



The Oldham Tinkers

For Old Time's Sake

John Howarth, *vocal, banjo*
Larry Kearns, *vocal, whistle, mandolin*
Gerry Kearns, *vocal, guitar*

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Signora

Vocal **John Howarth;**
Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**
Mandolin **Larry Kearns**

Though by no means an Oldham song *Signora* lends itself very easily to John's Oldham interpretation as well as to guitar and mandolin accompaniment. *Signora* was a favourite song of pub singers in Oldham between the wars and both John and Larry have heard it sung recently by pensioners in Oldham pubs. The song was written and composed by Merson, O' Connor and Ross and was originally sung by Billy Merson. It was copyrighted in 1919 by Francis, Day and Hunter.

Eaur Joe's Lad

Vocal and Guitar **Gerry Kearns**

Eaur Joe's Lad was written by Cliff Gerrard, whom Gerry always describes as "a dialect poet; and a good 'un". Cliff wrote the piece as a poem and Gerry later added the music. In his sensitivity, cleverly disguised by northern humour, Cliff depicts the frustrations and disappointments of a St Helens father unable to determine the sex of his offspring. When Gerry sings this song in concert, audiences often display as much relief as Joe himself.

John Willie's Horse

Vocal **John Howarth;**
Guitar and Chorus **Gerry Kearns;**
Mandolin, Whistle and Chorus **Larry Kearns**

Just as in Topic LP *Oldham's Burning Sands* the Oldham Tinkers implied a contrast between the splendour of the Orient and the reality of Oldham, so here we have a metaphor in song involving a cowboy tune and John Willie's Horse; a kind of Oldham Trigger, with the town and indeed Ascot too, as its oyster. Larry, who wrote the song, declares when on stage that John Willie's horse was reared by Joe Batey on his ranch behind the Delta Mill, near where he and John went to school. Adding to the fun of the song is the fact that the trio has resurrected the John Willie often heralded by George Formby and his father.

Barefoot Days Medley

Vocals **John Howarth, Gerry Kearns and Larry Kearns;**
Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**
Banjo **John Howarth;**
Mandolin **Larry Kearns**

The two songs which comprise this medley may seem poles apart, but the Oldham Tinkers feel justified in connecting them. John and Larry were born at the end of the War. Gerry was born four years later. All three had untroubled, happy childhoods, reaping the benefits of the relief and calm which were manifest in the late forties. The first half of the medley is indicative of a genuine, carefree childhood. Incidentally, the people mentioned in the first half of the medley are real people, as they were when the song was sung and skipped to in the streets by the little girls. Larry Kearns recognised the song only a few years ago when he heard it in a school yard. The generation of the parents of the Oldham Tinkers did not have life so cushy as the lads themselves. It had known the

rigours of two world wars, the hardship of the depressions during the twenties and the thirties and in fact has a lot to bemoan. However, the people of this older generation would rather look for sparks of happiness amidst fires of unhappiness than dwell on past hardship. It is to do with this attitude to life that *Barefoot Days* became the favourite of all tap-room songs in Oldham. Never a family gathering or a Christmas party goes by without a rendering of *Barefoot Days*. Like the children's songs which begin the medley, *Barefoot Days* portrays an ecstatically happy childhood. But the happy childhood is so transparent. It's a made-up one. It's the kind of childhood which our parents' generation would have loved to have spent, but didn't. However their generation is a proud one and would never admit to having missed out on anything. The contrast lies between the two childhoods: one really happy, the other, happy but not true.

Lancashire Witches

Vocal **Larry Kearns;**

Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**

Chorus **Larry, John and Gerry**

In past centuries witchcraft has often been to the fore in Lancashire. In Elizabethan times and during the first half of the seventeenth century witch persecution raged, especially in Lancashire. Perhaps the fact that in this county Catholicism was strong and Puritan zeal particularly energetic, had something to do with it. A bishop of the time reported that in one Lancashire village the number of witches was greater than the number of houses. Notable witch trials in Lancashire took place in 1612 (21 persons) and 1633 (20 persons). In the latter instance the troubles began when a boy, Edmund Robinson, invented a fantastic story to save himself a whipping for delaying to bring home his father's cows. Since those times, however, to most of us, a witch is somebody to be found in story books. The term witch

has lost most of its evil significance. There was even a train called "The Lancashire Witch". The witches referred to in this song are the lasses of Lancashire. (All Lancashire; not the new revised one). The song is a monument and tribute to their femininity, beauty and their beguiling qualities. We took the words from John Harland's "Ballads and Songs of Lancashire" (London, 1865).

Come Whoam to Thi Childer an' Me

Vocal **John Howarth;**

Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**

Mandolin **Larry Kearns**

Many of the great North West dialect poets moralized heavily in their works. They purposely sought to promote a high moral standard of behaviour. Quickly called to mind are Oldham's J.T. Taylor, Ammon Wrigley, Sam Fitton and Samuel Laycock. Currently, their successors, Harvey Fitton, Harvey Kershaw, Cliff Gerrard and many others are perpetuating this tradition. This song was obviously aimed to prick the consciences of those whose drinking habits keep them away from their families. The first four verses are supposed to be sung by a woman as she entices her husband from the pub. The remaining two verses comprise the husband's apologetic but comforting reply.

John sings the song rather than Gerry or Larry because he has been dragged out of the most pubs. Edwin Waugh (1817-90) wrote these verses. In 1855 he published his first volume of prose under the title "Sketches of Lancashire Life and Character", and some 12 months later *Come Whoam to Thi Childer an' Me* appeared in the "Manchester Examiner". It was first scribbled out hurriedly while Waugh was in the coffee room of the old Clarence Hotel, Spring Gardens, Manchester, and the original draft is still in the keeping of the Manchester Literary Club. Subsequently it was printed on card, one tradesman presenting a copy to each of his customers, and Miss Burdett-Coutts (later the Countess of Huntingdon) ordered some 10 or 20 thousand copies for free distribution. It became an overnight sensation and proved to be the turning point in Waugh's career as an outstanding dialect poet resulting in people often referring to him as "the Prince of Lancashire dialect writers". Delicate, tender, free from artificiality, it became a universal favourite wherever Lancashire dialect was treasured, throughout England and in the colonies.

