





Bob Roberts

Songs from the Sailing Barges

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- 2 **The Grey Hawk**
- 3 **Stormy Weather, Boys**
- 4 Waltz: **Waltz With Me** (melodeon)
- 5 **Haul Away, Joe**
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First published by Topic 1978
Recording, production & design by Tony Engle
Recorded at Ryde, Isle of Wight, August 1977
Notes by A L Lloyd

The Background

This record gives us songs off the sailing barges, songs of a peculiar breed of men working a peculiar craft. Maritime enthusiasts find the sailing barges the most interesting and picturesque vessels in the world today, uniquely and entirely English. They can carry the best part of two hundred tons of cargo and are handled by tiny crews, often only three hands all told, who are reckoned among the finest real seamen on the go. The sailing barge men comprise a class unmatched, distinct, to some extent apart from other seafarers, and their song culture too is mainly separate from that of merchant seamen, though it does overlap somewhat with that of trawler- and driftermen.

But perhaps all this should be in the past tense because within the last couple of decades the long distance trading barges have dwindled almost out of sight. It seems only a short time ago that strollers along the lower reaches of the Thames would see these sturdy flat-bottomed vessels with their big brown fore-and-aft mainsail (dressed with oil and ochre and supported by a huge diagonal spar or 'sprit') making stately way among the whooping steam and diesel craft. London River was their real home, and their main trips were up and down the east coast to the Humber and beyond, or along the Channel sea board, or across the North Sea to Antwerp, Holland and the Elbe. The cargo might be anything - grain, cement, bricks, coal, sugar, explosives (such steady craft were favoured for carrying dangerous loads). As to the bargemen themselves, East Anglia was the home of most, and particularly the neighbourhood of Pin Mill, near Ipswich, was a veritable nest of barge-working families and of the distinctive sailing-barge culture, including song.

Sundry factors have combined to push aside the big sailing barges. Modern shoal-draught motor coasters are less at the mercy of wind and tide. The cost of sailing gear has become prohibitive - a barge mainsail costs a fortune now, and masts and sprits are hardly to be found. Young bargemen are no longer trained in the mysteries of the calling, such as the art of making the barge go when there's little wind. Bob Roberts was (is) a master of those mysteries, and in many ways he is the outstanding exemplar of a nearly vanished race of men. His music is characteristic of his kind; except that, among bargemen, there's none to touch him as a performer.

The Singer

Bob Roberts is Dorset-born but Suffolk by adoption, and much of his life has been spent among fellow bargemen at Pin Mill. He went to sea at fifteen, in the *Water Witch* barquentine, running china clay from Cornwall to Liverpool and returning with coal. That was in 1924. A few years later, as the slump came on, ships were hard to get. Bob walked from Falmouth to London, to pick up a living as best he could, and for a while he made a few pounds a week as a prizefighter in the Blackfriars Ring and elsewhere. He also worked on the sand-barges at Waterloo.

However, it was the sea-going spritsail barges that occupied most of his working life, and among barge folk he is celebrated as the skipper of the *Cambria* of London, a 79-ton vessel built in 1906, and one of the most famous of her class, well-known on coastal and deep sea runs, and usually up among the winners of the annual barge races along the Thames and the Medway.

As the use for sailing barges dwindled in the 1950s and '60s, Bob left them to become skipper of his own 300-ton coaster, the *Vectis Isle*, running out of the Isle of Wight and across to the Continent. Nowadays he lives at Ryde, IOW, where these recordings were made.

Music has been important in Bob's life since childhood. His father was a good singer, and Bob remembers Vaughan Williams visiting the house to note down songs. Some of the pieces in Bob's repertory are from his father's stock, but he picked up more from his fellow-men on the spritsail barges. Pub singing never played a prominent part in his life; the parlour at home - especially at Christmas time - and the barge foc'sle were congenial places for performance. During the '50s and '60s he was often heard, and much admired, in folk song clubs and festivals, but nowadays the *Vectis Isle* keeps him too busy for that. More's the pity. And more's the importance of this record of a fine traditional singer from a bygone world, the world of the sailing bargemen.

