

# Best O' T' Bunch

## The Oldham Tinkers

(John Howarth, Larry Kearns, Gerry Kearns)

- 1 The Rochdale Mashers**  
*sung by John Howarth (banjo) & Gerry Kearns (guitar),  
acc. Larry Kearns (mandoline)*
- 2 Seeing Double**  
*sung by John Howarth, acc. Larry Kearns (whistle) &  
Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 3 The Pennine Rangers**  
*sung by the Group, acc. Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 4 The Two Jews**  
*sung by Larry Kearns, chorus by John Howarth (banjo) &  
Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 5 A Piecer's Tale**  
*sung by Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 6 Best o' t' Bunch**  
*(words by Harvey Kershaw), sung by John Howarth,  
acc. Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 7 The Lancashire Toreador**  
*sung by John Howarth, chorus by Larry Kearns &  
Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 8 A Cob-Coaling Medley**  
*sung by the Group*
- 9 The Four-Loom Weaver**  
*sung by Gerry Kearns*
- 10 John Willie's Ragtime Band**  
*sung by John Howarth, chorus by Larry & Gerry Kearns*
- 11 Platt's**  
*sung by Larry Kearns, chorus by John Howarth & Gerry Kearns*
- 12 Good Time Coming**  
*sung by Gerry Kearns (guitar), chorus by John Howarth &  
Larry Kearns (mandoline)*
- 13 I Mean to Wait for Jack**  
*sung by John Howarth, acc. Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 14 Skiing Owdham Style**  
*sung by Larry Kearns, acc. Gerry Kearns (guitar)*
- 15 A Mon Like Thee**  
*sung by Gerry Kearns (guitar) & John Howarth (banjo),  
with Larry Kearns (mandoline & chorus)*

First published by Topic 1974  
Recorded at Livingstone Studios  
Produced by Tony Engle

Sleeve design by Ken Lees  
Sleeve illustration by Jim Andrew  
Notes by A L Lloyd and The Oldham Tinkers



---

*About the Performers*

A few years back, when they were students, Gerry and Larry Kearns and John Howarth decided to form themselves into a musical trio called 'The Oldham Tinkers'. They specialise in local songs, ballads and lyrical scraps, suitable for singing in pubs and clubs, parlour parties and Pennine rambles. Their first record, *Oldham's Burning Sands*, was a big success, and many people felt that the salt and savour of South Lancashire, with its tomfooleries and tragedies, was uniquely conveyed by this talented trio. All three of them sing; John Howarth plays banjo and concertina; Larry Kearns plays guitar, mandoline and whistle; Gerry Kearns plays guitar.

*The Rochdale Mashers:* At the end of the nineteenth century, a successful music-hall song concerned two young provincial bucks, 'The Brothers Malone'. Since then, the song has passed into traditional currency, with the scene of the brothers' raffish exploits variously altered to Belfast, Bristol, Bury, Ashton, and here finally, Rochdale. It hardly matters. The song fits any place where the beer is bright and the girls are buxom. As in Rochdale.

*Seeing Double:* A latterday ballad of chivalry. Daring knight meets simple country maid. For once, no gentle romance ensues nor any seduction scene that leaves the maid lamenting while the knight rides off grinning under his visor. Instead, we are presented with a bit of cottage humour with an ironical edge to it.

*The Pennine Rangers:* Laurie Cassidy and Francis Connor are a couple of hikers, jokers and songsters. In the fifties, with a bunch of friends, they formed a rambling club called 'The Pennine Rangers'. They swear that, when hiking, they lived mainly on beans. Laurie Cassidy's brother John wrote the song to celebrate their endurance. Since then it has often rung out over the rolling hills and the reeling saloon bars.

*The Two Jews:* For at least a hundred years, students and other connoisseurs of daftness have found this song irresistible. It's based, of course, on the parable of Dives and Lazarus (16 Luke 19-26, if you want the reference). Gerry and Larry Kearns heard it as kids, sung every year at the family Christmas party by their father and his brothers.

*A Piecer's' Tale:* The piecer's task was to re-tie the cotton thread if it snapped as it travelled from bobbin to paper cop, in the refining process. In the nineteenth century, the piecers were often children. Especially in the smaller, more secluded mills on either side of the Pennines, the child-labourers were victims of long hours and harsh treatment. Says E P Thompson, noted historian of the working class: 'The exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history.' The little song here (words from a broadside, tune by Gerry Kearns) puts the case poignantly.