Johnny Bugger

Vocal and Banjo **John Howarth;**

Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**

Mandolin **Larry Kearns**

The Oldham Tinkers are aware that *Johnny Bugger* is rendered in other parts of England sometimes euphemistically as Johnny Bucker, often with variations in words like most songs which are passed on orally. They learned their version in Oldham ten years ago, partly from Jimmy Rosser, who first introduced the Oldham Tinkers to *A Mon Like Thee*, and partly from an old lady called Louise in the Oddfellow's Call (an Oldham pub), who used to sing it every Tuesday night. The song is humorous but at the same time it carries an important message: greed and selfishness will have their just rewards.

Billy Winker

Vocal and Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**

Chorus **John Howarth**

Billy Winker tells of the prodigious drinking exploits of a drayman. But however much we marvel at Billy's enthusiasm and capacity for ale and no matter how much we enjoy the story the song tells, we are haunted by the last line in each refrain which reminds us that Billy, though a great drinker has "supped" himself near to death. The words are included in "Sketches and Rhymes in the Rochdale dialect" by John Trafford Clegg (Aldine Press, 1895). Clegg died March 1895, aged thirty-eight.

Bits o' Bromley Street

Vocals **John Howarth, Gerry Kearns and Larry Kearns;**

Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**

Banjo **John Howarth;**

Mandolin and Whistle **Larry Kearns**

Children's songs have always been favourites of the Oldham Tinkers, and for a decade now they have been compiling and singing medleys of them. However, it occurred to Gerry lately that the medleys were becoming more and more academic and that though they aroused nostalgia amongst adults, they were becoming more and more incomprehensible to the many children in audiences. For this reason Larry concentrated on remembering songs, chants and games performed during his own childhood in Bromley Street where he and his brother Gerry were brought up. The resulting medley is authentic in that every part of it relates in Larry's mind to Bromley Street. The people in the medley are real. Anything which Larry could not remember being sung, said or chanted in Bromley Street was rejected. The Oldham Tinkers are aware that many of the items in the medley were common in nearly every street in the country and that others were isolated. The medley is

simplicity itself. Children can easily identify with it and it still brings back to adults fond memories of childhood.

The Condemned Cell
Vocal and Guitar **Gerry Kearns**

Gerry came across this as a poem in an edition of a penny weekly paper, *The Oldham Operative* (Friday, November 21st 1884). Gerry added the tune himself. *The Oldham Operative* gives no author's name. Since the title of the poem is *The Condemned Cell* and the word "cell" does not appear until the penultimate stanza, the Oldham Tinkers have always assumed that the mother herself was in the condemned cell as she dandled her offspring, and that she was executed, but took solace from the fact that her son might make his mark in life, unaware that he would achieve the same fate as herself. It would appear that his start in life, his birth in adversity, despite his doomed mother's hopes, contributes to the factors leading to an ignominious death.

Like many of the songs on this LP *The Condemned Cell* moralizes and has a message - in this case, for mothers. The author reminds them that even a condemned murderer was once a baby, thus implying that it is the evil of his environment and not evil within himself which makes a man a murderer. The author appeals to mothers who are in a position to determine so much of a child's early environment, to guard their children from evil.

The Maypole
Vocal and Banjo **John Howarth;**
Vocal and Guitar **Gerry Kearns;**
Vocal and Mandolin **Larry Kearns**

When the Oldham Tinkers were kids the last three days in April were hectic. People's back yards were hives of activity as the little girls prepared their Maypole outfits and practised their routines, which varied little anyway. They were allowed to wear make-up and abused the privilege enormously by powdering their faces excessively and smearing lipstick from one ear to another. They dressed in what to them was great finery but in fact was often mother's discarded underskirt and high heeled shoes several sizes too big. It was great fun for the girls. In fact the preparation was enjoyed better than what was to come. One girl had to be May Queen. She dressed even brighter than the rest and sat on a buffet holding the maypole, which was in fact a brush stale wrapped with paper ribbon, with several long paper ribbons attached to the top and hanging down to the ground. The other girls took hold of the hanging ribbons and dutifully danced round their queen in front of adult audiences who watched from their doorsteps, whilst male friends and brothers would collect coppers in boxes or jam jars. This is one of the songs they sang as they danced, unaware that they were perpetuating an ancient fertility rite. The actual performances took place on the first three days of May.

For Old Time's Sake

Vocal **John Howarth** and **Gerry Kearns**;

Chorus **John, Gerry** and **Larry**

Music - **Scratch Brass**

Soprano Cornet **Brian Evans**

Bb Cornet **Bernard Carroll**

Eb Horn **Gordon Bland**

Tenor Trombone **Gerald Burton**

Bb Euphonium **Kenneth Bridges**

Eb Bass **Eddie Grierson**

Percussion **Brian Coburn**

For Old
Time's Sake

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The late Edmund Hill captured in this song the same Northern warmth portrayed in *A Mon Like Thee* which he also wrote. Again the song has a message. Edmund Hill is advocating charity, hospitality and sharing. The Oldham Tinkers regularly sing on the same bill as Scratch Brass: a sawn-off brass band, some of whose members play sawn-off instruments. For years the Oldham Tinkers have enjoyed their music, company and friendship and at John's suggestion they were asked to provide the music for *For Old Time's Sake*.

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