



Oldham's Burning Sands

The Oldham Tinkers

Ballads, Songs & Daft Ditties

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Oldham has long had its share of travelling people, called 'tinkers', caravan or trailer dwellers knocking up a living mainly by knocking up scrap metal. Now and then the district gets excited about their presence and letters, angry and soothing, get written to the Oldham Chronicle. It was during one such campaign that Gerry and Larry Kearns and John Howarth, then all students, decided to form themselves into a musical trio called 'The Oldham Tinkers'. Since then they've specialised in local songs, ballads and damnfool bits, sung in pubs, clubs and charity dos. Harry Boardman helped them to look a bit deeply at Lancashire historical songs: dialect reciters and writers such as Harvey Kershaw increased their affection for the lyrical lore of their neighbourhood, the examples of George Formby and Ken Dodd reminded them not to go over the top in presenting the Lancashire lad as a gormless twit. Here, then, are sundry anthems of Oldham, dark and light, deep and dotty, and full of fondness.

Success To The Weavers

Nineteenth century textile workers' songs are mostly either complaints of hard treatment or celebrations of pride in the trade. The protest songs were made by the workers themselves, the morale boosters were mainly the work of professional entertainers. Not always though. Maybe this perky broadside piece was written by a weaver. The Oldham Tinkers learnt it when taking part in a documentary radio feature by Charles Chilton.

The Lancashire Miller

Since Chaucer's time, millers have been given a bad name for dirty dealing. A London broadside of c.1730 called "The Miller's Advice to his Three Sons", is the oldest version of our song. England, Scotland, Ireland and the United States have all known the piece, and every singer seems to locate the rascally old miller and his reprobate boys in a different spot. The tune here is a variant of the well-known. "Miller of the Dee" that became widespread after it appeared in a ballad opera around 1750.

Charlie Chaplin

All over the English-speaking world, North America and the Caribbean, Australasia and South Africa and Oldham, the dauntless Chaplin still features as the hero of many children's rhymes, and his adventures and fancies have remained green for more than half a century, suitably fitted to an out-of-date yet deathless tune of an Indian maid, *Redwing*. Some of the verses of *Charlie Chaplin* (e.g. the one about buying a fiddle for eighteen pence) have been circulating for over a hundred years. City kids have a longer folk memory than their parents.

Eawr Market Neet

Northern mill-town markets are still lively and important affairs. Friday night, pay night, weekend shopping night was always the great time. The poem here is by the dialect writer Sam Fitton. The Oldham Tinkers say he clearly had a particular market in mind, but which one - Oldham, Rochdale, Bury? When singing the song they always imagine it's about Tommyfield, Oldham's own market.

The Owdham Chap's Visit To Th' Queen

Long hours, alternating with periods of short time, and incessant bitter productivity drives, were the common experience of cotton operatives during the first half of the nineteenth century. Many a millhand had the illusion that if Royalty knew what was going on, they'd act to stop the misery. Several songs were made on the theme of the common worker's visit to the Palace, some bitter, others doggedly good-natured. This one, from a broadside in the Oldham Local History Library, is of the latter sort.

In Our Town

Larry Kearns took a lighthearted look at modern education and made this song, more or less from experience. The opening chant, in contrast, reflects the educational ideas of a generation or two back. The Tinkers got it from an elderly lady, Mrs Ada Connell, who remembered it being taught in Oldham schools some seventy years ago.

Oldham's Burning Sands

On those dull damp doleful South Lancashire days, many a millhand's meditations take on exotic colouring, a kind of Wilson, Keppel & Betty Orientalism, as in this masterpiece, learnt from an Oldham business man, Laurie Cassidy. On the dream-coin, it's the flip side to Valentino's sheik.

A Fine Old English Gentleman

The original, a bourgeois pop song of the eighteenth century, gives a sycophantic picture of a rich old port-wine and roast-beef character, lolling on his estate and being kind to the poor at Christmas time. The present version gives the old song the 'alienation' treatment, by substituting a lower class hero, firmly non-conforming in habits. The Tinkers say: "It was taught to us by John Howarth's stepfather when we were barely of drinking age, and we've since heard it in many a pub; in fact, it's quite a favourite taproom song in Oldham".

Peterloo

August 16, 1819, at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, some 80,000 people assembled to hear the well-known Radical, 'Orator' Hunt. The yeomanry charged into the crowd, laying about with their sabres. In a few minutes, eleven people were killed and some 400 injured. 'And serve them right', implied a recent historian. But that's not the view of Harvey Kershaw, who wrote the song (and most decent folk would agree with Harvey).

We're Off In A Motor Car

The great anthem of kid's coach trips. Likewise for toboggan rides when the winter's right. Most youngsters of the street-playing class know this one, yet mysteriously it's missing from the Opies' compendium of children's home-made rhymes.

The Oldham Pensioner

The Tinkers found the words of this whimsical hundred-and-fifty-year-old song on a broadside in the Oldham Local History Library, and they set it to the tune of *The Limerick Rake*. Fittingly enough; it may well have been an Irish composition originally, from the run of some of the phrases.

The Stockport Strike

Throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the output of strike songs was considerable (and where, pray, are the strike songs of today?). Mostly the events depicted in the songs are easy to check from local history accounts. But this one, entirely characteristic as it is, concerns a mystery strike inasmuch as the Cheshire records, and even Henry Higginbotham's comprehensive two volume work, *Stockport, Ancient and Modern*, doesn't mention any serious stoppage in 1848 (so the Oldham Tinkers report). In aberrant moments, Gerry Kearns has been known to begin this song, "Come all you tons of soil..."

Th' Childer's Holiday

Another of Sam Fitton's songs. There are no poets like the Lancashire dialect writers for getting the most out of seemingly insignificant domestic vignettes. Characteristically, this complaint of a harrassed mother shows its warm affection in the final line.

The Owl Of Oldham

The Oldham Tinkers made this nostalgic song as they watched some of the grubby but proud working class districts of Oldham being bulldozed, and modern flats erected, strong on sanitation but short on tradition. The local bogeyman, Jimmy Rubberboots (real name: Miller) of the street called Sun Brew, is mentioned in the song, also some of the demolished pubs - the White Horse, the Canteen, the Australian. One of the main streets of a new estate is Krang Way, named after Oldham's twin town in Jugoslavia. As football fans will know, the owl is Oldham's emblem.

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