

# THE GREY COCK - TEN YEARS ON

An historical appreciation by Mike Turner

## Introduction

The original intention was to make this leaflet a short outline of the club's history, on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. However, as I delved into the records of the past, I realised that a lot of background information would be needed by anyone who has only recently discovered folk music; so I am writing primarily for the newer members, and if any of this is old hat to you, please bear with me!

## The Folk Revival

When we speak of the 'Folk Tradition', we are talking of a tradition of self-entertainment and self-expression, by song and music and dance, which has flourished among the ordinary people of every land. Such art as this, originating in a self-aware and highly creative community, has increasingly disappeared from much of the western world during the past century, as the growth of the entertainment industry brought pre-packaged entertainment to every home. Music has been made into a commodity, and its performers have become a paid elite. Naturally, they and their industry have a vested interest in keeping things that way.

Fortunately, there have been a few far-sighted individuals who recognised the decline of folk traditions. These people, the field collectors, attempted at least to preserve for posterity the fading perceptions of a lost era of community art; but some of them aimed far higher than this; at the re-establishment of the creative process in the community. The field collectors laid the foundations of the Folk Revival by searching far and wide for folk performers within the community, armed at first with notebooks, then wax-cylinder recorders and latterly with tape machines. Their subjects, the field singers - old people usually - are our link with the folk process as it was actually practised, and it is by study of their performances that we are all able to acquire the creative skills that were once freely absorbed within the folk community by its members.

While the English Folk Dance and Song Society has been active since the early part of this century, it appears that the activities of American folklorists sparked off the revival proper in this country, with visits to these shores around 1950 by respected performers and collectors of American folk material; particularly Alan Lomax, whose broadcasts entitled 'A Ballad-hunter in Britain' had a central influence on the developing revival. By 1952, Ewan MacColl, whose connections with working-class culture in this country go back to the thirties, had opened the Ballads and Blues Club in London, which included A.L. Lloyd the very celebrated folklorist among its residents. This was the first of a new breed of gatherings known collectively as the Folk Club movement. It seems to me that the folk club developed as an artificial replacement for the vanishing folk community, fulfilling the need for an environment in which to develop the performance skills.



## The Folk Centre

In the mid 1950s, Charles Parker became involved in the folk revival. Charles was a documentary radio producer with the BBC, and found that folk song and the recorded speech of working men and women could be woven together into very powerful forms of expression. The series of eight Radio Ballads written by Ewan MacColl between 1957 and 1964, directed by Charles and with music direction by Peggy Seeger, stand out for me as some of the finest products of the revival.

Between 1964 and 1971, Charles held evening classes in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, for the Workers Education Association, where many new people were brought into the revival, often with startling effect. It was as a result of attending one of these WEA lectures that Rhona Bowdler went out and discovered the Black Country singer George Dunn - a most valuable contribution to the revival.

In 1965 Charles called a meeting of the Birmingham folk clubs and urged the setting up of an organisation to collect, develop and disseminate a specifically midland repertoire (in contrast with other parts of the country, the midland folk club scene at that time had not developed a regional repertoire, and there was a great need for field research here. There still is.) This was the beginning of the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre. Some clubs did not become involved, while others gave only limited support. On the other hand Pam and Alan Bishop, who had founded the Peanuts folk club at the Crown in Corporation Street in 1963, handed their club over to others and became totally involved in BMFC; while the Birmingham Folk Song Club, founded in 1950 by the EFDSS and run as a monthly meeting (latterly by Joan Smith) disbanded and joined BMFC en masse.

In line with the Folk Centre's stated aims, a great deal of collecting was done in the early days, culminating in the Folk Centre Archives - about 1200 items transcribed to paper, some of which material was published as a book, 'Songs of the Midlands', under the editorship of Roy Palmer who had chaired the Folk Centre's Publications subcommittee. The BMFC have also amassed an extensive collection of tapes, covering field singers, workshops, seminars, concerts and club evenings; and a number of valuable reference books, including the four volumes of Bronson's 'Tunes to the Child Ballads'.

