

Bob Hart

Topic

Songs from Suffolk

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Bob Hart, born 1892, belongs to the same grand company of East Anglian traditional singers as Harry Cox and Sam Lerner, Jumbo Brightwell of Eastbridge and Bob Scarce of Blaxhall. Of his life, Bob Hart has this to say –

'I started school at the age of four at Reydon near Southwold, until I was ten, when I was sent to Southwold School which I attended until the age of thirteen when we moved to Trentham.

'I started work on a farm, but the job never lasted long as I had a row with the boss and left right away. I walked to Lowestoft, eight miles, and got a job on a sailing trawler. After about a year I moved to a steam trawler as a stoker. We used to travel as far as the Shetland Islands, from May to November, and work back to Grimsby.

'It was at Grimsby where I learned some of my songs, and where I first heard *The Banks of Sweet Primroses*. I learned *As I Strolled out to Aylesbury* from a man called Jack Harling, of Snape. He has been dead for several years now. *Funny Little Place to Have One*, *Underneath her Apron*, and *The Female Cabin Boy* are songs I seem to have always known. *Broadside* I learned from Bob Scarce of Blaxhall, who I think is eighty-seven years of age.'

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Cod Banging

Compared to the great treasury of songs telling the adventures of Navy Jacks and merchant seamen, the English fisherman's repertory is rather small. Such songs as survive are mostly found along the East Anglian coast, and the trawlermen who work the cod-banks off the Shetlands and beyond. *Cod Banging*, sometimes called *The Smackman's Life* is a rather rare song. Sam Larner knew a bit of it, and doubtless at one time it had more verses than it retains now. In Bob Hart's version, a stanza – the one about the 'big barque ship' – has wandered in from *The 'Dolphin'*, a sea-battle song much favoured among old time fishermen of the Suffolk-Norfolk coast.

Australia

Transportation to Australia was a popular theme for sentimental balladry throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Like most of the convicts, most of the songs came rather from the towns than the countryside. So with this one, by the sound of it. Though probably widely sung in the past, the song has dwindled almost out of sight and earshot now, and as far as I know, Bob's is the unique version, unreported elsewhere. It has acquired a verse from *Van Diemen's Land* ('The Farmers they stand with their whips in their hand. They yoke us like horses to plough up their land.')

A Broadside

This is the great 'Female Warrior' song, but as often happens it lacks an important verse, telling us how, after diligently learning her seamanship, 'early one morning this damsel she arose. She dressed up herself in a suit of seaman's clothes. She dressed up herself all in her royal estate, and on board of the *Union* she signed as a mate.' Harris of Birmingham printed a broadside lacking this verse, and most of the surviving sets of the song seem influenced by Harris's version. The sudden unexplained appearance of the bold girl has puzzled many collectors. Sharp found the song in Somerset, Hammond in Dorset, Williams in Wiltshire, Grainger in Lincs, and Kidson on the Yorkshire coast. A well-scattered, much-loved song.

The Banks of Sweet Primroses

In an idyllic setting, a man meets a girl. He seems not to know her, but she knows him too well, and scornfully rejects his overtures. What's the big attraction of the song that makes country singers regard it as the ace of lyrics? During the twentieth century it has turned up over and over again, in the West Country, through the southern counties, and far up into East Anglia. The most famous recorded version was got from Phil Tanner of Gower. Bob Hart's version of the tune differs slightly from Tanner's for whereas the Gower singer begins each

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line with a different melody-phrase, Bob Hart's first three lines repeat the *incipit*. Others have done the same. Seventy years ago, Vaughan Williams heard the tune sung this way by the parish clerk of Willingdale Doe in Essex.

What a Funny Little Place to Have One

Folk Singers don't only sing folk songs. Since Shakespeare's time, maybe long before, their repertory has also included popular songs from the towns. Lyrics from the theatres, pleasure gardens, music halls have lived alongside traditional songs without prejudice or discrimination. So with this comic song of the nineteenth century. 'Fillet-bag' is a corruption of 'philabeg', strictly a Highlander's kilt, but here applied in error to a sporran.

Bold General Wolfe

Some say Wolfe was a young Mozart among generals. Others say he was a cold martinet with small regard for his men. Well, with his army he boldly stormed the heights of Abraham, and it killed him, but he won Canada from the French. That was in 1757. The young general's dramatic death struck the popular imagination and so the song arose and it has lived among traditional singers to this day. Every broadside printer of note issued its words on song sheets throughout the nineteenth century. The tune is a 'folklorized' version of a parlour ballad, Distress

me with these tears no more, published in the 1780s.

