

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!**

FOLK SESSION – Howard Arms, Brampton

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.

FOLK SESSION – Howard Arms, Brampton

We had a good turn-out on 15th April when we met in the Howard Arms to make music and tell stories on the theme of 'Houses/Places to Live'. A warm welcome to Bev and Hedley, visiting us from Maidenhead, the former with her portable piano (not a common instrument at folk sessions!)

To start with 'houses' (including 'cottages'): Sally sang us the ribald story of *The Yorkshire Couple*, involving a whole row of cottages, plus a pub. *Little Boxes* (Kath) is critical about the houses of 1960s America, and the *Skyscraper Wean* (Katy) complains about the inconveniences of high-rise living. On the other hand, the value of house and home was presented in Sam's song *Give Me Clean Water* (sung by Alan) which argues that 'a house with four walls' is an essential for happy living; the heroine of *The Galway Shawl* (Jane) takes her admirer to her father's cottage, and Gerda grieves for the 'homes that were drowned for a city' (*Ashokan Farewell*). Chris went upmarket with two stories involving manor houses: *The Witch of Edmondthorpe* and *King of the Cats*. Steve lamented that 'this old house is falling down' (*Dimming of the Day*), while John sought patches of garden between 'terraced houses and concrete towers' (*A Place called England*). Les's entertaining parody, *Ukulele Hallelujah*, described how no 'dwelling, house, or home' could escape from the instrument, while proving how many rhymes he could find for 'ukulele'! Some songs implied houses by mentioning 'bits of house' – a window in *Love Minus Zero* (Bev and Hedley); another window in *It's Been a Long Time* (Steve) and a door in *Lights of Home* (Gerda).

There were lots of imaginative variations on 'houses.' Phil found a lodging-house (*Keep Your Feet Still, Geordie Hinny*) and Alan a house of ill-repute (*The House of the Rising Sun*). *The Keeper of the Eddystone Light* (Adrian) lives in a lighthouse; while *Barges* (Gary) provide another watery residence – with castles (also a place to stay) painted on the side! A gypsy caravan features in *Beeswing* (John), as do 'the tent and the old caravan' in *Thirty-foot Trailer* (Phil). The protagonists of *The Little Old Sod Shanty on My Claim* (Chris) and of *Little Bridget Flynn* (Kath) both want wives to come and look after their homes and themselves.

Some places to live are decidedly temporary: the hotel mentioned in *Big Yellow Taxi* (Gary); the warm boxcar of *The Hobo's Lullaby* (Hedley and Bev) and the sentry box that witnesses the frolics of *The Gentleman Soldier* with his 'fair maid' (Anne). What does it say about folk song that we had three separate references to prisons? *I Wish There Were No Prisons* (Adrian); *Little Tim McGuire* (Sally) and *To Althea from Prison* (Anne).

'Home' can be a place, rather than bricks and mortar. Kath and Geoff rejoiced to be *Westering Home*; Les commended *Glasgow (No Place Like Home)*; Geoff looked forward to *Going Home* and Gerda sang *Lay My Heart* about the place where the narrator feels safe and at home.

And finally, there is homelessness: *London Lights* (Jane), the Victorian song about the deserted mother in the winter streets, and Hedley and Bev's of *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, adapted to speak about homelessness.

We next meet on **20th May in the Howard Arms Brampton at 8pm**, with the theme of 'furniture and household plenishings' – think 'beds, chairs, clocks, spinning wheels, crockery, saucepans' and so on.
ALL WELCOME!

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We missed some regular faces (voices?) on 20th May when we met in the Howard Arms, but were very pleased to welcome Martin joining us again from London, and two visitors who came to listen.

Our theme was 'Furniture/Household Plenishing'. Charles and Martin both went for the big picture, so to speak, with *Not Without a Fight* (Charles), about a family resisting their home being bulldozed in Gaza, and *The Auction Song* (Martin), about poverty leading to a family's household possessions being auctioned and dispersed.

The most frequently mentioned item of furniture, (this is, after all, folk music!), was the bed. Charles presented it as the most basic necessity threatened by flood waters in *River, Stay Away from My Door*. In mood, we ranged from romps in *Grandma's Feather Bed* (Kath), through sleeping children visited by *John o' Dreams* (Phil) and the giver of *Scarlet Ribbons* (Jane), to the inevitable seduction at *The Bedmaking* (John). 'Bed' was also the scene of ultimate revenge by a battered wife (involving needle, thread, frying pan, rolling pin etc) in Gary's *Stitch in Time*.

Next came chairs of all sorts. Les announced *You Ain't Going Nowhere* in an easy chair (not surprising, really). Phil inherited a fortune hidden in *Granny's Old Arm Chair*. Anne's parody of *Side by Side* included a chair as well as a bed. We had a kitchen chair in Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* (John); a chair of bamboo in *Sand and Foam* (Gary); a pub chair in the *Red Rose Café* (Les) and a sofa in Sam's *Self-Assembly Blues and Yellows* (sung by Alan). Tables and chairs go together, and were mentioned accordingly in Les's own song *People to People*, while John on mandolin played us *William Taylor's Tabletop Hornpipe*.

Clocks were unexpectedly popular, whether as the main theme in *My Grandfather's Clock* (Geoff and Kath); a metaphor in Charles' *The Windmills of Your Mind*; or a passing reference in Jane's *If You Wait*.

Tools and household equipment cropped up as baskets and creels in Martin's *Thirty-Foot Trailer*; in Anne's exhortation to *Dance Around the Spinning Wheel* and Geoff's plea to *Buy Broom Besoms*; in Jane's *Bogie's Bonny Belle* (pots, pans, paraffin lamps); in Martin's *Oak and Ash and Thorn* (bowl and cups), and as a metaphorical *Potter's Wheel* (Kath). Household linen sneaked in, taking the form of sheets offered to *The Jolly Beggar* (Phil); a pillow supporting the heroine's head in *That's No Way to Say Goodbye* (Jane) and Katy's query *O, Can Ye Sew Cushions?*

And who would have thought that so many obscure and unexpected household items could work their way into song? Bookshelves? Anne's *Joyce the Librarian*! Litter trays? Alan's *Our Cat*! A fuse-box and a gas-tap? Geoff's *The Gas-Man Cometh*! A phonograph? Alan's *Don't Blame the Motorman*! A mantelpiece? Anne's *The Keyhole in the Door*! Not to mention Gary's *Little Pot Stove*.

We next meet on **Tuesday 17th June at 8pm in The Howard Arms, Brampton**. The theme will be 'Wildlife' – forests, wildflowers, wild animals etc. **ALL WELCOME!**