

Peter & Barbara Snape

...from the North

A quick glance at the gig list on their website shows that Peter and Barbara Snape are firm fixtures on the folk club and festival circuit in the UK. Barbara has a rich and powerful voice, and she knows just how to use it, knowledge gleaned from years of singing experience. Peter's melodeon is robust and reliable, and he has the enviable skill of being able to accompany a song without overwhelming it. Together, they make a formidable team. Their love of folk music and passion for the songs of the north of England, has given them a distinct musical identity; their careful research informing the performance of the songs that they are now bringing to a wider audience up and down the country. Having just released their fourth album, *Upward Onward*, we thought it was time to catch up with Peter and Barbara and find out more about them and the songs from their beloved Lancashire.



Barbara, tell me about your introduction to folk song, and what drew you to it.

I remember my introduction to folk song quite well. I was a teenager attending a youth/drama club at the local YMCA in Birkenhead. There were three boys who sang folk songs at a rugby club on Friday nights and practised at the YMCA. The songs they sang were so different to the mainstream music I was hearing on the radio and television. It was a key time and when I saw a poster for the Spinners playing in New Brighton, I was hooked. Following this, I became a regular at the Spinners Folk Club in Liverpool on a Monday night, even though it meant a train and bus journey to get there and a rush to catch the last train under the Mersey back home. During

that period I saw The Copper Family, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, New Deal String Band, Aly Bain and Tom Anderson. It was wonderful. It was at the Spinners Club that I met John Howson (of Veteran Records). We became friends and sang together for four years. John introduced me to a wider 'traditional' folk world - for example, in 1975 we met Emma Vickers, a traditional singer from Burscough, a lovely lady who fed us apple pie and talked away about her songs and family.

Along with some friends we ran the Liverpool Trad Club for a number of years and booked some great guests. We had a visit from the American singer Helen Schneyer through Peter Bellamy. Liverpool had a remarkable thriving folk music scene at this time. You could go out, and often

did, to a different folk club every night and although Irish music and sea shanties dominated, it was not hard to hear English song being sung also.

After John went to live in Suffolk, I started to sing in an American Gospel group called Bright Phoebus. They introduced me to Peter Bellamy who provided us with some super material from the Pinder Family, Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys and the Rosalie Sorrel, amazing music. It was a pity that for a number of reasons the group only had a short life and in 1985 I moved to Burnley in Lancashire to work with deaf children. It was a turning point that led to a complete break from folk music until 2002 when I started to attend a singaround at the Wagon and Horses pub on a Wednesday night and there, one

night in 2004, a chap walked in with a melodeon.

Peter, presumably that was you? I wonder whether this was coincidence, or perhaps was meant to be. Tell me a bit about your history and involvement with folk music over the years.

It is a much less intense story although with similarities. I had a family background where music was part of family life. My father was a classical pianist and organist. I had an uncle who sang Irish folk songs and a grandad and another uncle who played banjo, and family occasions at home would very much feature song and music. *The Good Old Days* TV programme was always a part of living room life and all these background influences attracted me to the 'traditional

night out', which ultimately led me to visit some local folk clubs and especially a weekly traditional music session in a local pub with the Garstang Morris Dancers, who I then joined.

You have been busy researching the song/poem traditions in your area. What made you pursue this avenue, rather than singing more general folk songs?

When we first began performing together we chose songs we loved and enjoyed because of their content, message or story and these were from various parts of the UK, but not from our native Lancashire/North West. We would hear songs from various parts of the country too, but very rarely, if at all, hear someone say, "This is a song from Lancashire". So we began our quest to research some traditional songs of the north.

Let's talk in more detail about what you have done, and about the songs you have researched and now sing.

Going back to mentioning Emma Vickers earlier, we recorded a beautiful version of *Died For Love* called *There Is Tavern*, set to the tune of *Lord Franklin*. Emma Vickers was a traditional singer from Burscough and lived on the Leeds/Liverpool canal. She was a wonderful character with some fine songs which she learnt from her father.

In 1865, John Harland compiled and edited a book, *Ballads And Songs Of Lancashire*, which brought together various collections from all over Lancashire covering many subjects. It became so popular that it was followed in 1866 by *Lancashire Lyrics: Modern Songs And Ballads Of The County Palatine*, again edited by John Harland. They contain some beautiful songs/poems, but no tunes, so we had the challenge of putting tunes to words for *The Happy Workingman's Song* and the *Radcliffe Otter Hunt*.

Another great resource for us are the Lancashire poets from the Victorian times - Ben Brierley, Samuel Laycock, John Thomas Baron to name but a few.

Don't Give Up started life as a poem written by John Thomas Baron (1856-1922), a popular and prolific poet from Blackburn who, over a 35 year period, wrote a dialect poem each week for the Blackburn Times never missing an issue apart from one short break

due to illness. *Homeward Bound* is a two verse poem written by him also and published in a book of his work called *A Cotton Town Chronicle* in 1978 by his great grandson.

The Fair Drummer Boy is taken from the poems of Ben Brierley in *Spring Blossoms And Autumn Leaves*, published in 1893. It is an evocative story seemingly set in the Napoleonic wars. Ben Brierley came from Failsworth, near Oldham.

