

Music of the Cut

James Francis Fox explores the traditional folk music of the inland waterways

In the September issue of *WW*, Jo Lewis enquired about traditional songs of the inland waterways and his hopes of discovering “a rich seam of canal folk music”.

While several readers responded in subsequent issues, pointing him towards a handful of vinyl recordings produced in the late 1960s and '70s, I fear that Jo's hopes of uncovering “the great folk songs of the canal boat community” may be a little frustrated.

In Britain in the late 19th and early 20th century, there was a popular upsurge in interest in folk music, which was

partly related to the pastoral romanticism of that era. As such, song collectors, mainly from the educated middle classes, set out to record the songs of industrial and agricultural workers. However, one of the few groups they appear to have missed, perhaps due to their remote and nomadic existence, was the working boating community. As a result, there are very few canal folk songs that have survived the centuries.

One person who has carried out much research into the topic is boat-owner and amateur musician, Ian Bruce, who, many years ago, combined



his two passions to create the superlative website, *waterway songs.info*. According to him, the majority of folk songs you'll find labelled ‘traditional’ were actually written after World War II. These tend to deal with the decline of the waterways, or hark back to the experiences of boaters of times gone by, such as legging through tunnels and contending with boat horses. While these compositions are now historic in their own right, they're still too modern to be considered genuine canal folk songs.

Thankfully, we aren't entirely bereft of original waterway tunes as, according to research undertaken by Ian and others, there are a couple of exceptions. The songs ‘Tommy Note’ and ‘The Greasy Wheel’ are widely believed to date back a century or more and to have originated from the boating community, who were known to be a musical people. But what, if anything, can these compositions tell us about life on the cut in times gone by?

Tommy Note

‘Tommy Note’ is not about a boatman of that name, rather it takes aim at the Truck, or

Tommy, system of remuneration once employed on the canals.

Instead of being paid in conventional money, boaters were issued with company vouchers, Tommy notes, which could only be exchanged for commodities at company stores or designated shops. In this way the canal company had complete economic control of its employees' lives. According to musician Jon Raven, who carried out some research into the song, “In the Potteries, [the Tommy system] meant an employee being given totally useless items that the shop wished to dispose of.”

Set to a sea-shanty-like melody, with its familiar rises and falls, in the opening lines it appeals to, “You boatsmen and colliers to listen to this ditty...” which concerns “Tommy shops and the high fields ruffian/ He pays you with a Tommy note/ You must have that or nothing.”

The following paragraph references a man at “at the junction” at “Runcan” (Runcorn), who, one assumes, is responsible for distributing the vouchers. This would explain the narrator's desire to “Ram the tiller down his throat / It would be a means to choke him.”

But the real issue relates to

“The narrator wishes to ‘Ram the tiller down his throat’”

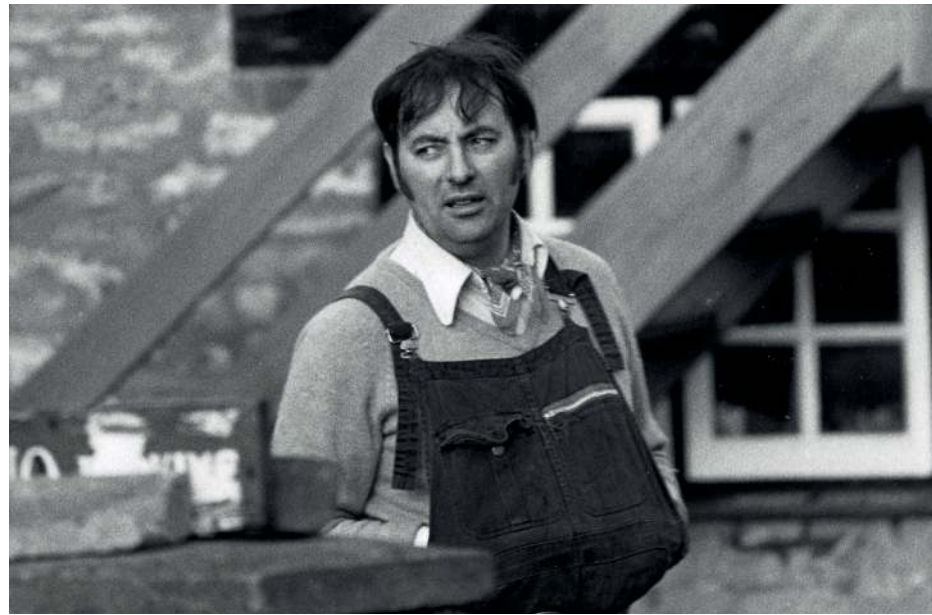
At the Canal Cavalcade at Little Venice, a gentleman in period costume plays a squeeze box. Folk music continues to be celebrated at waterways festivals around the country.





