

My Eels Foot Week in the 1960's

When I set out I had no intention of making a CD of The Eels Foot Singers, or even CDs at all for that matter, but somehow paths seemed to lead in the Eels Foot direction.

I remember taking a week off from work in a cold January 1966 and staying at an unheated Leiston hotel. My girlfriend thought that she was going to be taken to the Costa Brava of somewhere and was sadly disappointed at my selfish gesture. I had various contacts that I wanted to follow up and I saw a whole week as very much part of an adventure.

I spent one day just going round the village of Westleton, up and down either side of the green and hearing stories and songs from retired people, almost everyone to a man had been fishermen, and there were some wonderful stories. The results of which will be coming out on East Coast Fishermen's Songs and Stories which will mainly feature the Westleton people and an evening that I had with three old fishermen in Winterton, and others such as Albert Bromley from whom Bob Roberts acquired 'The Fish and Chip Ship' when they used to sing at the Kings Head at Ewarton. The story of a U-boat being sunk by a Lowestoft smack is a good 'un.

Anyway, this week I made contact with Jumbo Brightwell who lived at Archway Cottages, Leiston. Jumbo did not like singing at home, he needed the feedback from an audience. I never ceased to marvel at him and it was a pleasure to have known him. He was what we call in Suffolk 'a long headed man'. He said he only had to hear a song twice and he had got it and so he had. One never knew what Jumbo was going to come out with. We would take him mostly to Butley Oyster or Snape Crown and on the way home he would sit in the front of the car with me and chat about songs. These are some of the ones which that I never got the chance to record off him and which he said he was going to sing: 'The Bonny Blue Handkerchief tied under her chin', 'The Bonnet of Blue' (about a young lad ill treated by a ship's captain), 'William Taylor', 'Scarborough Lily', 'The Foxhunt', 'A Soldier and his True Love were Walking One Day', 'A Young Lad from the Country', 'The Faithful Plough', 'My Native Land', 'Father, Build me a Bower', 'Smuggling Song', 'Go Ye Down to Yonder Nunnery where the Wild Fowl do fly high', 'We shot out nets from the Cooper Dee not many leagues from Lowestoft Town'. He mentioned one his grandfather sang about Botany Bay. When he did sing it and could not get the first line, everyone in the pub kept saying about 'Australia' thinking it was the Yinka Friends song about that Bob Scarce used to do. But Jumbo then came out with

'Come all of you young fellows take warning by me, never go midnight walking and shun bad company' - a rare and a great song. It will be on the Eels Foot CD.

But I did get a number of other songs from Jumbo and those on the CD will be chosen from the following: 'Underneath her apron', 'Terpeton Town', 'Ramble Away', 'Newry Town', 'The Lost Lady found', 'The Soldier and a Sailor', 'The Ramalees', 'Tooralu Toorallay', 'The Irish Soldier', 'The Flower of London', 'Down in the fields where the buttercups grow', 'Old Jimmy Boger', 'The Game Cock', 'The Parson's Prayer', 'Home Dearest Home', 'The Indian Lass', 'A Joke', 'The False Knight', 'This English Land', 'On the Jasper Sea', 'In a Boarding House I used to live in', 'On the Banks of the Nile', 'What's the Life of a man anymore than a Leaf'. All recorded by myself live and in the tradition of local pubs.

Sid Cook had moved to Sibton where he was now a cowman and he was fairly forthcoming. He sung 'These Old Lavender Trousers', 'No I don't like to do that', 'Home Dearest Home', 'Nothing to do with me', 'Ring a ring a ding dong', 'The Ball of yarn', 'As I strolled down by Liverpool Town', 'Foggy Dew', 'Buttercup Joe', 'Down in the fields where the buttercups grow' and 'Pleasant and Delightful'. Those on the CD will be chosen from these.

We also made contact with Edgar Button and an evening was arranged there. It was a good evening, Edgar was a fairly dour sort of fellow, though. He certainly sang differently from the others - very slow and deliberate and made the comment that 'it took a lot out of you'. I did not get a get number of songs in the time that he sang there and it was not as easy to enter his personality as it was with Jumbo and Sid.

These singers then put me on to the people who got the BBC down and it is they who deserve much credit. They similarly sang a load of the Eels Foot songs and I hope to tell of meeting with them in the book I intend to publish and which will be more about the people themselves and the idiom that made these songs important to me. I had bankrupted myself on a portable Uher tape recorder - nearly £400 then but I am so glad I did as these 1960s recordings still sound like yesterday.

The Eels Foot Singers were indeed interesting and sung songs that, to me, were far more exciting than the ones that the BBC put on 78 in their 13th May 1939 recordings. In fact, the locals became very upset when they were told by the BBC that they couldn't do it their way and I am told the singing at the Eels Foot ceased not long afterwards when people came from away, gawped and treated them as 'some sort of freak'.

I found that most of the 'folk song collectors' seem to have come from an academic background and tend to have looked down on the singers, only wanting their songs. I remember being irritated at the time when Roy Palmer wrote to me for songs 'from the peasants'. Thinking down here in the country that peasants were something that we ate on a Sunday with a 'h' stuffed in the middle, such an attitude very much made me go into a shell with my recordings and not make them available to those who I felt did not respect the people themselves and, more important, their tradition. I do, however, want to make them available now but I feel it is important that they are heard in conjunction with the stories from the book.

It is people who come first and I want to write very much about the people and about the tradition that cherished and fostered these songs and used them for self-entertainment.

The set of three CDs of Blaxhall Ship will probably be the last that I shall do but they will be the jewel in the crown as they will feature my favourite singer of all time anywhere - Englishman Bob Scarce.

Peter Kennedy had done some recording in the 1950s but when I went round in the early 1960s there was no one else about then (at least that's what Bob Scarce and Bob Hart, who Roger Hazelden and I got singing again, said) so I feel that these recordings are important as they are undiluted in respect of the whole nature and ambience of what goes in to making the tradition.

I had a brilliant week and a real adventure in spite of getting frozen at night when I could have been on the Algarve. Needless to say, my young girlfriend deserted me and the 'old boys' in pubs for someone a bit more 'with it' but I would not have swapped my EELS FOOT week for anything.

Neil Lanham is bringing out a CD of the singers of The Eels Foot as part of his VOICE OF SUFFOLK series of CDs of the singing of varying areas across the county.