These poems provide a real social comment of the time in which they were written and a window on Victorian Society. They tell us about work, love, play and everyday life and are a great resource to work with, use and perform as part of our Lancashire Tradition. Again, we had the challenge of putting tunes to the words.

Some poets were self-taught and came from really poor backgrounds. John Baron, for example, was born in 1856 and his only formal education was up to the age of nine. His father paid one penny a week for him to learn the '3Rs'. Yet he wrote over 4000 poems! There are many songs/poems from the mills and the mines and from the time of the cotton famine. These are part of the Lancashire folk tradition, written in the 1800s as a social comment of that time and not passed on orally as we think of in the traditional manner of songs being passed down the generations.

Sitting comfortably with, and complementing all the poetry, is *Dialect Songs Of The North (Lancashire, Cheshire, Westmorland And Cumberland)* edited by John Graham and printed in 1910 for one shilling. Interestingly enough, each song is also printed in a non-dialect format, for he states that the "lover of old songs need not be versed in the dialect of the locality whence they originate in order to appreciate their flavour". The first song in the book is entitled *My Old Wife*, which he says he learnt "over thirty years ago, in Liverpool from a rustic singer" (and there are not many of those around today!). Another is a version of *The Three Jolly Huntsmen*, the tune of which came from a fiddle player called Moses Hale who died in 1875 at the age of 101. He had learnt to play at the age of eight and noted down every tune he learnt after playing it for the first time.

In the book also, John Graham refers to the Victorian poets of Lancashire, Samuel Laycock, Edwin Waugh and Ben Brierley. A very good friend of ours, Sid Calderbank, is an expert on Lancashire dialect, a most enthusiastic performer and a keen advocate of maintaining and performing dialect song and prose. He gave us some invaluable help.

Another source investigated was the Paul Graney collection which was, until December 2014, at the Sound Archive Library in Clitheroe Castle. It is now in Manchester Central Library. *No More Shall I Work In The Factory* and *Hold The Fort* are two current favourites of ours from that archive.

Manchester Central Library also hold a copy of the 35 street ballads selected and edited by Harry Boardman and Roy Palmer and published in 1983 (*Manchester Ballads*). One of the songs we do is *Rag Bag*, a temperance song sold on the streets in 1861. In 2005, Mark Dowding and Chris Harvey made a valuable contribution to the preservation of these ballads when they recorded them all on an accompanying CD.

We spent some time in Chethams School of Music Library too and viewed the *Manchester Ballad* collection, (whilst sitting at the table that Karl Marx sat at whilst visiting Frederick Engels in 1846 and 1870). *Fancy Lads* is an eight verse broadside printed by Swindells of Manchester between 1800 and 1830. *Never Look Behind* is also a Manchester Ballad sold on the streets in the 1860s and printed by T. Pearson. It was also a song from the music halls written and sung by Harry Clifton, who wrote over 500 songs and often borrowed old tunes for them.

It is worth noting also that Mike Harding brought out a collection of songs of Lancashire in 1980 which contains some great songs, very well illustrated and with very helpful notes.

If you had to choose one song of significant interest, which one would it be?

One particular song in *Modern Songs And Ballads* is a version of *The Sprig Of Thyme*, of which there are many to be found all over the British Isles. However, some of the lines in this particular version, which came from the John Greave's Collection, are also to be found in a poem written around 1689 by Mrs Fleetwood

of Habergham Hall, near Padiham. Her poem was called *The Unfortunate Damsel* and was written when her husband's extravagances led to the loss of the family estate. Interestingly, the song, *The Seeds Of Love*, which Cecil Sharp collected in 1903, also contains some of the lines of Mrs Fleetwood's poem, which is certainly food for thought, being written three centuries earlier.

Tell me about the new CD - is it mostly songs from Lancashire?

Yes, apart from two songs, the whole CD is based on Lancashire songs with a couple of tunes thrown in, and these are Lancashire related. The majority of the songs we have mentioned above are all on *Upward Onward* and those not on this CD are on our previous CD, *SnapeNotes*.

One song, *Poor Old Weaver's Daughter*, is from Yorkshire, but the link for us, and for the CD, is that the song is a broadside and printed by Harkness of Preston.

It could be said that this CD is a logical progression from the other three. We have for some time thought about our geographical area of the North West, its social and economic history and how perhaps we would like to reflect that in our own way. So the CD is a collection of songs that hopefully contributes to that, and hopefully helps achieve it.

And how are the songs going down on your travels up and down the country?

We are singing these songs everywhere we go now and we have had a positive response to them. They are very good songs covering a variety of subjects and many of them are good for joining in with. It is interesting also that they occasionally raise questions, either because of their content or story, or their relation to other songs. The song, *Homeward Bound*, is perhaps a good example of a song that many are surprised to find is a poem by a Lancashire poet! We get very enthusiastic about Lancashire's past and feel it has a place in the present and the future. We sincerely hope that others will see the value that these songs have.

John Harland summarised his work in the following way: "I have merely gathered the flowers of Lancashire song into a garland. There is the fragrance of these poetic blossoms; theirs is the rich and varied tints that delight the eye". How very true.

www.thesnapes.org.uk