During 1965 and 1966 the Folk Centre ran several highly successful concerts, at venues such as the Town Hall and Digbeth Civic Hall, with artists including Ravi Shankar, the Exiles, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. Then in late 1966 the Centre formed its own folk club, the Grey Cock, as a very necessary development for the work of the BMFC. The name was chosen because the song 'The Grey Cock', collected from Mrs Cecilia Costello of Washwood Heath, was the most complete version of this rather rare ballad that has been collected. Apparently, the news media were instrumental, albeit unwittingly, in putting the Folk Centre in touch with Mrs Costello, for they published a news item about the Centre, indicating that they were studying material collected from the 'late Mrs Costello' (she had been discovered, I believe, back in 1952). Her subsequent indignant denial of her demise was received with great excitement! Unfortunate to relate, she has indeed passed away since then. Mrs Costello was one of the Folk Centre's best informants, and indeed one of the most important field singers yet discovered.



## The Grey Cock

The first club evening was on 18/12/66, an evening of seasonal songs. Initially, the club was an informal affair, held every Sunday night at the Roebuck just off Islington Row; and the first evening to be advertised to the public was on 26/2/67. The Folk Centre organised the club through a Club Committee, and supplied the resident performers. In the first year of operation, these were :-

Joy Ashworth	Fred Grindrod	Jane Marshall	Tony Seymour
Ann Barrie	Alan Hale	Barbara Miller	Duncan Skene
Alan Bishop	Richard Hamilton	Doug Miller	Joan Smith
Pam Bishop	Graham Langley	Roy Palmer	Jane Stevens
John Fryer	Rosemary Lucas	Charles Parker	Rod Stevens

Club policy was, and is, to present the best of traditional folk performance, along with contemporary developments using traditional forms. To that end, initial aims were to provide at least one guest and one feature of themed evening every six weeks, though in 1967 almost all evenings were themed. These evenings, with a central issue or viewpoint from which the material springs, have become infrequent of late, the most recent example being "Deadlier than the Male". The 'public' opening on 26/2/67 also coincided with our first guest, Festy Conlon, a brilliant Irish musician; a complete list of guests is appended.

The club has often tried experimental ways of organising its evenings, and one such way - the 'Beer and Cheese' - first tried on 30/6/68 has become a firm favourite as the informal evening when free food is served, and all are welcome to perform. Film evenings have also been staged occasionally, though with good folk material on film getting hard to find, and escalating hire costs for equipment, these are not viable at present.

On 3/9/67 the club moved to the White Lion in the Horsefair, where it grew steadily until April 1976. By this time, space was becoming a real problem, and we often had to turn away people for lack of room. This was one of the factors contributing to our move to the Crown, where capacity is almost double that of the old venue.

In addition to running the club on Sunday nights, there have been a number of other activities promoted by the Folk Centre and the Grey Cock, as follows :-

### Drama

Dramatic productions have been presented by BMFC, at the Grey Cock and elsewhere, since the earliest days. Some of these have been 'Of One Blood' (concerning racial equality), 'The Making of the Midlander' (industrialisation of the midlands), 'She Rode On a Horse Naked' (a radio program about Lady Godiva), 'St. George Alive' and 'St. George and the Dragon' (two mumming plays), 'Dog in the Manger' (a nativity play), and 'The Funny Rigs of Good and Tenderhearted Masters' (a documentary on the Kidderminster carpet-weavers strike of 1828). In January 1974, the group decided to produce a stage version of the 'Big Hewer' Radio Ballad, an undertaking much bigger and more complex than any previously attempted. The success of the resulting show, 'Collier Laddie', led to the formation of Banner Theatre Company, which is extremely active with three shows in permanent repertoire and engagements most weeks. Banner's productions, which have all been put on at the Grey Cock, are 'Collier Laddie' (the coalmining industry), 'Viva Chile' (events surrounding the overthrow of Allende in 1973), 'Shrewsbury 24' (building workers struggle), 'Womankind' (womans rights), 'Saltley Gate' (the culmination of the 1972 miners strike) and 'The Great Scapegoat' (race and racism). There have also been several street theatre productions, concerned with issues such as the battle to save the Post Office building in Victoria Square from the developers, and the campaign against cuts in public expenditure.



There have also been dramatic productions by the Grey Cock residents as such; notably 'Striking Times' a couple of years ago, which traced the growth of trade unions in Britain. More recently, another 'St. George' mumming play is entering its second Christmas season by popular demand.

### Workshops

The Folk Centre has run a workshop since 1965, which used to meet on Monday nights at Pam and Alan's. It moved to Joan Smith's in 1971/2 while the Bishops and the Rogers's were in India, and then to Dave and Chris's on their return. The Monday night workshop was given over mainly to development of singing style, though since 1972 it has diversified into musical sessions, songwriting, and in fact any aspects of folk performance that interest its members. So if you have any ideas, go along on Monday night and make them known!

