

Elizabeth and Annie Stears of Bonchurch, and a friend, in period morris dancing costume with ankle bells and sticks, around 1898.





At the time the photograph was taken, there was growing interest in folk song, music and dance because people were concerned that traditional culture was rapidly being lost. Annie and Elizabeth's father, Thomas Stears, born 1844, living on the Isle of Wight, came from a musical family. His elder brother Josiah, born in 1823, was a violin teacher and music seller. Thomas was a schoolmaster in Brading (as well as a constable and eventually Mayor). With his first wife, Emma, he had four children including Alfred Thomas Stears, great grandfather of the folk singer Ian Anderson.

Thomas remarried after the death of Emma, moved to Bonchurch and became the schoolmaster there for 20 years until his own death. He had eight more children in that time, including Annie and Elizabeth, pictured above. He was obviously interested in folk dance as in the family's collection of photographs there is also one of maypole dancing in Bonchurch school yard. The school house pictured is still standing, next to the church, and it is currently a holiday rental property.



In 1890, Thomas Stears' son from his first marriage, Alfred Thomas, married the then 18 year old Emily Agnes Ragless. He worked at various occupations including as a decorator and a railway ticket collector. Emily also had an interest in folk culture and some knowledge, as in 1904, the folk song collector and composer Ralph Vaughan Williams came to Horsham where they were living and collected the song *Lord Allenwater* from Emily. The family involvement with folk music is a continuing one, as their great grandson Ian Anderson, is a writer and broadcaster on the subjects of folk, roots and traditional music as well as a well-known folk blues musician with numerous recordings to his name.

The photograph below shows Thomas and Susannah Stears' at the old school house at Bonchurch, about 1902. With them are their morris-dancing daughters from the first photo, Annie and Elizabeth, and son Frank.

