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**SONGS FROM THE EEL'S
FOOT
JUMBO BRIGHTWELL**
Traditional Songs and
Ballads from Suffolk

Jumbo Brightwell

Songs from the Eel's Foot



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William Brightwell was born in 1900 in the small village of Little Glenham, Suffolk, one of eleven children. While a youngster, he became friendly with an old sailor from the village known as Jumbo Poacher, and when the old man died the nickname stuck with the boy.

Outside the family, Jumbo's first contact with the local music was at the age of eight when he remembers standing outside the Glenham Lion looking after the horses and carts for the local shepherds and listening to their singing coming from the cellar. Some of their songs which he picked up, in addition to a bottle of ginger beer as a reward, he still sings to this day.

He first started work at the age of thirteen as a bird-scarer on a farm at nearby Blaxhall and worked there until his father, a platelayer, moved the family to Leiston in 1916.

After a spell of two years in the Army of Occupation, he returned to Leiston in 1919 to work as a bricklayer's labourer. It was not long after that he began to visit the local pubs with his father and elder brother, Bob, and they would regularly cycle across the fields about two-and-a-half miles to the Eel's Foot Inn at Eastbridge. 'We didn't miss many Saturday nights.'

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As at many local pubs, Saturday nights were for singing and the Eel's Foot was no exception, having a Chairman – Philip Lumpton – who would keep the tiny bar in order with a gavel or the cribbage board and the ruling was that everyone had 'to sing, say or pay'. Jumbo however remembers one chap, a steamroller driver, who 'whenever it was his turn to sing someone would generally pay him a tanner not to – he wasn't all that good.' The money went into a kitty to supply the singers with beer which had to be brought by hand from the cellar to the bar, one pint at a time.

Jumbo, with many songs from his father (a fine delicate singer nicknamed 'Velvet') and childhood acquaintances, soon became a regular singer at the Eel's Foot, in company with older men such as Diddy and Carter Cook, William Smith and Jack and Edgar Button. There was also generally an accordion player – Boxer Fairweather – or one of the Seamen Family or Jack Button on fiddle to provide the music for step-dancing at which his brother, Bob, excelled.

In June 1939 Jumbo and the other singers were recorded by A L Lloyd for the BBC and this recording was subsequently broadcast.

In addition to singing Jumbo was also an expert at steel quoits, helping Theberton to win the Suffolk

Challenge Cup four times. They travelled to many of the local pubs such as the Middleton Bell, Snape Quay, Friston Chequers, Marlesford Bell and Blaxhall Ship for matches which generally finished with a sing-song and it was at such functions that Jumbo was able to pick up many of the songs which took his fancy – 'I wouldn't have to hear a song more than twice before I had it.'

However, shortly after the Second World War the Eel's Foot changed ownership and the singing died out – Jumbo himself stopped singing publicly about ten years ago at about the same time he retired from his job as a rail shunter, after twenty years' service.

Keith Summers

The Flower of London Although Jumbo calls this song *The Flower of London* it is far better known either as *The Young Sailor Bold* or as *The Rich Merchant's Daughter*. John Pitts printed it in the early 1800s and John Ashton reprinted a broadside text in his book *Modern Street Ballads* (1888). Lucy Broadwood collected the song in Sussex in 1901 and printed it in the following year's *Folk Song Society Journal*, while subsequent sets have been noted in Nova Scotia, Michigan and New York State.

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The Derby Miller *The Derby Miller*, often called *The Miller's Will*, began life as a medieval tale. Converted into a ballad, it appeared as a blackletter broadside (c.1730) called *The Miller's Advice to his Three Sons in Taking of Toll*. Peter Kennedy collected the song for the BBC in Boscastle, Cornwall, and in his book *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland* (1975) notes that 'in many places the tradition is to imitate the clatter of the mill by working the hands and elbows on the table during the chorus.'

The Loss of the Ramillies According to the song collector Alfred Williams, HMS Ramillies, a man o'war, was lost on the Bolt Head, a promontory on the coast of South Devon on February 15th 1760. Seven hundred and thirty four persons are reported to have been lost and only twenty-six men saved from the wreck. At least three songs commemorate the event – our present one, which George Gardiner also collected in Dorset in 1906; *The Fate of the Ramillies*, which was printed by Henry Parker Such in the 1860s and which was found by Alfred Williams being sung in the Thames Valley sometime prior to the Great War; and *The Fatal Ramillies* a broadside by James Catnach of Seven Dials.

The Green Mossy Banks of the Lea Of *The Green Mossy Banks of the Lea* Lucy Broadwood was able to write in 1899, 'The words are astonishingly popular

amongst country singers', and her words are almost as true today for the song turns up again and again in the mouths of country singers. Although Jumbo believes that the song refers to the River Lea which flows through North London – the song's narrator having left County Kildare for England – earlier versions suggest that it was the River Lee in Co. Cork which provided the inspiration for the song. Jumbo's tune is used for several Irish songs, many of which are well known in England, including *Bold Reynard the Fox* and *Dick Derby the Cobbler*.

Blow the Candle Out While *Blow the Candle Out* appeared on many 19th century broadsides – Catnach, John Gilbert of Newcastle and John Harkness of Preston all printed the song – it first appeared in volume 6 of Tom Durfey's *Pills to Purge Melancholy* which was printed in 1720. The song's popularity was such that Catnach, a wily old printer with a good nose for earning an extra copper or two, issued a follow-up sheet *Blow the Candle In*, a rather risqué send-up of the original. Jumbo's tune is often used for the song *The Banks of Sweet Dundee*.

