

Birth of the Island Folk Song Club

Mike Butler, November 2020.

Some years ago I was doing a search on the MudCat folk music forum when I came across a discussion with a reference to folk on the Island; I think it was probably something about Laurie Say's songs. I made contact with the person who was contributing, Richard Corbett, and asked what his memories were.

The result was an insight into how the folk club started at The Castle Inn in Newport. This triggered some memories of the club at the Sloop in the '60's when I first became involved in the Island folk scene and I thought I would write down some of this story.

At the same time The Men of Wight Morris were approaching their 50th anniversary and it seemed like a good idea to write a short story of how the team came into being since they also originated from the Sloop Folk Club and the country dance sessions that were held there.

It turned out that all this was much more difficult than I thought; memory is a strange thing; I have vivid images of some things that happened but the rest is vague and I'm the sort of person who needs to make sure that everything is accurate before I commit to paper. So I embarked on some more research to put together the events of those early days, digging out old diaries from the loft and asking anyone I could think of who was around in those early days. Eventually it became so consuming that I felt I had to concentrate on just one topic and that was The Origins of The Men of Wight. But out of that I gathered much more information and here is some that tells the story of the emergence of The Island Folk Song Club.

So back to Richard Corbett. His story is best stated from his own words in our emails starting in January of 2016:

Hello Mike!

*From mid 1963, myself and some friends would meet almost nightly at the Castle Inn, top of the High Street in Newport, run by Mrs. Tibbenham, a lady in her 60's. She'd been landlady since the War. She'd been "adopted" by the Airborne troops then and they won a lot of money on a horse called Airborne in the Derby during one of those war years! **

We would take it in turns to strum away - Kumbaya, If I had a Hammer, Blowing In The Wind etc etc - for hours (and pints!) on end.

Many we knew and many we didn't, would come in, sometimes pick up the guitar and do a number or two. All sorts of fascinating people. Even some Mormon missionaries for a while. They never talked God but we enjoyed their company and their folk, US style. Sadly, some years later, I heard they had all perished in Vietnam.

Tom Taylor was one such person passing through. A big man with a big talent. Had played all over Europe but for his own amusement and barely for subsistence money. Any (and there were many) who knew him will tell you about him. Cliff Maidment to name but one. Tom took up with a girl called Liz, who could sing folk.

He, Liz and Cliff invited me to the Castle Inn one night where Mrs T had given him the use of her bigger function room to see if we could all inaugurate an Isle of Wight Folk Club. I guess this would have been in early 1964, possibly late 1963 - long time ago now. There were others I didn't know and to tell you the truth, I was by then engaged to be married and was more pressed for my time than disinterested. It all moved on without me.

As always on the Island though, I saw all the old mates and kept up regularly with the move to the Sloop and the Fishermans at Shanklin, where we had a fair few nights cut off by the tide! Always used to check the tide tables before we went to get the most drinking time in!

Laurie Say I knew although not when I was "Folking".

* (Airborne won at 50/1 in the first Derby at Epsom after the war - 5th June 1946. They must have made a lot of money!)

In June of 1965, the club moved to The Redan in Ryde where it was MC'd by John Greene with Tony Key on the door. Performing that first night were some musicians soon to be a foundation of the Island's folk scene – Cliff Maidment, Roy Middlebrook and John Underwood. According to John Underwood: *"on the first night so many people turned up that the room overflowed onto the street and we had to open all the windows so that they could hear."*

The Redan only lasted a short while as it was obvious that a bigger venue was needed. A 2-month period in the back room of the Anglesea Tavern in Ryde was followed by a move to the most famous of the Island's folk venues - The Sloop Inn at Wootton where it remained until 1970.



The audience at The Sloop

I can place the start of my own involvement in folk very specifically it was Friday 26th April 1968. I was studying Engineering at Portsmouth Polytechnic and, in the autumn of 1967, I was recruited by the Plessey Company to join their student apprentice scheme. This would involve spending 6 months each year at college in Portsmouth and then 6 months on the Isle of Wight - fortunately these would be the Summer months! So on the 7th of April 1968 I arrived by hovercraft onto the Island. Several other students from my course had also been recruited and they knew about the local folk club – at that time I had no idea what a folk club was but I went along to The Sloop where the guests that night were The Yettis and I was hooked! Eventually I performed there and helped in a small way to run the club and its subsequent moves.

The club ran every Friday night and had a strong contingent of local performers including Roy Middlebrook, John Underwood, Cliff Maidment, John Greene, John Newman, Keith Hardy, Laurie Say, Daisy Krishnama, Steamboat (a 3-piece), Nial Conlan, etc, and had a guest every week including Pat Nelson, Dave Williams (the Southampton one), Frankie Armstrong, Geoff Jerram, The Strawberry Hill Boys, Trevor Lucas, The Yettis, Dave Swarbrick, Jeremy Taylor, Cyril Tawney, Derek Brimstone, Joe Stead, Noel Murphy, Davy Graham, Jackson C Frank, Martyn Wyndham Reed, Johnny Silvo, Stephan Grossman,

Magna Carta, Hamish Imlac, Humblebums (Billy Connolly and Gerry Rapherty), Alex Campbell, Tim Hart & Maddy Prior (they slept on my front room floor that night), Martyn Windham Reed - just to name a few.

The Sloop club moved to the cellar of The Prince Consort in Ryde, and then onto The Eagle Tavern in Ryde: that was the time of an expansion of folk on the Island with clubs and pub sessions emerging everywhere. In the late '70's and 80's folk nights happened at The Fisherman's Cottage, The Chequers, The Crown East Cowes, Calvert's, The Castle and Banner, Vectis Social Club, Victoria Tavern E. Cowes, The Riverside Centre, The Blacksmith's Arms, The White Lion at Arreton, The Woodvale Gurnard, The Sandrock Hotel, Lakeside Inn, The Vine in St Helens, The Countryman Brighstone, The Simeon Arms Ryde, etc.

And of course the fashions in Folk have changed many times since that period, as all things do. The un-accompanied singing, usually called "finger in the ear singing", suddenly got posh and was called a-capella, much of the contemporary music that was performed at folk clubs fell out of fashion and then came back again, new songs were written, English folk tunes gradually emerged from the darkness, and so on.

It's great to see the Island still as a thriving bed of folk music of all sorts and long may it continue.

"So fill to me the parting glass,
Good night and joy be with you all"