The Songs

The few surviving sailing bargemen represent the last of our traditional workers in sail, and it is no surprise that in song as in other ways they have been good maintainers of folklore, of old and of latterday kind. As mentioned above, their repertory resembles to some extent that of the older school of East Coast fishermen, part countrified, part sea-professional, part burlesque (a sign of declining tradition?). No one presents that repertory better than Bob Roberts.

Among Bob's older folk songs his version of **The Grey Hawk** is remarkable. Better known as *My Bonny Boy*, this song usually ignores any reference to birds and is sung to a handsome variant of the *Henry Martin* tune. But originally it was a Restoration ballad (c. 1675) called *Cupid's Trepan*, beginning 'Once did I love a bonny bonny bird', and unlike other traditional survivals of the song, Bob's version - uniquely, as far as I know - keeps close to the original tune as printed some three hundred years ago.

The Single Sailor is an oldish piece too. It's usually called *Early, early in the Spring*, and some versions refer to Caribbean sea battles of 1739-40, but Bob's set has been so much trimmed that much of the original story is lost.

The Ball of Yarn is not so venerable. Every folk song collector has come across it, though it has seldom appeared in print till recently, presumably on account of its saucy implications. The good American folklorist Vance Randolph, who found versions in the Ozark Mountains, suggested that the 'ball of yarn' might refer to the vinegar-soaked wadding used as a primitive contraceptive device. Maybe; if so, ineffectual in this case.

While Gamekeepers Lie Sleeping is a favourite from the time of the poacher-gamekeeper 'wars' at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Gypsies and other travelling people have their versions, using Romany or 'tinkers' cant' words.

The Foggy Dew, a standard folk song that survives particularly well in East Anglia, has its sense more obscured than elucidated by amateur folklorists, great seekers after symbolism, who aver that 'dew' = 'virginity'. 'Foggy' is right.

Along with **Foggy Dew**, the nineteenth century sailor ballad nowadays called **Bell Bottom Trousers** is among the most durable of all our folk songs, It's a blunt sexist declaration; but **Little Boy Billee** is far from straight-forward and there is more to it than meets the ear. This drama of cannibalism at sea began life as a French sailor ballad in the sixteenth century and passed along the Atlantic coast to the Mediterranean. Catalonia and Italy have their versions, but the most impressive is the Portuguese Nau Catarineta (re-enacted ceremonially in parts of Brazil with Padstow-like fervour). In England it circulated traditionally as *The Ship in Distress*, set to what Cecil Sharp considered one of the grandest airs he had ever come across. Thackeray made a parody of the continental versions of the ballad, and Bob Roberts's **Little Billee** derives from the novelist's comic re-make.

Among the songs coming from the repertory of fishermen are the sly **Candlelight Fisherman** (put a candle out of the window; if the flame blows out there's too much wind for fishing; if it doesn't there isn't breeze enough; in either case, go back to bed) and **Windy Old Weather**, a favourite song of the old Norfolk fisherman Sam Lerner, though Bob Roberts's words are somewhat different from Sam's.

As to barge songs proper, **Stormy Weather, Boys**, the account of a drunk and disorderly trip from the Surrey Docks in Rotherhithe to the Druid's Arms in Yarmouth, and **The Collier Brig**, with its familiar chorus of 'Waiting for the day till we get our pay', are two of the best. **The Fish and Chip Ship**, with its tune derived from *Darling Nelly Grey*, belongs to that class of latterday burlesque sea songs of which *The Cruise of the 'Calabar'* is perhaps the best-known. As for the work-shanties, **Haul Away, Joe, Whiskey Johnny** and **Leave Her, Johnny**, Bob converts them into lyrical social songs for the sake of their choruses.

Finally, for good measure, Bob gives us the recitation piece, **The Oily Rig**. Topical enough in these days of North Sea drilling, the poem is founded on a fantasy - the draining of the ocean through a big hole - that sci-fi writers have returned to over and over again, usually with less wit and success than Bob shows here.

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