

FOLK SESSION – Howard Arms, Brampton

Many thanks to everyone who turned out to lift the darkness of winter with music and song on 21st January in the Howard Arms, on the theme of 'Scotland/all things Scottish'. A particular welcome to Ruby on accordion, joining us for the first time, and Charlie on fiddle, back after a long absence.

We had a rich variety of instrumental music. Ruby and Charlie kicked off with *Loch Lomond; Comin' Thro' the Rye* and *Ye Banks and Braes*, and continued later with the music hall delights, *The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen* and *I Belong to Glasgow*. Adrian on melodeon found devious Scottish links for his tunes: *Duncan McGillivray* is a Canadian tune written for the Scottish pipes, and *The Banks of the Dee* is an English morris tune about a Scottish river! Sally Hardaker on recorder played *Flatwater Fran* (Scottish composer) and *Da Lounge Bar* (a Shetland tune). She and Richard on tin whistle joined together in the waltz, *Alloa House*. Charlie gave us some fine solos (in which all the other instrumentalists in the room joined): *Major Graham of Inchbrackie* and *Lady Baddinscough's Reel*.

Our pretext for the theme was the approach of Burns' Night, so Les wrote *Burns' Night Blues* for the occasion. Gerda sang a revamped version of *Go Fetch to Me a Pint o' Wine*. In more traditional mode, Richard commemorated Burns' brief visits to the Highlands with *My Heart's in the Highlands*; Jane lamented that *It Was a' for our Rightful King* and Katy celebrated the birth of *Ranting, Roving Robin*.

Nostalgia and homesickness are popular among Scots abroad, so Steve longed to return to *Caledonia* and, more specifically, to the *Valley of Strathmore*. John's *Hearts of Olden Glory* looked back to Scotland's past, while Sally longed for her lost love on *The Isle of Eigg*. On a lighter note, the *Skyscraper Wean* (Charles) regretted moving to a '20-storey flat'.

Seduction and romantic love are widespread subjects in any country! Sometimes tragic: *Mary Hamilton* (Sally) was hanged for infanticide; *Bogie's Bonny Belle* (Chris) was separated from the father of her child; the heroine of *Fear a Bhata* (Gerda) waits with dwindling hope for her lover's return. Phil decided he preferred a drinking companion to his *Star of the Bar*. A happier outcome awaited the young couple who spent the night at *Rarie's Hill* (Gerda); Alan invited his sweetheart to pick *Wild Mountain Thyme* (and generated some brisk discussion about whether the song is Scottish or Irish!) and Jane's hero wished he were a *Baron's Heir* in order to lavish riches on his beloved.

Some connections were ... tenuous. John sang the hymn *Only Remembered* because its author was a Free Kirk minister; *Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat* (Charles) rides the night train to Dumfries; *Oud Rimbant* (Anne) alludes to the alleged parsimony of the Scottish people; Les's *Crystal Dragon of Eryri* takes us right round the British Isles; Alan's *People Get Ready* was squeezed in because it had been covered by Rod Stewart 'who has a Scottish surname'. Phil's *Best of the Barley* tells the story of a Falkirk man who hustled for survival in the USA during the Depression and Chris, quite frankly, cheated with his folktale *Eilidh and the Banshees* (were the banshees on holiday from Ireland, Chris?)

We next meet in the **Howard Arms, Brampton, at 8pm on 18th February** with the theme 'Stories/Storytellers'. **ALL WELCOME!**

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We met on 18th February in the Howard Arms with the theme of ‘Stories and Storytelling’ (a very wide and all-embracing subject). A warm welcome to Garry, joining us for the first time from Corbridge.

Given the reputation of folk music (‘a dismal song in three-four time’), no-one was surprised when the body count started to rise. Some were single deaths such as the eponymous hero of *The Ballad of Billie-Joe* (Jane); the heroine of *Molly Malone* (Steve), and the grasshopper in the fable of *The Ant and the Grasshopper* (John). There were double deaths in *Miss Otis Regrets* (Gerda) and *Barbary Allen* (Chris), and thirteen deaths of smokejumpers caught in the forest fire of Montana in 1949 (*Missouri Waters* – Liz). Anne despatched a whole Cumbrian army and a monarch (*King Dunmail*).

Several singers found songs with factual backgrounds. *Nine-Pin Jacques* (Alan) was written by Sam Millington, based on a friendship between an American blues singer and Durham teenagers that lasted fifty years. We also heard *The Story of Isaac* (John); the history of the first immigrant to pass through the Ellis Island, the *Isle of Hope* (Steve). Les sang his own song, *A Walk in the Park*, about meeting, marriage and loss, and Anne her own *Finsthwaite Princess*, about a woman buried in Finsthwaite churchyard who was said to be Bonny Prince Charlie’s illegitimate daughter (unlikely!)

