

Surprise for five folk dancers of 50 years ago

WHEN Mrs. May Hickson and Mrs. Beryl Scully found them in the wooden box in the cupboard in the corner a few weeks ago they thought they were jumble.

Ten girls' print dresses and bonnets. Three boys' smocks and a hat.

But five old ladies in the audience at a Folk Dance Party at Ascott-under-Wychwood gasped with delight last night when children from the village danced into Tiddy Hall wearing them.

For they recognised them at once as the clothes in which they themselves danced over 50 years ago in the summer of 1913 for the founder of the English Folk Dance Society, Cecil Sharp.

And the best kept secret in Oxfordshire was out.

I learnt about it some time ago through a former pupil of Miss Marjorie Walkenshaw, a retired schoolmistress. But in return for a seat in the audience last night I promised not to disclose it. And very glad too I am that I did.

The old ladies' faces were a picture, and they were able to recall for me as if it was yesterday the year when they wore the dresses, two of which still have their names in the waistband.

Charles Enginton (?) played the mouth-organ, Lord Sanderson the fiddle for them, and of the many fetes at which they appeared.

But perhaps before I go any further I ought to draw your attention to the stone tablet on the wall.

For it is to the memory of Reginald John Elliott Tiddy, Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, who fell in the First World War and it was put there by those with whom he worked and danced and for whom he built the hall.

"He cherished its traditions with the passion of a lover and the memory of a scholar. Here he taught us to remember our old songs and dances and with the genius for friendship, sympathy and laughter he made our old life young again."

A phrase which, as it turns out, was almost prophetic because he taught those five ladies and the other children of the village to dance in the schoolroom until his hall was ready and he bought the material from which the wife of the station-master made their dresses and smocks.

Their pink, blue and lavender patterns are a bit faded now and, to tell the truth, Mrs. Hickson, Mrs. Scully and Miss Walkenshaw had to undo a few gussets and let out a few seams to make them fit the girls of Ascott-under-Wychwood of today.

But that didn't matter. A lot of the starch of 50 years ago was still in them. They were safe in their wooden box in the cupboard in the corner, and the moths hadn't got at them. And with eight modern lasses and three modern lads wearing them they looked as good as ever they did.

In fact, if Reginald Tiddy could have been there he would have felt really proud. Not only were Peter Lund and a band of folk dancers from Oxford University present under the auspices of the Rural Community Council carrying on his tuition. But there were these children dancing the dances he taught their grandparents.

Who says the traditions of village life are dead?