

'Padstow Carolling'

Transcript of a talk given by Roger Gool, leader of the Padstow Carollers, at the Festival of Village Carols, Grenoside, Sheffield, 29 November 2014

Cornish Carolling

Many carols still exist from mediaeval times, but in the early 19th century, they were neither popular nor regarded as notable.

Mediaeval carols were usually written in triple time because the carol was originally a dance-song. In the Cornish language, the word 'karoli' means 'to dance'.

However, towards the mid-19th Century, these ancient carol tunes began to be published, giving rise to a revival in Cornwall. Several Cornish musicians, becoming more conscious of the heritage of the carols, set about composing their own.

The composer of Cranbrook, Thomas Clarke of Canterbury, developed a style which epitomised 19th Century non-conformist tunes, using repeated lines and imitative vocals that found great favour with Cornish composers and singers.

In the latter half of the century, many collections of local carols were written and at around this time, Cornish carolling was probably at its height. The enthusiasm to sing these old tunes quickly spread county-wide and carol services were often over-crowded. Also, people regularly invited others into their homes to sing carols around the harmonium or piano.

Carol services could begin as early as 6.00am, or perhaps 5.00am on a Christmas Day. The Royal Cornwall Gazette in 1895 recorded that this was 'particularly strong in Padstow compared to other areas of the County'. Nonetheless, such behaviour did not find particular favour with English ministers who tried to discourage the practice.



It was the rule that most carols were learned 'by ear'; but they were often adapted or re-arranged between areas, thus leading to varying versions of the same carol.

Most singers were unable to read or write; a skilled musician would sing a line so others could repeat it. Compositions were also handed down from parent to child by listening and learning.

In some 19th century parishes of Cornwall, a few people would meet in Church on Christmas Eve to sing carols well into the night, the tunes and words being very different from those heard in Churches and Chapels nowadays.

These carols, given a folk setting, often told of bible legends not directly related to the Christmas story. 'The Three Ships' is a well-known example of this type of carol.

Most carols did not appear in print until the late 1800s. But some evidence suggests that the tunes were from an age of Henry Purcell or perhaps even earlier. The Cornish historian, Inglis Gundry, refers to this in his publication 'Now Carol We'.

Nevertheless, these old songs contrive to hold their own, due in no small part to the manner in which they proclaim the numerous facets of the Christmas story, and the often quirky tunes that accompany them.

Of all the Cornish composers of the mid-19th century, conceivably, one composer's name stands out, Thomas Merritt.

He rose out of a background of poverty and disease with little or no support to encourage him. His father died when Merritt was just eleven years of age which meant seeking an early career. But for poor health, a job in the tin mines would surely have been his future.

Merritt began to compose music and his songs and carols soon became popular amongst the mining community. He wrote stirring compositions which appealed to a kindred folk bred to work and sing.

But these were difficult times economically; Cornish mining was in steep decline. Many Cornish folk, including miners and their families, emigrated in search of work, taking Cornish carols with them.

Thus, the songs and carols of Thomas Merritt and other Cornish composers are to this day sung around the world. They can be heard particularly in California, South Africa and Australia.

We in Padstow regularly sing a Merritt carol, 'Lo! He Comes an Infant Stranger'. This carol was adopted around 1890, but lapsed sometime after WW11 until revival in 1974.



Padstow

Padstow possesses a set of its own beautiful Christmas carols,

The 4-part anonymous compositions date from the late 18th, early 19th Centuries and have touched the hearts of Cornish men and women the world over ever since.

Many an old Padstonian and many a visiting exile have been uplifted by the tingling sound of the exquisite melodies that drift on the crisp air across Padstow's river valley on a calm December evening.

Apart from Thomas Merritt's 'Lo! He Comes an Infant Stranger', which has been a part of the Padstow carols set for more than a century, we are unlikely ever to find out completely who composed our carols. They seem

to have been joint or folk compositions and certainly do not obey the rules of harmony.

Some of the carols were certainly established before around 1870. Padstow had the talent to sing and compose such music. Composer Edward Dayman was born in Padstow in 1807. He became a Fellow of Oxford and Prebendary of Salisbury Cathedral. He wrote many original hymns during his lifetime.

Like other Cornish carols, Padstow's carols had been passed on by word of mouth from the 19th forward into the 20th Century. The Royal Cornwall Gazette, also in 1895, noted the strength of the tradition in Padstow compared to the rest of Cornwall.

Not much information is available in the early part of the 20th Century but it appears that the carols continued to be sung by a combination of the Wesleyan, Methodist and Anglican communities. The late carollers' leader, Molly Pinch, remembered as a child around 1918, Rouse Rouse, Jesse and Zadoc being sung.

Thus, the carols had survived the ravages of the Great War. Padstow was then, as it is now, a small town, and losses due to the war had proved considerable.

Providentially, the singers were augmented by visiting fishermen from West Cornwall who also sang their own carols. It is very probable that 'Harky Harky' came to be sung in Padstow in the late 19th or early 20th Century by this process.

