

An Adventure in the Search of Tradition

Neil Lanham is producing a series of CDs of traditional singers and storytellers he recorded in his native Suffolk mainly in the 1960's, I asked Neil if he would care to tell us some anecdotes of his adventures into deepest Suffolk in his pursuit of the tradition.

In the late 1950's I used to work at a Cattle Market in East Suffolk. The next village to where our market was situated was the village of Blaxhall. Blaxhall Ship, the only pub, was one of probably a dozen pubs that us young reprobates would go round to for a bit of high life and a sing on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday night - but Blaxhall was different. Firstly there was a close-knit society. You would hardly ever see a car in the car park but several bicycles leaned against the pub wall. I used to hide my old banger up the road because I did not want anyone to think that I was 'posh'.

In this pub on a Saturday night they would have one 'musicianer' with a button accordion playing for the people with anything from mazurkas and schottisches to the pop tunes of the day, and he would be called upon to play by Wicketts, the chairman, whatever the mood of the evening demanded. In between dancing, ancient characters were called upon to 'oblige with a small ditty'. Whereupon the likes of Bob Scarce would reel out probably a murder ballad. He had as much stage presence in commanding the attention of his company as Max Miller had over his Music Hall audiences, in his technique of telling of his story in song to his company.

Music was always for dancing, usually a Polka (sort of on the spot version) the old fashioned Waltz, Stepdance, Candlestick dance or the Broomstick dance on special occasions. But the piece de resistance was the Apache. How on earth this late 19th century Parisian café dance ever came to get into the tradition of the likes of these ploughmen I cannot think, but Eli Durrant was the expert at it. He would pull his cap down over his eyes, put a white handkerchief high up round his neck, bend his cigarette and then throw his wife Lily around the room in a Tango. Then when he'd finished others would have a go. It was a haven of tradition - completely unaffected by the outside world. Before I went I was told that it was a place to go for a good pint of Cobbold's beer and a 'sole of the skull' and not necessarily in that order!

In 1961 I left East Suffolk to come back to West Suffolk for business reasons. It was not the same but a few landlords kept button accordions behind the bar should anyone wish to go in for a play or a stepdance.

When I asked around Haverhill almost everybody said 'you should have seen PC Gunboats Smith'. Well this Gunboats Smith was a folk hero and a policeman who was 6ft 7ins tall and had boots well ... the size of gunboats. Everybody seemed to have a story about him. He didn't arrest anybody but if they did anything wrong they knew what to expect - something of their own kind in return. And they took it and they loved him for it. Many laws are now made and administered by people who seem to know so little about the community that they are being levied on.

The old vicar's son from Great Thurlow told me that when the point-to-point was held at there and a spiv came down from London doing 'chase the lady' and was fixing it with one

hand and a magnet underneath the table, someone told Gunboats. He strolled through the crowd and with one mighty kick put the table into orbit, the spiv's hand with it.

About this time I went to record Jack Drury from Sudbury (can be heard on my Singing Tradition of Lavenham CD NL01). He knew a good few songs and in the course of the conversation he said 'You come from near Haverhill don't you?' I said 'Yes' he said 'Well, did you ever hear of PC Gunboats Smith?' 'Yes, I should think I have' I said. 'Well when I was out there working on the Estate at Great Bradley we stayed at The Fox, which was kept by the blind landlord Nathan Gooch. 'Yes' I said 'He used to serve beer with his thumbs in the top so he knew it was full'. 'That's right' he said. 'Gunboats came in there and he said 'where's young Drury', he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck stood me on a table and said now you sing boy like your father would and I had to sing and we had a rare old night'. 'Did he sing?' I said 'Oh yes' he said 'Can you think of any of his songs' I asked 'Sorry I can't remember any'.

