

# Origins of the Pub Carols

Village carolling traditions exist in many parts of the country, notably in the Hope Valley in Derbyshire, the villages to the north of Sheffield in Yorkshire, and in parts of the West Country. The carols were initially developed by 'quires' or bands who occupied the west galleries of Anglican country churches, until they fell victim to 'reform', with the arrival of church organs, and a more orderly, less robust mode of delivery. The carols were continued by the participants elsewhere, sometimes just in the streets round people's houses, and sometimes in the pub, and sometimes in the non-conformist church halls.

## Who were the carollers?

Many of the carollers were from the artisan class e.g. leather workers, and people who worked in the metal trades such as cutlers and file makers. Carollers were often instrumentalists as well and played in the local bands.

## What is the singing style?

Extremely robust and uninhibited, mostly performed fortissimo, with a slow tempo. Witnesses to the tradition before the First World War noted the exuberance of the singers, not singing as part of a choir, but as individuals. The spirit is powerful, gutsy singing, with or without forceful striking accompaniment, avoiding at all costs the saccharine sweetness of commercialised Christmas carols, or the cathedral choir treatment. Where there is accompaniment, it too is robust, with 'symphonies' between some verses to give the singers a rest and a chance to sup their pints, and to delight the company.

## How did they acquire and learn their parts?

Early published versions of sets of carols date from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when people followed the singers around trying to notate what they were singing. In one group, known as the Big Set, from Sheffield, the carollers themselves used their own manuscripts which were jealously guarded, even from members of the same carolling group. Carols were originally sung in two parts, treble and bass, with alto and tenor parts being added over the years. Carollers carried their own copies of hand-written manuscript as an aide-memoire, but sung mostly from memory. Much of the notation and the instrumentation of the symphonies was done by the carollers and singers themselves.

In other more open groups, only a few people had manuscripts and most people learned them by singing in the pub. Other groups (Coal Aston in Derbyshire) learn and practice singing in parts and they meet for rehearsals. The original carollers sang round the houses in the village every night between Christmas Eve and New Years Eve.

## How do the Prince Albert Carollers learn the parts?

In 2001 12 to 15 people got together to learn a few carols in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The idea was to sing them in the local pub, The Prince Albert in Rodborough. Over the years more and more people came along to join in, wanting to sing the parts and it became obvious that the carols needed to be a bit more structured to make them accessible to more people. There are now regularly 70 or 80 people singing in four part harmony, making a very robust noise. Many of the original carols in the repertoire were based on transcriptions done by Ian Russell, others were gleaned by members seeking out carols from Yorkshire and the West Country. As the repertoire grew, what was being sung was formally notated as much as possible and where parts were missing or changed, these were added. There are still parts of some of the carols which elude notation: these just happen!

A few rehearsals are held each year during November to refresh the collective memory, learn new carols and encourage new-comers, using parts notated on Noteworthy (a computer programme), with pdf sheets for each carol. Rehearsals are actually quite formal, going through the parts section by section, note bashing where necessary. Some people use the new-fangled pdfs, some downloaded to their tablets and i-pads, some still use the original dog-eared copies and some use the eagerly-awaited word sheet booklet produced each year by our resident satirist, Bill Hicks. It is a complete mix.

Some people manage to attend all rehearsals, some come along just for the sings, and join in by singing next to others who know the parts, some join in all of it, some come along to listen and gradually join in over the season.

The piano accompaniment is hand-notated by Meg the pianist, who also writes extra symphonies to delight the singers.

The PACC carollers come from a wide geographic area as well as Stroud – there are regular visitors from Yorkshire, Bristol, Warwickshire, Hampshire, Devon, Gloucester, Cheltenham..... Like the original carollers, many PACC singers are instrumentalists and play in bands for dances, weddings, festivals and other social events.

**Where do the PACC carols come from?**

The original carols PACC sang at the beginning in 2001 were mostly from the Sheffield area, using transcriptions done by Ian Russell. Over the years various members have attended various workshops and collected books of carols on their musical travels. Ian Russell has spent a lifetime making the Sheffield and other repertoires more widely available, and we are also indebted to Eddie Upton and Folk South West for their splendid West Country Carols workshops.

**Notes taken from:**

1. A Festival of Village Carols – Derbyshire Peak District. Transcribed and arranged by Ian Russell. Village Carols Sheffield 2006
2. A Festival of Village Carols – Sixteen Carols from the Mount Dawson Manuscripts, Worrall. Transcribed and arranged by Ian Russell. Village Carols Unstone, Sheffield, 1994.
3. Come sing for the season. Village Carols from Coal Aston in Derbyshire. Village Carols, Unstone, Sheffield. Ian Russell 1995
4. Jack Goodison's Collection of Local and Traditional Carols. 'The Red Book' Fourth Edition. Rolling Stock company. Forgefolk 2005

PACC members Ali Riley and John Willoughby both have an extensive collection of these and other carol books, and have contributed several carols to the PACC repertoire.

Fran Wade 24 August 2015.