

# The Collier Lad

## Johnny Handle

*with*

Alistair Anderson, *English concertina*

Tommy Gilfellon, *Guitar*

Colin Ross, *fiddle*

Johnny *plays guitar, accordeon & piano*

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### In Bye

- 1 **The Collier Lad \***
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- 3 **The Durham Big Meetin' Day**
- 4 **The Old Man of the Village**
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\* ably assisted by the rest of the High Level Ranters  
± with Alistair Anderson, chorus

First published by Topic 1975  
Recorded in Newcastle, April 1975  
Recorded and Produced by Tony Engle  
Photographs by Tommy Gilfellon



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Here's an LP of contemporary songs. They are written about things which have happened to me, or stories which I have been told by local people in and around Tyneside. The record reflects many facets of North Eastern life, from the ancient background of mining lore to the ship-yards, 'D' villages and the boisterous gregarious Geordie.

I tend to write songs in many different ways - sometimes to record one experience, sometimes to crystallise thoughts on aspects of local life, and sometimes to air a particular grievance. I hope that in the balance here, a picture of the North East emerges through the language of the people.

Most of the songs on this record are printed in *The Johnny Handle Songbook* published by Spin Publications

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### ***In Bye - at the coal face***

#### **The Collier Lad**

Written 1958. A description of a day in the working life of a 'filler' or 'collier'. Their job was to shovel fired-down coal on to a conveyor belt, working in the height of the coal seam. They also set pit props in the space left. Although there were many other jobs in the three-shift system of coal-getting, the colliers considered themselves the real 'miners'; the song reflects this jaunty attitude.

#### **Dust**

Written 1964. If a machine breaks down in the mine, there is a great outcry because production is hindered. If a spray nozzle is not effective, or a heavy 'reek' (after-explosion dust) is in the air, production still goes on. Thus, even in modern mines, dust in the lungs is a hazard. Dedicated to Jack Elliott of Birtley.

#### **Durham Big Meetin' Day**

Written in 1961, after a visit to the event. This is the great meeting place of the Durham miners, and to attend is a moving experience.

#### **Old Man of the Village**

Written 1971. Planning authorities in County Durham decided to label certain communities 'D Villages', where the pit had closed. This meant development was prohibited and much property was condemned, or compulsorily purchased and demolished. Many of these communities are active, warm groups of people who have established within themselves a dignity and relationship which would take many generations to create in a new estate. Dedicated to High Spen villagers who fought the 'D' tag and won.

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### **The New Spotlight**

Written 1965. Officials at a colliery have specially polished reflectors on their cap lamps which help inspection of roof machinery, supports and men. This song is about an incident where the lamp-cabin man was over zealous with a workman's reflector. As the bright beam could be seen for a long way, 'gaffers' could be easily spotted by the workmen.

### **Farewell to the Monty**

Written 1957, about the closure of the Montagu Colliery, Denton. A colliery with a chequered history, the Monty Pit had survived explosions, floods, loss of coal due to geological conditions, strikes and lockouts. Miners frequently have a love-hate relationship with their pits.

### **Stottin Doon the Waal**

Written 1959. A typical pitlad's Friday night out. The wall is the long ropeworks wall at Wallsend, and the pit - the Rising Sun Colliery. The Penny Wet is a pub, and the 'Mem', a dance hall - the Memorial Hall.

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### ***On Bank - on the surface***

#### **The Day we went to the Coast**

Written 1959. The seaside is only a short journey away from most parts of urban Tyneside. In my youth it was a ritual to travel in a family or street 'herd' to follow the call of the sun, the sand, and the 'bracing' sea, on the electric train. Seafront shelter accommodation was always sparse.

#### **Schooldays**

Written 1967, after attending a teachers training college to retrain for a 'career' in education. This is quite a personal song, based on my own memories and experiences.

#### **Is there owt secure?**

Written 1960, as part of a series of songs for a television documentary on a Sunderland ship-yard. The song reflects the insecurity of the workers' womenfolk.

#### **The Old Pubs**

Written 1963, as part of a set of songs for a radio programme on 'the pub'. The songs were linked by spoken words collected with a tape recorder from people in Tyneside and Belfast. Dedicated to the memory of the 'Brass Man', Collingwood Street, Newcastle.

#### **Decorating**

Written 1974. Perhaps the hardest cross a husband has to bear is the job of decorating a house, and the attendant dislocation of routine and disturbance of furniture and comfort. To be sung with feeling after painting a ceiling for the third time.

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### **The Fearless Mariner**

Written 1960, about a trip around Bridlington Bay in a pleasure boat.

### **Danny's**

Written 1971. My own local in the village had the same landlord, Danny Brannigan for 15 years. It has all the atmosphere a pub should have - friendliness, good beer, darts, dominoes, and a piano. Also cheap beer compared with many other parts of the country.



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I started getting interested in music when I was sent to piano lessons at the age of eight. Six years later I was able to read music very slowly and had a compelling urge to play the trumpet. To avoid the continued drudge of trying to make sense of written music, I started to play the piano by ear and progressed to playing in a New Orleans style jazz band at the age of 16. From there, my musical interests expanded to playing trumpet, bass, guitar and banjo, and from jazz to dance music, cabaret, and skiffle.

In 1957, whilst singing blues and country and western songs at the New Orleans Club, Newcastle, I met Louis Killen of Gateshead, who was performing American folk music. He persuaded me that a Folk Club was a good thing to have, so we started one in Newcastle. I worked in the coal mines at the time, as a mine surveyor, and having started to learn local songs, felt it was a natural extension to write about North East life in the present. As my interest in British folk music grew, so new instruments were acquired - melodeon, accordeon and eventually Northumbrian Pipes. A folk group was formed within our club, in which I play the accordeon. The group, called 'The High Level Ranters' is still going twelve years later, in 1975, as is the folk club, Folk Song & Ballad, Newcastle. As well as performing solo, I spend much of my time playing with the group at concerts, festivals, folk clubs, and ceilidhs. After twelve years in mining, I decided to become a teacher, so my recent songs tend to be more about local life than just mining topics. The heritage of the North East is large and varied, and yet there's still room for many more new songs today. I hope these few songs have added to it in some small way.

*Johnny Handle*

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