Well a little time passed and we had a job about 50 miles away at a big house near Rickingham, near Diss on the Norfolk Border. I was sitting outside, as was my wont, eating my sandwiches with the old gardener of the house and he said in the course of conversation 'You come from near Haverhill don't you?' 'Yes' I said 'Well, did you ever hear of PC Gunboats Smith?' 'Should think I have' I said 'How did you know him?' 'Well when he moved from Haverhill he came out here to Rickingham and you remember that famous murder case about Whistlecraft the Gypsy?' 'Yes' I said 'I know the one. He shot the keeper then allegedly hid his .410 shotgun down the well and went and got his brothers and got off, because Churchill the famous gunsmith and ballistics expert couldn't match the gun to the pellets'. 'That's right' he said 'Well him and Gunboats were mates because they used to drink down the local pub and when Gunboats had to arrest Whistlecraft they were walking down the street together and Whistlecraft said to him 'Boy I could be away for a long while. Don't you think we ought to go and have one for the road', 'Alright' said Gunboats and as they got up to the pub door Whistlecraft showed him his handcuffs and he said 'Yer not gonna take me in this these on are you?' So Gunboats took em off and after a pint or two he looked up and Whistlecraft had gone but Gunboats knew where to find him because he went down to the next pub and there was Whistlecraft. So Gunboats quickly put the handcuffs on him again. But anyhow he got off the charge in the end'. So I said to this old gardener 'Did he sing?' 'Oh yes' he said 'Like a canary'. 'Well do you know any of his songs?' I asked in excited anticipation, 'No, no' he said 'I can't think of any'.

Well time passed by and I was back in The Ship at Blaxhall, which is situated about another 80 miles towards the coast from Rickingham, sitting next to Cyril Poacher when he said to me 'You live out near Haverhill way now don't you?' 'Yes' I said. He said 'Did you ever hear of Gunboats Smith?' well you could have knocked me down with a feather. I said 'How on earth did you ever hear of him?' He said 'When he retired from Rickingham he came to live here in Blaxhall', 'Well **** me' in shock I said and with intrepid excitement immediately asked without really expecting an answer in the affirmative 'Did he ever sing?' 'Oh yes' said Cyril. 'Do y-you kn-n-now any of this songs' I stammered. Well if you knew Mr CP you knew he only had to hear a song once or twice and he'd get it. He immediately said 'Let me see now. This is one of Gunboats Smith's'. He stood up, moved round the other side of the table as if he was Gunboats Smith himself telling his story specially for me. He sung in his own very distinctive deep down nutbrown voice and non-rhythmic style (to be heard on the Blaxhall Double CD of course, 40 songs for £15!). When I think of this song now my mind is filled with Cyril. He freely gave of himself to me in his song and that is just one reason why I

always have this strong thought that the singer and the company for that matter are more important than the song. The song that Cyril sang was the 'Irish Jaunting Car' which is not greatly known in this country, although it came out in the 19th century on a broadsheet by H Such. If one ever hears the Nutting Girl sung in a folk club it will be Cyril Poacher's version who recorded it about eight times. There are 12 of Cyril's songs featured on the CD. I have purposely left in all of the flotsam and jetsam of the conversation around the songs, the chorus, the chairman's introductions and even when he tries to get Bob Scarce going by saying 'Get for'ward Mrs Gorrard, the cart hang'. Who cannot fail to see a mental picture of a fat lady sitting in the back of a tilling cart. To me this expression is the epitome of the idiom of the people that this CD displays.

Bob Scarce, who sings 20 songs on the CD of murder, poaching, seafaring, Napoleon, pirates and transportation, is my favourite singing Englishman. The reason for this is simply that his performance is the least cluttered by 'modernism' and by modern musical parameters. What I mean is he would change from a major key to a minor key accentuating some part of a murder ballad, drop the rhythm altogether, pause where there is musically no pauses, nip the note or sing unbelievably flat on purpose, not musically knowing what he was doing but being very much aware of the affect that it had on his audience in the telling of his story. You can get songs and music off the Internet and Tin-Pan Alley but you cannot get tradition - The tradition of all of the Suffolkness that this old boy could muster in telling of his Suffolk story to his Suffolk people which incorporates everything that has happened to him since the cradle and before, is undiluted by the effects of the wider world. Perhaps it is an acquired appreciation but it still gives me goose pimples.

Neil Lanham tells stories of his adventures in collecting traditional songs, stories and folklore from the people of his native Suffolk and sells his CDs under the name of the Helions Bumpstead Gramophone Co.