*Best o' t' Bunch:* 'Gallows humour' is a special kind of black fun well suited to the Lancashire dialect and temperament. Harvey Kershaw, heir to the great tradition of Edwin Waugh, Ben Brierley, Sam Laycock, wrote this one, a set of ironic cameos, depicting a raffish family, and threaded on to a hempen rope.

---

*The Lancashire Toreadors:* One of George Formby's better pieces. It's image of the flat-capped Lancastrian, popeyed amid the pomp and circumstance of the Spanish bullring, his limbs scattered by the bull, but nonetheless triumphing as the champion Don Juan of the Castillian castles, that endears this song to the Oldham Tinkers.

*A Cob-Coaling Medley:* At one time, around Hallowe'en, great fire festivals associated with the cult of the dead took place all over England. Nowadays they've mostly died away or become 'rationalised' into Guy Fawkes celebrations. Lancashire in particular was a great area for ceremonial fires, and at the end of October, until some seventy years ago, huge fires could be seen on the hills all round the horizon. Fuel for the fires would be gathered partly by children, often disguised, who went in bands from door to door, some to wish luck, some to threaten slow givers, some for impish daftness. These are a tiny selection from a treasury that runs into scores of cob-coaling anthems.

*The Four-Loom Weaver:* The song, originally called The Poor Cotton Wayver, was published on a broadsheet during the depression years that followed the close of the Napoleonic Wars. It's one of the striking documents of the Industrial Revolution. In a shortened and re-made form, it was popularised by Ewan MacColl some twenty-five years ago, in the earliest days of the folk song revival, and that is the form in which it is sung here.

---

*John Willie's Ragtime Band:* Already in the early years of the present century a number of kazoo bands came into being, notably in the coalmining and textile areas, though it wasn't until the Depression years of the 1930s that they attained their full flourish. By then, the music was made partly as a means of filling in the empty workless hours, and partly as a fundraiser to supplement the meagre dole. Originally, they were simply carnival bands, and as such they still turn out in force at Oldham's annual carnival. George Formby senior first recorded this song in 1916, when kazoo bands were popular in the Wigan neighbourhood. 'Ragtime' doesn't mean Scott Joplin; it merely means 'bizarre'. The bizarre kazoo.

*Platt's:* Platt Brothers is a leading textile engineering firm with its roots in Oldham. The Oldham Tinkers found the words of the song in a local library, apparently in the handwriting of the man, a mechanic working for Platt's, who wrote it in 1884. Alas, the copy has since disappeared from the library, and the Tinkers can't recall the last verse. So here is the song without its end.

*Good Time Coming:* The Oldham Tinkers learnt this when taking part in a radio documentary about the Industrial Revolution. Its theme, a reflection of hard times and hope for change, is valid for our own times.

*I Mean to Wait for Jack:* An oleograph from the early nineteenth century. Boy and girl, working in the mill, are too poor to marry. Jack is recruited for the Peninsular War and only returns many years later, crippled for life. But a brave face is put on it, and the wedding bells ring out. The song is from a broadside published by Bebbington of Oldham Road, Manchester, c.1850

---

*Skiing Owdham Style:* The completion, at great expense, of a floodlit artificial ski-slope at Counthill, gave rise to comment, mostly ironical. At the time of writing (1973) it is littered with rubbish, much overgrown, and handy for children to negotiate the slope on sheets of cardboard, planks, or the hulks of prams. The song, however, gives it all the pretensions, trimmings and ice-blue hue of a winter sports centre.

*A Mon Like Thee:* The Oldham Tinkers recorded a version of this song on the album *Deep Lancashire* but they were dissatisfied with it as learnt from sundry singers in various Oldham pubs. Particularly the ending seemed unsatisfactory. However, the original ending was subsequently supplied by Jack Carey, an authority on local song, and his evidence was corroborated by the son of the song's author - Edmund Hill, from St Helens. So here's the song as it was meant to be.

Digital remaster ©2009 Topic Records Ltd.  
©2012 Topic Records Ltd.  
The copyright in this sound recording  
and digital artwork is owned by Topic Records Ltd.  
All rights reserved.