The Bold Princess Royal Although several mid-18th century ballads mention a 'bold Princess Royal', our present song derives ultimately from a Catnach broadside of sometime prior to 1838. Perhaps the birth of Queen Victoria's daughter, the Princess

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Royal, had something to do with the song's success. Versions have turned up not only along the British seaboard but also in the Maritime Provinces of North America as well, and one version of this seafaring ballad, titled *The Lorena Bold Crew*, has even been reported from the mountains of North Carolina.

Newry Town *Newry Town*, in the eyes of the English folksong scholar Margaret Dean Smith, is the 'archetype of the execution ballad'. It has been collected extensively in England and Ireland and sets have also been noted in Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina and Tennessee. Jumbo's reference to 'Fielding's gang' is interesting, in that the novelist Henry Fielding, who was appointed Chief Magistrate of Westminster in 1748, formed London's first policemen, the Bow Street Runners, in 1751. Another version of this song, sung by the late Bob Scarce of Blaxhall in Suffolk, can be heard on the record Fair Game and Foul (Topic 12T195).

The Indian Lass Broadside printers, ever eager to sell their wares, were quick to exploit the unusual and exotic in their stall ballads. How many rural labourers, I wonder, dreamed of chasing buffalo on the American plains or of swimming naked with an aborigine girl in a cool Australian river, solely as a result of hearing about such events in a village sing-song? Frank Kidson, who noted several sets

of *The Indian Lass* in Yorkshire, felt that the song narrated in simple language 'the joys of a sailor's life ashore'. More likely, however, it reflected the fertile imagination of some printer's hack who produced the song for James Catnach who included it in his 1830 catalogue. The song seems to have begun life as an account of a meeting in the American backwoods between a pioneer and a Red Indian girl. Later it was adapted, perhaps by Pacific whalers, with its scene changed to the South Seas. Jumbo's version has bits of both sets in it.

Muddley Barracks *Muddley Barracks* is popular with folksingers, if not with folksong collectors, few of whom seem to have chosen to write the song down. It's a pity because, in its own way, the song gives us a far better insight into army ways than any number of patriotic pieces – such as *Drink Old England Dry* – could ever do. In Norfolk the song is usually known as *Bungay Town*, whilst in Oxfordshire the well known Cantwell Family of Standlake call it *The Yorkshire Blinder*.

The False Hearted Knight *The False Hearted Knight*, or *Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight*, to use Professor Child's title, is one of the most ancient and mysterious of all the classic ballads. Its origins lie lost in the Steppes of Central Asia, from whence it

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came, spreading into Eastern Europe where medieval church frescoes are still to be seen depicting aspects of the ballad's story. The ballad may have spread with migrating gypsies, many of whom sing it today, although the version printed by John Pitts in the early 1800s had an important effect in stabilising the ballad's present form. One elderly gypsy, Mary Ann Haynes, can be heard singing her version on the record *Songs of the Open Road* (Topic 12T253) while Fred Jordan, a Shropshire farm worker, sings a version which he learnt as a boy from a family of gypsies who were camped on Wenlock Edge, which can be heard on the record *When the Frost is on the Pumpkin* (Topic 12T233).

The Lost Heiress In the classic ballad of *The Gypsy Laddie* we hear tell of a rich lady who volunteers to leave her castle and family to roam with a wandering band of gypsies. Our present song, often called *The Lost Lady Found*, tells of an heiress who is stolen by gypsies and, like *The Gypsy Laddie*, it has survived well in tradition – no doubt on account of the Such Family of broadside printers, who included it in their late 19th century songsters. The late Harry Cox of Norfolk sang this song, as did 'Pop' Maynard of Copthorne in Sussex, and Harry's fine version is included in Peter Kennedy's *Folksongs of Britain and*

Ireland (1975).

Down in the Fields Where the Buttercups Grow

Many country singers have *Down in the Fields* in their repertoire, no doubt as a result of the song being recorded in the early 1930s by the north country comedian Charlie Higgins. It's the kind of song that country singers love and is still a firm favourite in many a Suffolk pub.

Rambleaway Versions of *Rambleaway* have been collected in Devonshire by the Reverend Baring Gould, in Dorset by the Hammond Brothers, in Hampshire by George Gardiner, in Somerset by Cecil Sharp and in Yorkshire by Frank Kidson. Peter Kennedy recorded a version for the BBC from Alec Bloomfield of Framlingham in Suffolk who, unlike Jumbo, places the song's activity in Burlington Fair – a corruption of Birmingham Fair, the title given to the song by early 19th century broadside printers such as Jackson of Birmingham. Unlike other singers, Jumbo uses the well known *Villikins and Dinah* tune for his set of words.

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The Life of a Man

First I'll compare (man) to a tree,
Which you sometimes all green may see;
Bit suddenly his leafes doe fall
That he was beautify'd withall.

These lines, printed by Frances Coules sometime during the period 1646-74, form part of a long blackletter broadside *The Life of Man – concerning how fickle his estate doth stand, flourishing like a Tree, a Vine, or dainty Flower*. The comparison of man's life to that of a tree was not, however, new even in the 17th century. More than two thousand years earlier Homer had written, 'As leaves on trees, such is the life of man' and, for all we know, this notion may have been old then. *The Life of a Man* was printed on numerous 19th century broadsides which possibly explains why it turns up fairly frequently today. I recently recorded a similar version from Harry Holman of Copthorne in Sussex, and this can be heard on the record *When Sheepshearing's Done* (Topic 12T254).

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Notes by Keith Summers and Mike Yates

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Other front sleeve photographs show Jumbo – centre front - member of Theberton quoits team and at his job on the railways in the 1950s.

Sleeve design by Tony Engle

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