

Bob Hart Percy Webb Ernest Austin



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FLASH COMPANY
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Seventy years ago Ralph Vaughan Williams collected his first folksong when he noted Bushes and Briars from Mr Pottipher of Ingrave, near Brentwood in Essex. To Vaughan Williams it was a labour of love, 'I could imagine a much less profitable way of spending a long winter evening,' he wrote, 'than in the parlour of a country inn taking one's turn at the mug of 'four-ale' in the rare company of minds imbued with that fine sense which comes from advancing years and a life-long communion with nature – and with the ever-present chance of picking up some rare old ballad or an exquisitely beautiful melody, worthy, within its small compass, of a place beside the finest compositions of the greatest composers.' Although collectors were then active in other parts of England time has shown that it is only in East Anglia that such traditions now remain to anything like a similar extent.

The Irish composer E J Moeran, who had collected songs from Harry Cox in the 1920s, returned to Norfolk and Suffolk in 1948 and was surprised to find at least one Suffolk pub where 'every Saturday night the company, male and female, assemble in a low ceilinged room, and through a haze of smoke from strong shag tobacco the chairman can be seen presiding over the singsong (or 'frolic' in local parlance) calling in turn for a contribution on those of the company he sees fit to honour'. On this present recording the singers are elderly and it is interesting

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to note what Moeran had to say on this subject. 'One of the singers there was a man of about fifty who learned his songs from his father. The latter was also present, singing in the quavering and asthmatic tones of old age, but it was only recently that he had allowed the young man of fifty ... to 'perform in public' for he was determined that he must acquire the true traditional style, uncontaminated by outside influences, before so doing.'

Ernest Austin is now 83 years of age and he lives in a small village to the east of Colchester in Essex. He left school at 12 to work as a kitchen boy in a farmhouse, earning 3/6d in return for a 60-hour week. For most of his early life he worked on the land as a farm labourer until, with experience, he became an agricultural engineer, retiring at the age of 70.

Percy Webb has also spent most of his working life on the land. He was born in 1897 at Herningstone, a small Suffolk village where his father was a shepherd. Percy fought in the Great War as an infantryman in the Royal West Kents, seeing service in France and later in India. On his return he settled for agricultural work and joined the Framlingham Horse Society in 1937, the experience that he had gained working with horses standing him in good stead. Now aged 77 he still works in a chemist's shop in Woodbridge. Percy learnt most of his songs from his father, who not only

sang but played the concertina, accordion and mouth organ as well and, like his father before him, he may still be heard singing at weekends in his local pub.

Bob Hart is another singer who likes to perform in company. He was born in 1892 and, although originally a farm worker, he left home to work on the steam trawlers that fished the east coast of Britain from Grimsby to the Shetlands and back. His songs, and he knows more than a few, were picked up from work mates and casual acquaintances as well as from friends and relatives at home. A further selection from his repertoire can be heard on his solo album Bob Hart (Topic 12TS225).

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The Bold Princess Royal

The Bold Princess Royal has long been a popular song among seafaring folk, not only in Britain, but all along the Maritime Provinces of North America as well. The '*bold Princess Royal*' features in a number of mid-eighteenth century ballads, some based on fact, others – like this one – apparently fictional. Most current versions derive ultimately from a Catnach broadside published some time before 1838. Structurally it owes something to another sea song, *The Coast of High Barbary* which, in turn, appears to be based on an older ballad, *The George Aloe and the Sweepstake*, Child 285. Indeed, some singers confuse the two songs to such an extent that, at times, it is impossible to tell just which vessel they are singing about!

Seventeen Come Sunday

On the surface a simple song in which a girl offers her favours to a young man, following a brief discourse. In 1790 Robert Burns printed it under the title *A Waukrife Minnie* (meaning: *A Wakeful Mother*) commenting 'I picked up this old song and tune from a country girl at Nithsdale. I never met with it elsewhere in Scotland! This version includes the following verse:

O weary fa the waukrife cock,

And the fonmart lay his crawin!
He waukend the auld wife frae her sleep,
A wee blink or the dawin.

which prompted Professor Child to suggest a relationship with the classic ballad of *The Grey Cock*; and, in fact, it would seem that the song is linked with the vast body of night visiting songs which are well known throughout Europe. Another strange fact is the apparently meaningless chorus. Meaningless today that is. Past singers chanted a chorus which included the names of the herbs rue and thyme. A remnant, perhaps, of a once magical incantation? Whatever its origins, the song has turned up time and time again in the mouths of country singers who have no doubt been influenced by the numerous broadsides issued by such printers as Bebbington of Manchester, Forth of Pocklington and Henry Parker Such of London.

The Faithful Sailor Boy

The Faithful Sailor Boy is one of those songs which the early folksong collectors tended to ignore. However the Scottish collector Gavin Greig, to his credit, included it in his *Folk-Song of the North East* with the note, 'Both the sentiment and the language show it to be quite modern. The tune too appears to be modern although it may be older than it looks.' Another

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version, sung by George Spicer of Selsfield in Sussex, can be heard on the record *Blackberry Fold* (Topic 12T235).