Left: Fellows, Morton & Clayton steamboat *President* with its working crew, plus dog. Traditional boat song 'The Greasy Wheel' celebrates the experiences of operating such craft.

Below: The late David Blagrove who did so much to preserve canal folk music, which he discovered while working boats in the early 1960s.



“The Greasy Wheel’ is a celebration of working a fly-boat”

the Tommy shop, where “short weight and little measure” are given. As the song reaches its penultimate verse, the narrator lays it bare. “The profit they get out of us is nine shillings out of twenty”. And the result of this is that, “The children look so funny / The voyage we so cheerful go / Till we have eat all our tummy.” The haunting phrase “eat all our tummy” is repeated later in the song and gives a bleak image of the hardships of working canals boats in this era.

The late David Blagrove, who played a major part in preserving the music of the waterways, wrote of this song. “This ‘real old un,’ as boatmen say, comes from the early 19th century... Tommy shops were a well-known evil before the truck Acts ended them.” He also noted that “high fields” is most probably the headquarters of the carrying firm.

Jon Raven suggested that ‘Tommy Note’ is unique in being the only industrial song to deal with the injustices of the Tommy system in its entirety, which is surprising given its widespread use in all manner of industries in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Greasy Wheel

Using an upbeat tune borrowed from an older song called the ‘Jim the Carter’s Lad’, ‘The Greasy Wheel’ is an altogether brighter, lighter song than ‘Tommy Note’.

Essentially, in spite of its opening advice, “If you want to join a Braunston boat / A thing you should never do”, it is a celebration of working a fly-boat – a steam-powered narrowboat that was operated day and night to provide express deliveries around the system.

Ian Bruce says of the song “[It] captures the brief glory of the men who manned Fellows, Morton & Clayton steamers at the end of the 19th century. Their glory was brief because the steam power, which gave them their ascendancy, had already, in the form of the locomotive, made the canal system obsolete.”

While the majority of the lyric is concerned with humorous descriptions of the hard work involved in running such craft, some interesting insights into the life of fly-boatmen are given. The third verse is worth publishing in full:

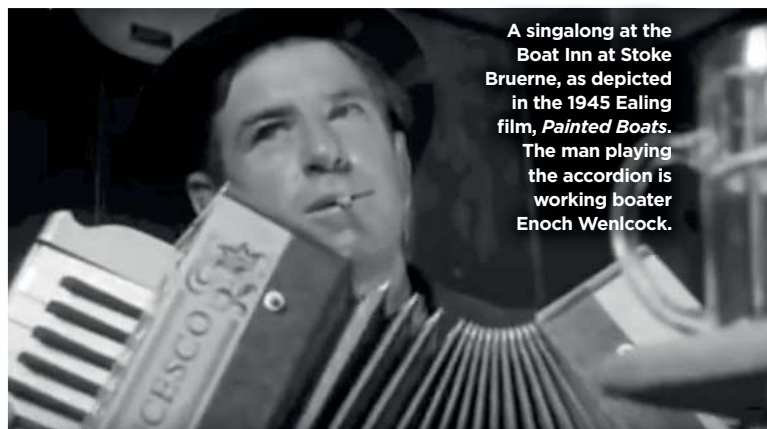
*If you want to join a fly-boat,
You'll have to change your ways,
You've got to keep her spotless,
You're cleaning night and day,
Between Camp Hill and Knowle,
If she gleans from funnel to keel,
Then you are fit to do your bit,
Upon the greasy wheel.*

As for the ‘greasy wheel’, this is believed to be a reference to the prominent flywheel in the engine room of steam-powered narrowboats. “The ‘greasy’ epithet is obvious to anyone who has

HUGH MCKNIGHT



Left: Former boatman Jack James at Stoke Bruerne in the mid-1960s; he is wearing traditional boaters clothes from the early years of the 20th century, and carries an accordion, which was a popular instrument among boaters – mainly, one suspects, due to its small size and big sound.



A singalong at the Boat Inn at Stoke Bruerne, as depicted in the 1945 Ealing film, *Painted Boats*. The man playing the accordion is working boater Enoch Wenlock.

ever taken a turn in a steamer’s engine hole,” said David Blagrove.

David, himself, collected fragments of the lyrics and tune from an old boater in the bar of the Greyhound Inn at Hawkesbury Junction in the early 1960s. As with all historic

folk songs, there are variations in the lyrics, though the theme remains essentially the same.

