's courage and values. Children dance and sing 'Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah' and, unrehearsed, 'dip and dive' together.

Handover time. Archivist, Janet, removes 'horrid' metal from the archive and is cheered as the folk revival chapter, removed in the 1950s, is re-inserted. I hand a stack of boxes to Malcolm Taylor with Keri Myers standing by. We're done! Celebratory lemon drizzle cake arrives: a line of fifteen cakes spells 'For as many as will'. Another cheer.

The afternoon is a whirl of activity all over the House. Conversations in Kennedy; my sister Tabitha's sewing workshop spreads out like a picnic with children and adults sitting quietly stitching; a ceilidh downstairs in Trefusis. Baked bread arrives! Connections are made. I introduce Helena to Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's great nephew. On the stairs, Sam's singers pass singing 'The Nutting Girl', in barbershop harmonies. Youth theatre company Phakama take Polaroid pictures and fill a 'graffiti wall' with responses and comments. All positive! The elderly walk slowly with sticks while children run around. The combination makes for a sense of openness and possibility. Someone says: 'I feel as though a new door is opening.'

The evening concert begins. New Espérance Morris dance in Bledington, Fieldtown and Espérance traditions, followed by a beautiful piece made by artists co-creating all day, gossamer light, with three dancers, guitar, viola and a bacca pipes jig. Abingdon enter in

#### **Further Information**

Information about Mary Neal, the day and archive extracts are available on [www.maryneal.org](http://www.maryneal.org)