Flash Company

Flash Company was first noted in Limerick, sung to the tune of *The Green Bushes*, in the mid 1850s. Most collected versions seem somehow incomplete, suggesting that at some time or other, an unknown broadside printer had assembled a number of loosely related verses in order to form a 'new' song, thus fixing its present form. Some singers call it *The Yellow Handkerchief*, others *First I Loved Thomas*. Dr George Gardiner collected a version in Hampshire in 1906 and Walter Ford found it in Surrey the following summer. For some reason the song has survived best in East Anglia. Also among gipsies in Southern England, many of whom can recall part, if not all, of it. As will be readily noticed, this version shares its tune with Bob Hart's set of *The Bold 'Princess Royal'*.

Wheel Your P'rambulator

Ask an elderly singer for an 'old' song and chances are that he will oblige with something akin to *Wheel Your P'rambulator*. The Victorian and Edwardian music halls produced songs like this by the hundreds, sung by popular and accomplished performers such as Gus Elen, Dan Leno and Marie Lloyd. Not folksongs of

course, but often good songs, nevertheless.

Go and Leave Me

Go and Leave me or Fond Affection, as it is often called, is well known throughout Britain and North America. Gavin Greig found that it was popular in Aberdeenshire at the turn of the century and Superintendent Ord of the Glasgow City Police included a set in his noted collection of *Bothy Songs and Ballads*. It is particularly widespread in America (Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina) and has been called by the distinguished Missouri folklorist H M Belden 'a favourite among songs of disappointed love'.

Rap-a-Tap-Tap

The Farmer's Servant has been collected infrequently from tradition. Not that it is all that rare. Most singers in East Anglia have either a version of it or of the related *Chandler's Wife* song. Gardiner noted it once in Hampshire in 1905, but in general country singers have preferred to keep it to themselves, feeling no doubt that it was not the sort of thing which they should sing in 'respectable' company. Bob's tune, in common with most, is a version of the well-known *Lincolnshire Poacher*.

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The Song of the Thrush

In the 1850s the Australian goldfields attracted a vast number of emigrants, their exodus from Britain being perhaps encouraged by several broadsides which were issued on the subject. One 'catchpenny' in particular told of a huge consignment of gold that had been lost in Victoria, and many an unsuccessful digger must have regretted the day that he first read such a sheet. *The Song of the Thrush* was written in retrospect by George Le Brunn, who also wrote *If It Wasn't For the Houses in Between*, gained a tremendous success on the British music hall stage, and it is still met with quite often today although, rather surprisingly, it does not appear to have been collected in Australia itself.

John Barleycorn

Early folklore scholars, preoccupied with solar myths and prehistoric vegetative rituals, saw in the ballad of John Barleycorn the embodiment of some ancient fertility rite in which a human sacrifice was offered in return for the promise of abundant crops. It's a theory which does not hold much weight today, and most authorities regard it, not in terms of fertility, but simply as an account of the planting, reaping, threshing, milling and brewing of the barleycorn. Nevertheless it is an old song. One version, titled

Allane-a-maut, is known from a Scottish manuscript of 1568, while a blackletter broadside telling the tale of Sir John Barleycorne, Sir Richard Beer and Sir William Whitewine was licensed to be printed on December 14th 1624. It is a song which has remained popular with many singers and one which is included annually in the Lincolnshire mid-winter Haxey Hood custom.

The Gipsy's Warning

Although *The Gipsy's Warning* is a relatively recent song which turns up in the repertoire of many traditional singers, we know little about its origin. It appears to have been first printed in America in 1864, the music 'arranged by Henry A Coard', although by 1892 the copyright has passed to one D S Holmes. In 1896 the song was sufficiently well known to form the basis of a Broadway melodrama of the same name. In a way *The Gipsy's Warning* has already carved its own niche in history, as in 1878 it became the first song to be transmitted over the telephone, Thomas Augustus Watson singing it at a demonstration organised by the pioneer Alexander Graham Bell.

Hares on the Mountain/The Knife in the Window

The Hindu scriptures tell us of gods, in pursuit of one another, transforming themselves first into one

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thing, then into another. It's an ancient belief which has spread into various parts of the world, including Europe, and one which has survived in Britain in the shape of a rare ballad *The Twa Magicians*. Cecil Sharp found it once, sung in 1904 by a blacksmith in Minehead. He also found another song *Hares on the Mountain* sung in several parts of Somerset. As is the case with Ernest Austin's version, some of Sharp's texts are linked with another song *Sally My Dear*, which Sharp believed to be an integral part of the later song. Although now rare, other versions are occasionally met with and I have recently recorded a set from an elderly singer in Berkshire.

Barbara Allen

Of all our classic ballads none has proved so popular as this present tale. In 1666 Pepys praised the singing of Mrs Knipp and her 'little Scotch song of Barbary Allen' and, a century later, Goldsmith was compelled to write, 'The music of the finest singer is dissonance to what I felt when an old dairy-maid sang me into tears with 'Johnny Armstrong's Last Good-night' or 'The Cruelty of Barbara Allen'. Strange really when one considers just how feeble the plot is, and how weak the characters. Bob Hart knows two versions of the ballad – this, which he learnt as a youth, and 'a longer version which came in later'

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The recordings of Bob Hart and Ernest Austin are in stereo; those of Percy Webb are mono. It is regretted that the recording quality on the Percy Webb recordings is not as high as it might be. Unfortunately the tapes used were several years old and were copies of originals which had been destroyed before they could become available to Topic. The quality of Percy Webb's singing on these tracks, we feel, outweighs the loss of fidelity.

Photography: Bob Hart – Alan Martindale
Ernest Austin – Tony Engle
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Bob Hart



Percy Webb

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Ernest Austin

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