

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 Billy-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!**