Between the wars, carolling continued whilst retaining close links to the Church and Chapels.

It was during this time that the leader of Padstow Voluntary Band, Edgar Tonkin, noted down in manuscript, the Padstow carols Zadoc; Behold the Grace; Come and Worship; Jesse and Shepherd's Rejoice.

Sometime between 1955 and 1960, Edgar's son Ted, handed the manuscripts to the Church minister of the day, the Reverend Benjamin Clarke, who stored them in the Church.

Edgar, at the time of preparing the manuscripts, could not have foreseen how valuable his efforts were to prove.

It seems the carols were not regularly sung during the WW11. A lot of the menfolk were away and the blackout was in place.

Following WW11, few Cornish carolling customs it seems had survived. The Padstow carollers were led by Frank Bray, a champion counter-tenor.

Frank was blessed with perfect pitch and always gave the correct note to start each carol. (The current principal is not similarly gifted).

Carolling in Padstow was also at a very low point with no more than a handful of singers willing to carry on into the 1950s. Despite numbers continuing to be supplemented by visiting fishermen, the future for Padstow's carols was looking very bleak.

The numbers of carollers was decreasing alarmingly. The ranks of tenors for example, were reduced to perhaps one or two. There was an imminent danger that the 4-part harmony would be lost; or worse, the carols vanish altogether.

However, re-establishment was to come about towards the end of the 1950s and into the early '60s. It was determined that the Padstow carols were too important a part of the town's history to be allowed to die out.

A few of the townsfolk set about rekindling interest and this venture proved extremely successful. Year-on-year, the group grew in strength and experience. During the '60s, the number of singers continued to increase. By invitation, the carollers regularly sang in nearby towns and villages; also taking the carols to West Cornwall on a number of occasions.

The words and music were still learned by ear, having been passed on in this manner for well over a century. To assist this, get-togethers were organised, usually in November, with sheets of words provided to help the newer members learn as quickly as possible. This took place for a few years leading up to Christmas and is the only period where anything remotely resembling proper rehearsals occurred, other than when practices to re-learn dormant carols were arranged more recently.



It had become clear that the need to accurately chronicle the carols to ensure preservation was foremost.

Two people in particular took on responsibility for the task. Johnnie Worden, a town barber and excellent bass singer who had assumed leadership of the carollers from Frank Bray; and Stephen Fuller, shop owner, proud Padstonian and Cornishman, whose dedication to the town was, throughout his short life, unflinching.

Stephen approached the aforementioned accomplished music historian, Inglis Gundry, himself a Cornishman by descent, to assist in what was to prove a fairly arduous job. Some of the carols, previously laid down in manuscript by Edgar Tonkin, were loaned by Padstow Church. But for the remainder, the institution of 'word-of-mouth' and perfect pitch had to be relied upon.

Some of the strongest singers were employed to sing the various parts. Each of the carols was taped and re-taped until, it was believed, authenticity had been achieved.

After several months of work, provisional manuscripts were produced by Inglis Gundry and returned to Padstow for final checks. Critical examination revealed just a few notes to be corrected. By Christmas 1965, the Padstow Carols were in print in full for the first time and thus, safeguarded for future generations.

The first hand-written, duplicated copies of the words and music appeared as the Padstow Carols booklet 'Strike Sound'. But few were produced and the booklet did not become available for public purchase until 1971.

Also, in 1965, ITV recorded the carols, broadcasting them nationally on Boxing Day of that year. But a later offer to put them on a record was refused.

After Stephen Fuller's untimely death in 1969 at the age of just 36, Johnny Worden led the carolling alone until 1972.

My predecessor, Molly Pinch, took over from Johnny from December 1972, together with my uncle, Raymond Gool, having assumed the shared role.

Raymond died in 1981, leaving Molly in sole charge; and what a charger she proved to be. Tenacious and unshakeable, Molly was determined that the carols, passed down through the many generations of Padstow families, were not to be forfeited. A small lady she may have been, but with seemingly boundless energy and enthusiasm.

Molly was leader when the carollers made their previous visit to Sheffield in 2000. Not without controversy, some of the carol party insisted the carols should not be sung outside Padstow.

Nonetheless, the visit went ahead and proved a great success. Perhaps the detractors had forgotten, or indeed were unaware that the Padstow carollers had sung all over Cornwall over many years previously. In addition, the carols have been globally exported by migrants and other travellers for over a century. A trip to South Yorkshire was unlikely to have an adverse impact on several decades of history.

Molly remained as leader until her death in 2005. She did not enjoy the best of health over the last couple of years of her life. Therefore, I had assumed most of the organisational responsibilities from about 2002.

Molly's contribution to the carollers' tradition over the near three decades that she led them can never be understated. Not only was she dedicated, she was also responsible in great part for the revival in 1999 of the carol 'Star of Bethlehem'; not sung in Padstow for around 60 years.

Further, during Molly's tenure, thousands of pounds was donated to Padstow Churches and she had collected every penny herself.