Luckily there were plenty of cheerful and funny songs. The *Mary Ellen Carter* (Adrian) was raised from the depths of the sea by her tenacious crew; the sailors who are *Rolling Down to Old Maui* (Liz) are rejoicing at their return home; *Wedding Bells* (Jane) are ‘ringing out one day of joy’ and the extraordinary participants in *The Reel in the Flickering Light* (Phil) had a wonderful time. *The Widow of Bridlington* (Charles) defied spiteful neighbours to continue on her merry way. Sam Millington’s song *Never Press Nine*, sung by Alan, is a hilarious ‘take’ on the frustrations of call centres; *The Muck Spreader Song* (Garry) is a comic tale of malfunctioning agricultural equipment (to put it delicately); Phil sang the tall tale of *The Silloth Submarine*, about U-boat submariners who came ashore for fish-and-chips in wartime, pretending to be Free Poles.

Some had more ambiguous endings. The highwayman of *Whiskey in the Jar* (Charles) may or may not escape; the fragile heroine of Gerda’s *Beeswing* keeps her freedom but at great cost, and we never know if the daughter heeds her father’s warning against marrying the *Willy ‘Ole Lad* (Liz).

Particularly ingenious were those who told tales of tales. Chris told the tale of *The King’s Tailor*, whose suit ends up as a story. *The Story that I Started at the Kirk Soiree* (Katy) is a story about a storyteller telling a story. Les’s own song *So Many Stories* is inspired by ‘people watching’, seeing them playing out their own stories; while Garry’s *We Tell Stories* explains that story-telling is part of the human condition. Adrian topped the lot by encompassing the greatest story of all in his tune on melodeon, *How Great Thou Art*.

We next meet on **18th March in the Howard Arms, Brampton, at 8pm**. The theme will be ‘**March**’ – think hares and madness; the beginning of the spring. Or getting one’s marching orders. Or military marches (a gift to instrumentalists!) **ALL WELCOME!**

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This being the month of March, our theme was ‘March’ (or ‘march’) when we met at the Howard Arms on the 18th (yes, of March!) We had connections to military marches; winds (March winds); madness; hares (mad March hares), spring, and of course events that took place in the month of March. Or any other subject that could plausibly be wrenched round to refer to March.

The month of March is clearly not as popular in song as, say, May or October, but Phil headed for *The Lakes of Pontchartrain* on a ‘bright March morning’; Charles’ *Kerry Recruit* decides to enlist ‘one morning in March’; Alan’s version of Masfield’s *Cargoes* mentions ‘mad March days’ and Richard’s *Ballad of John Willie Stell* commemorated his great-uncle, killed in the March 1918 German offensive. Gary Skinner assured us that the March wind was ‘blowing his blues away’ (*Sun’s Gonna Shine in my Backyard Some Day*) and less season-specific winds featured in Steve’s *Blowin’ in the Wind* and Gary’s *Dust in the Wind*. As March is generally considered to be first month of spring, Charles enjoined us to celebrate by *Poisoning Pigeons in the Park* while Steve met his love in the springtime, *When Blue Skies Turn to Grey*.

Hares and madness (not in combination) were popular. Les sang us his own song, *Hare Magic*, while Gerda’s *Hare Spell* dates chillingly from a Scottish witch trial. Geoff and Kath found a mention of hares in *Where Ravens Feed* and in the poem *The Poacher*. Gary imagined how young men would take to hunting if girls were *Hares on the Mountain*, then Anne lowered the tone further (naturally) with the *double entendre* of *The Bonny Black Hare*. Gerda assured us that it is a *Mad World*; Les told us that his own song was a *Load of Nonsense and Insanity* and Anne sang the tragedy of *Crazy Man Michael*. Tom o’ Bedlam (Katy) begs his way on the roads of Jacobean England and Garry Swinton found both madness and a march in the parody *Psychotherapy*, where ‘the id goes marching on’.

Which brings us to ‘marching’. Sally, on recorder and flute played the *March of the Men of Devon* and a medley of Irish marches: *Battle of Auchram*; *Lord Mayo*; *Chief o’Neill* and *Tralee Gaol*. Gerda’s *Lancashire Lads* marched away; Geoff and Kath sent the troops *Over the Hills and Far Away*; Richard’s *Peat Bog Soldiers* ‘marched with their spades to the moor’ and the captain of Irish dragoons wooed *The Bonnie Lass of Fyvie* (Phil). On a more light-hearted note, Garry Swinton’s *Dedicated Follower of Fashion* has a ‘Carnabetian army marching on’.

Outliers included Alan’s devious inclusion of Sam’s *Lost in IKEA* (by routes that are too complicated to describe!); the doomed love between *Tushie Law* and ‘the Earl of March’s daughter’ (Phil) and the Easter poem-song, *Jerusalem Tomorrow* (Charles).

We next meet on **Tuesday, 15th April at 8pm in The Howard Arms, Brampton**. The theme will be Houses/Places to Live (think palaces, castles, houseboats, shacks, tents, caravans...). ALL WELCOME.