The Folk Centre used to run drama workshops, which function is now fulfilled by Banner. However, the nominal Wednesday workshop dates are frequently used for rehearsals, so it is best to ask any of the group about dates if you are interested in coming along. Banner are currently in urgent need of bodies, particularly if you can sing and/or play any instruments; but ultimately enthusiasm is the only vital requirement.

### Seminars

Over the years there have been numerous seminars run by the Folk Centre; notably by A.L.Lloyd on Industrial folksong, Charles Parker on the Ballads, Ewan MacColl on Songwriting and on singing style, and E.P. Thompson on working-class culture. Seminars are available on tape for those wishing to study them.

### Outings

The club has promoted regular camping weekends over the last few years, often to Talybont-on-Usk which is a great favourite. Coach trips were also run to the Festival of Fools in 1971 and 1972 (MacColl's annual dramatic production on current events, now alas defunct).

### Dances

Occasional dances were organised by the club from 4/10/69 up to 1972, when they became more frequent, and more recently have been held about every 4 to 8 weeks. These Folk dances are very popular, and provide great fun even for complete beginners, who are guided through the movements by our callers.

### Conclusion

In looking back over the ten years of the Grey Cock Folk Song Club, I must acknowledge the debt of gratitude owing to the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre and its illustrious vice-presidents Charles Seeger, E.P.Thompson, Ewan MacColl and Joseph Needham; to the Birmingham Arts Association, and West Midland Arts Association more recently, with financial assistance from whom the programmes are presented; to all the singers, musicians, and others who have helped out in so many ways; and of course to you the audience, who have helped to keep the club going for a decade - may the next one be as successful as the first.

GUESTS OF THE GREY COCK

1966 - 1976

Alastair Anderson  
Frankie Armstrong  
Roy Bailey  
Aly Bain  
Banner Theatre Company  
Bob Blair  
Boys of the Lough  
Mick Branwich  
Packie Byrne  
Sean Cannon  
Canny Fettle  
Jimmy Carroll  
Bob Casey  
Chris Coe  
Pete Coe  
Rosario Cofre  
June Colclough  
Phil Colclough  
Clive Collins  
Combine  
Festy Conlon  
Seamus Creagh  
Critics Group  
Siney Crotty  
Jacky Daly  
Barbara Dane  
Bob Davenport  
Tommy Dempsey  
Dekek Elliott  
Dorothy Elliott  
John Faulkner  
Ray Fisher  
Miller Frondigoun  
The Galley  
The Gaugers  
Dick Gaughan  
Tom Gilfellow  
Walter Greaves  
Roger Grimes  
Kali Das Gupta  
Tommy Gunn  
Johnny Handle  
Roy Harris  
Carole Hartop  
Brendan Hearty  
Mike Herring  
Les Ivall  
Nic Jones  
Fred Jordan  
Dolores Keane  
Donneil Kennedy  
Floyd Kennedy  
Sandra Kerr  
A.L.Lloyd

Eamonn Lowe  
Tim Lyons  
Tom MacArthy  
Jimmy MacBeath  
Ewan MacColl  
Geordie MacIntyre  
Donal Maguire  
Cathall McConnell  
Kevin Mitchell  
Adrian Morris  
Robin Morton  
Oliver Mulligan  
Na Fili  
Pete Nalder  
Tom Paley  
Brian Patten  
Brian Pearson  
Catherine Perrier  
Martin Wyndham Read  
Reel Union  
Anthony Robb  
John Rose  
Buff Rosenthal  
Colin Ross  
Leon Rosselson  
Dave Scott  
Willy Scott  
Mike Seeger  
Peggy Seeger  
Irwin Silber  
Singers Workshop  
Dick Snell  
Staverton Bridge  
Mike Steele  
Alec Stewart  
Belle Stewart  
Ian Stewart  
Sheila Stewart  
Stewarts of Handsworth  
Gabe Sullivan  
Swan Arcade  
June Tabor  
Cyril Tawney  
Kevin Thomas  
Bob Thompson  
Paddy Tunney  
Denis Turner  
Jack Warshaw  
West Indian Narrative  
Ron Wheeler  
John Wright  
Terry Yarnell  
The Yetties  
Rene Zosso