Thank you to Jennifer Hindshaw for supplying material reviewed in this article.

FURTHER LISTENING

waterwaysongs.info
Ian Bruce's website is a magnificent resource for those wanting to find more about inland waterways-related music of the UK and Ireland. Listing over 300 songs, old and new, a good number are available to listen to directly on the website and include numbers from Ralph McTell (of 'Streets of London' fame), Stan Cullimore (the Housemartins' guitarist) and Dusty Miller (better known for his paintings of working boaters). A lot of the songs include printed lyrics and some have accompanying video performances, while others have musical notation and chords, allowing musicians to quickly learn the tunes.

If you have a passion for folk music and/or boating, you'll consider this site manna from heaven; especially as you're unlikely to find many of these songs on popular online streaming services.

STRAIGHT FROM THE TUNNEL'S MOUTH: SONGS OF THE INLAND WATERWAYS

The Boatmen

This album of canal-themed songs from folk outfit The Boatmen was recorded in 1975 and, once again, David Blagrove's fingerprints are all over it – he wrote and arranged five of the 13 tracks, though his musical contribution isn't credited.

Very traditional in sound, with the instrumentation comprising banjos, fiddles, mandolins, guitars etc, it includes the plaintive 'Girl on the Cut', a song dating



back to the late 1950s, and the 'Dudley Tunnel', an account of legging through the famous subterranean passage, written in the early 1960s. There's also 'Orrible Trip', which relates an actual and disastrous journey around the Black Country in 1971, plus an acapella version of 'Tommy Note'.

Often reminiscent of the Dubliners, the Irish folk group that had such success in the Britain charts over the previous decade, this is a well-recorded and well-performed collection of canal songs.

'DOWN THE CUT' WITH PUMPKIN PIE: THE CANAL AGE IN SONG

Taking a slightly different approach to the subgenre of canal folk music were musicians John Mills and Norma Kings, known collectively as Pumpkin Pie. Following regular appearances at canal conventions, folk festivals and on radio and TV, they cut this album of canal-themed tunes in 1975.

Accomplished musicians both, their sound has, on the whole, a softer and lighter quality than The Boatmen; indeed, it is sometimes reminiscent of Peter, Paul & Mary or The Seekers, thanks to their accomplished harmony vocals.

The album comprises a mix of original and semi-traditional folk songs, and,



interestingly, three covers of David Blagrove's original compositions. However, there is one song with genuine historical pedigree: 'Birmingham Lads', which was written in 1769 for the opening of Birmingham's first canal. Local publican and balladeer John Freeth devised the lyrics, which begin:

*This day for our new navigation,
We banish all cares and vexation;
The sight of the barges each honest heart glads,
And the merriest of mortals are Birmingham lads.*

The lyric continues to boast of Birmingham having the "best of wrought metals", the "best coals in the nation" and "the cut of all cuts". It's a fascinating social document (even if the tune does get a little annoying).

THE BOLD NAVIGATORS: THE STORY OF ENGLAND'S CANALS IN SONG

Why were so many great canal albums released in the mid-1970s? *The Story of England's Canals in Song*, recorded by quintet The Bold Navigators, is another accomplished and enjoyable collection of waterway-themed songs.

Consisting of a mix of originals and covers, the material explores everything from Canal Mania and the construction of the waterways, through to the sufferings of boat



horses and a song which attempts to capture the feelings of a former boatman reflecting on his days on the cut.

While the songs 'Tommy Note', 'Birmingham Lads', 'Push Boys Push' etc are familiar from other albums listed here, The Bold Navigators do include one historic gem: 'All Hail This Grand Day', which was originally devised for the opening of the Croydon Canal in 1819. The chorus goes, "Long down its fair stream may the rich vessel glide / And the Croydon Canal be of Eng-land the pride." The rhyme may be a little forced but the sentiment is clear.

NARROW BOATS: VOICES, SOUNDS & SONGS OF THE CANALS

This BBC recording, released in 1969, attempted to capture something of the fast-disappearing world of commercial canal carrying. It includes snippets of conversation, edited together in a rather fast-paced format (so you're not always sure who's actually talking) of such well-known canal characters as Charlie Atkins, Leslie Moreton, Sister Mary Ward, Herbert Tooley, and Joe & Rose Skinner.

While music is secondary to the interview material, it still features fairly heavily and is primarily the work of David Blagrove. A background sound bed of vintage diesel engines and other canal sounds adds further to the strong sense of atmosphere.



“There are very few canal folk songs that have survived the centuries”