In 2010, another carol, 'Sound Sound' was revived. This carol is known to be sung elsewhere in West Cornwall. But Padstow's version has a curious polyphonic harmony which is difficult and demanding.

Again, not having been sung for over 60 years, the likely reason being a large number of singers for each section is needed. After WW11, when the singers were so few, it would not have been possible to perform the carol well, if at all.

It is not included in our repertoire this weekend; quite simply, there isn't enough of us to do it justice. 'Lo! He Comes..', 'Star of Bethlehem' and 'Sound Sound' now have a firmly re-established place in the 'Strike Sound' catalogue.



Nowadays in Padstow, little has changed insomuch as Sunday evenings in December remain special. The carollers come together to sing music and words that are largely unfamiliar to others. These anthems have been fiercely protected for a couple of centuries and in this aged but bustling port, a timeworn ritual of 4-part harmony singing endures as our Padstow carols.

The singers have left their warm homes to perform in all weathers; be it cold, wind, rain or snow, or a combination thereof. Inclement weather changes nothing, bar perhaps the addition of some extra clothing for the colder evenings or an umbrella.

They are a sturdy assortment of men, women, boys and girls. Some are experienced by countless years of attendance; others perhaps not, but certainly no less welcome. This group are not a choir and very little rehearsal has taken place but the affinity, though unspoken, is palpable.

Sopranos, basses, altos and tenors organise themselves into their sections. They chatter amongst themselves until called to order. The carol is announced, throats are quietly cleared. A pitch pipe sounds a single note for the sopranos, followed by the cue words 'Strike Sound' and thus begins the first carol of the evening. The pitch pipe and 'Strike Sound' have carved their own niche in the tradition.

Together, usually, with the sopranos, the other sections join in. Their respective harmonising notes borne of experience of having sung this particular carol goodness knows how many times. The routine is repeated throughout each evening. Carols are selected, mostly randomly, but occasionally by choice of a resident as the carol party makes its way around the town.

Always beginning from the Market Place, the routes change from weekend to weekend, with older Padstonians and former carollers no longer able to

participate being visited. Accordingly, singing takes place both outside and inside homes. Several other planned events are undertaken in a busy itinerary leading up to Christmas Eve.

Occasionally, visitors to the streets of Padstow will delay momentarily to listen to this ultra-demographic cluster. It is a cold December evening, what is going on? Those with the will to enquire are given a brief explanation of the tradition. Do they really understand the custom, or the motivation to preserve it? Perhaps not but it doesn't matter.

'Rouse Rouse' is the next carol, they won't have heard this for sure. Fundamentally a Padstow carol, it is not known to be sung elsewhere. 'Behold the Grace' to the tune Cranbrook, follows; that is a tune others will undoubtedly identify with. Padstow carollers have been singing this carol beyond living memory, thus we are equally protective of it.

No-one is concerned about the similarity with 'Ilkley Moor Baht 'at'. Whether the tune crossed the Tamar for the North or headed South from West Yorkshire, or perhaps elsewhere, probably from the county of Kent, is a total guess. The vast epoch of folk-melody does not bow to any sense of loyalty. The only importance is that we all enjoy it in whatever form.

Christmas Eve is very much looked forward to with visits that include Prideaux Place, an Elizabethan manor house on a hill to the west of the town. The acoustics in the main hall are wonderful. The sound and images of a large assembly of singers attracts many a spectator with a camera.

Through periods of war and strife, tough economic times and genealogical movements, the carols have survived to maintain an aspect of Padstow life largely unique.

The carols, painstakingly written down over 50 years ago through the devoted commitment of amongst others, John Worden and Stephen Fuller, are a lasting tribute to the dedication of those determined to ensure that a peerless birthright endures.

The Padstow carols exist through the pride with which we hold our inherent culture, our Cornish history and heritage, and in particular, our Padstonian forebears to whom we are indebted.

Honoured are those who perpetuated the tradition; from its obscure humble origins, through hard economic periods into the 20th Century, beyond two World Wars and forward to the present. We continue to pay a much-merited tribute to those with the foresight to protect an ancient gift otherwise lost.

It is written and I quote, 'The people of Padstow have reached across the generations and boundaries. Their enthusiasm has kept the carols alive to this day in a manner achieved nowhere else in Cornwall'.

Acknowledgments

Mike O'Connor; Padstow Museum; Evolution of the Cornish Carol; The History of Padstow Carols.

Stephen Fuller; Padstow Echo.

Johnny Worden; Lodenek Press; 'Strike Sound'.

Inglis Gundry; 'Then Carol We'; Oxford University Press.

The Royal Cornwall Gazette.

For anecdotal information provided over many years;

Mr. Eric Gool; Father; sang the tenor parts for the preparation of manuscripts for 'Strike Sound'.

John Buckingham; Rev. Barry Kinsmen; Padstow Museum & Federation of Old Cornwall Societies.

Mr. Roger Rodda and Mrs. Doris Rodda; Uncle and Aunt. Former Methodist Lay Preachers of Scorrier/Redruth.