



DEVON TRADITION

An Anthology from Traditional Singers

Amy Birch, Phoebe Birch, Avice Clarke,
Nobby Clarke, Joe Davies, Harold Gill,
Charlie Hill, Brian Holland, Sophie Isaacs,
Henry Mitchemore, Tom Orchard snr,
Tom Orchard jnr, Bill Parnell, Bob Penfold,
Nelson Penfold, George Roberts,
Jim Sanders, Bob Small



Devon Tradition

An Anthology from Traditional Singers

Amy Birch, Phoebe Birch, Avice Clarke,
Nobby Clarke, Joe Davies, Harold Gill,
Charlie Hill, Brian Holland, Sophie Isaacs,
Henry Mitchemore, Tom Orchard snr,
Tom Orchard jnr, Bill Parnell, Bob Penfold,
Nelson Penfold, George Roberts,
Jim Sanders, Bob Small

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | The Exmoor Ram | Nobby Clarke |
| 2 | The Molecatcher | Amy Birch |
| 3 | When I Was a Young Man | Bob Small |
| 4 | Tuning | Brian Holland (<i>melodeon</i>),
Tom Orchard snr (<i>vocal</i>),
Tom Orchard jnr (<i>dancing</i>)
Bob Penfold (<i>vocal</i>)
George Roberts |
| 5 | Barbara Allen | Avice Clarke |
| 6 | Head-a-nodding | Joe Davies |
| 7 | The Thrashing Machine | Sophie Isaacs |
| 8 | Sweet Willie | Bill Parnell |
| 9 | Navy Boots | Henry Mitchemore |
| 10 | The Leg o' the Mallard | Amy Birch |
| 11 | Royal Comrade | Charlie Hill |
| 12 | Three Men Went a-Hunting | Nelson Penfold |
| 13 | The Farmer in Leicester | Tom Orchard snr (<i>vocal & melodeon</i>),
Tom Orchard jnr (<i>melodeon</i>) |
| 14 | Tuning | Harold Gill |
| 15 | Seven Nights Drunk | Phoebe Birch |
| 16 | The Fremington Great Meat Pie | Amy Birch |
| 17 | Up the Green Meadows | Bob Penfold |
| 18 | Rattling Irish Boy | Jim Sanders |
| 19 | Mortal Unlucky Old Chap | |

First published by Topic 1979

Notes and all material recorded by Sam Richards, Paul Wilson and Tish Stubbs between 1974 and 1976

Production and design by Tony Engle

Photographs by courtesy of James Ravilious, Beaford Centre

We wish to thank the Arts Council of Great Britain, South West Arts
and the Beaford Centre for aiding collecting with subsidies and resources.

The Rev. S. Baring-Gould, who collected folksongs in the West country during the 1880s, wrote in his reminiscences that “the old fellows who had these songs were fast dying off, and their sons and grandsons despised the ballads and the tunes in the Gregorian modes and sang only the last vulgar music-hall ditties.” Many song hunters from that day to this have thought the same.

Are they right? Well, this record of pieces recently collected in Baring-Gould’s own county of Devon gives some answers. It’s not a clear answer though. Undoubtedly it represents a tradition vastly changed from his day. A quick reckon-up shows that virtually all the melodies are solidly in major keys, so the old squarson was right about the disappearance of “Gregorian modes”, as he called them. Also, no doubt, songs such as **The Thrashing Machine** or **I’m a Mortal Unlucky Old Chap** would have been consigned to the rubbish heap of “vulgar music-hall ditties”.

Our other point of reference in the West country is the recording done by the BBC (mainly Peter Kennedy) in the post-War period up to the 1960s. Although there were fewer songs around than in Baring-Gould’s day, grand singers like the Westaways of Belstone or Jack Endacott of Tedburn seemed very close in spirit, and probably in style, to old song-men like James Parsons and Robert Hard, two of Baring-Gould’s most prodigious singers.

By the mid-1970s when recordings like these on the record are being made, the tradition has changed again. The number of singers available has drastically declined - and this in all age groups - and their repertoires now include tear-jerkers, Country and Western and modern pop pieces. Many of the tear-jerkers were known to Baring-Gould, although he didn’t note them, but the other twentieth century pieces represent the influence of mass culture, particularly records. It is interesting that, although this has had a standardising effect, conflicting with the oral process, many of the singers encountered today still retain their own versions. The singers on this record amply display that. This is not, however, a record of “star” performers. If it were we might have simply featured a couple of singers and left it at that. No, this is a genuine selection. It represents what can be found “in the field” today. It is not ultimately a regional record; it could be done anywhere, in any county, city or town.