The Female Cabin Boy

In the folk songs, a great gallery of girls dressed themselves in men's attire and signed on as soldiers or seamen. Polly of The Female Warrior, that other Polly who called herself Jack Munro, The Female Sailor Bold, Sarah Grey who followed (and shot) the faithless *William Taylor*, are some of the bold female tricksters in transvestite gear, whose fantasy has haunted the minds of single folk for centuries. Miraculously, their enterprise seldom lands them in the kind of trouble experienced by the Female Cabin Boy. But her misfortune is treated as a joke by all, including the captain's equivocal wife.

As I Strolled Out to Aylesbury

On the evidence of the broadside prints, not Aylesbury (Bucks) but Hazelbury (Dorset) is the true scene of this raffish encounter between an inviting country girl and a rambling rake. Perhaps this is a comedown version of the classical ballads such as Crow and Pie, and The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter (in both of these, as in other ballads, British or Continental, when asked his name the seducer gives a vague answer). In some versions of the present song, the young man says he's Micky the

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Drover. James Reeves suggests that the 'Ups and Downs' denominates the 69th Foot Regiment, so the seducer is a soldier. Well, it's a long shot.

The Scarlet and the Blue

Like the comic stage songs, patriotic and pseudo-military songs also took their place happily alongside folk-traditional stuff in the country singers' repertory. This one, composed by John J Blockley in the 1870s was popularised on both sides of the Atlantic by the Irish comedians Ed Harrigan and Tony Hart, who had great feeling for high-toned songs of the 'Conquer or Die' type.

John Barleycorn

The Passion of the Corn was a sacred drama in the minds of ancient Egyptians, and since remote times agricultural peoples have begged the pardon of the grain before they cut it. Our Barleycorn song has become a semi-comic affair, yet it still keeps some of its old ceremonial aura. The song was already in print by 1620, and it has stayed green ever since.

The Miner's Dream of Home

Far more than the California gold rush, it was the Australian rushes from the 'fifties to the 'nineties, from Summer Hill Creek to Kalgoorlie, that hit the

fancy of our makers of sentimental stage songs. The plight of the Englishman roughing it on the goldfields, with frail hope and heavy homesickness, was irresistible. Several parlour ballads of the epoch still linger in the mouths of old-time singers, notably *The Thrush in Australia* and, most favoured of all, *The Miner's Dream of Home*, words by Will Godwin, music by Leo Dryden.

The Young Sailor Cut Down

Eighteenth century broadsides tell the tale in full. A young soldier lies in the infirmary, brought to death by a young woman. He complains: 'Had she but told me before she disordered me, Had she but told me of it in time, I might have got pills and salts of white mercury. Now I'm cut off in the height of my prime.' Though his wounds were got from Venus rather than from his country's enemies, he orders a funeral with military honours. Later versions give us a dying sailor, a rakish girl, a gunned-down cowboy. Perhaps it was that colourful bit of pomp that has ensured the song's long life, for it's among the most vital and widespread of surviving traditional songs.

All Jolly Fellows that Follow the Plough

Of this song, Cecil Sharp said: 'I find that almost every singer knows it. The bad singers often know but little

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else.' Wherever it's been found the words are almost identical with Bob Hart's set. Such is the power of the broadside text first issued by old James Catnach about 1820 and subsequently imitated by a score of stall-ballad printers. A nineteenth century Top of the Pops.

Underneath Her Apron

One of those much-sung, seldom-published songs. The old model of it is a rather elegant, somewhat mysterious song called *Gathering Rushes in the Month of May* (it's on Topic 12T135). Some time in the nineteenth century, *Gathering Rushes* became parodied or ground down into *Underneath her Apron*, and in that shape it has amused three or four generations of country folk, particularly – for some reason – in the stretch between Aldeburgh and the Norfolk Broads.

First published by Topic 1973

Recorded and produced by Tony Engle

Notes by A L Lloyd

Sleeve design and front cover photograph by Tony Engle

This is a field recording made at Snape, Suffolk – July 1972

Topic would like to thank Royston Wood for his assistance in making this recording possible.

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