The singers represent two strands in the tradition; gypsy, a group Baring-Gould never bothered with, and non-gypsy. We’ll use the gypsies’ own preferred word “travellers”. Non-travellers who sing are often regarded locally as “characters”, marked out from the rest of the population. On the other hand, no traveller sees anything exceptional in other travellers who sing, play or dance. Bob Small for instance rarely “performs” as such. Instead fragments and short songs such as **When I was A Young Man** make a strand in casual conversation. If many of the singing situations have gone, his songs are still used in a way that is more than mere reminiscence.

With Amy Birch the case is different. She says that she still uses the songs in her family circle, and long sessions in side rooms in pubs where many gifted singers gather, are not unusual. She also sings a lot of modern songs. Her singing represents more than anything else on this record a style that has come to be associated with modern travellers; slowly paced with a pinched, nasal quality of tone, little genuine decoration, the occasional sob which betrays modern influences. Her versions are extremely good and complete.

Sophie Isaacs's performance of **Father, Father Build Me A Boat** arose spontaneously in a local pub. No sobbing here, and few other recent influences too. The style is direct, unadorned, and very effective - more typical of older travellers.

Bob Penfold's singing, unashamedly pub-orientated, carries this further. Bob's recollection of singing some years back tells of "the sort of thing that went on in the pubs at the fairs." Anyone who got up and sang a comical song could "make the folks laugh wholesale."

Nelson Penfold's song **The Farmer in Leicester** is the best known folk song amongst travellers. His direct style of singing it, with a melody that has a nice twist to it, is one of the best that we have found.

George Roberts and Phoebe Birch sing in a style that probably prevails amongst travellers; one which seems to serve generally for folk songs, music-hall, tear-jerkers and Country and Western alike. **The Fremington Great Meat Pie** runs very close to the nineteenth century broadside about the Denby Dale pie in Yorkshire.

Finally from the travellers we have the melodeon playing of Brian Holland and Tommy Orchard junior, two gifted players frequently seen at fairs playing for step dancing, as well as some examples of "tuning" - mouth music used for step dancing.

Turning to the non-travellers, there is less unity of style. Bill Parnell's parody Irish performance of **With Me Navvy Boots On** displays a gift for theatricality - something more in evidence amongst non-travellers generally. Nobby Clarke's clear and controlled **Exmoor Ram** (Derby of course) keeps the theatrical qualities slightly more buried, but the twinkle bubbles under the surface just the same. **With His Head A-Nodding** is a rare piece although once widespread. Avice Clarke, one of the youngest singers on this record, learned it from a schoolfriend.

There are few surprises in the rest of the songs. The ubiquitous **Thrashing Machine** turns up in an explicit version from Joe Davies, rather cleverer than the rugby club one, but not far off in many respects. **The Leg of the Mallard** is given superb rhythmic drive by Henry Mitchemore. Baring-Gould found it in the 1880s and pronounced it “silly”, and Peter Kennedy recorded a number of West country versions during the BBC period in the 50s. Peter Kennedy also recorded Jack Endacott singing **The Hunting Song**. Charlie Hill says that he learned his version from the same singer. His tune is certainly the same, but some of the words differ. Charlie is a popular figure in folk “revival” events around Dartmoor. Perhaps Jack Endacott’s original has picked up some other influences?

Miles I Have Travelled sung by Harold Gill is one of the few versions of this song that hasn’t given way to the Dubliners’ well known recording.

We wind up with a dialect piece from Jim Sanders. The tourist handbook West country yokel never speaks or sings in any other way of course. This record has dispelled that myth, we hope. Even so, we can’t ignore the fact that most regions seem to have their own dialect “warhorse”. Devon has two, this one and **Tavistock Goosey Fair**, both circulating in a striking number of versions. Jim Sanders’ is the most complete **Mortal Unlucky Old Chap** available, and is something of a tour-de-force, very much in demand in the Rockford Inn on Exmoor, as we can hear.



Digital remaster ©2013 Topic Records Ltd.
©2013 Topic Records Ltd.
The copyright in this sound recording and
digital artwork is owned by Topic Records Ltd.
All rights reserved.



TOPIC TSDL349
www.topicrecords.co.uk