

# ALBERT AND THE CAROLS

It was sometime in the early 1980s that a friend in Leicester, where I was living at the time, suggested a trip to the Royal Hotel at Dungworth near Sheffield to hear some old carols sung in the pub at Christmas time. I must say I did not immediately jump at the opportunity. Although a severely lapsed Methodist who thoroughly enjoyed singing Wesleyan hymns as an impressionable youth, I had always found conventional Christmas carols pallid, joyless things that I was embarrassed to sing even to please my Mum on Christmas eve.

We queued outside the slightly forbidding Royal Hotel - this was Yorkshire after all - for ten minutes or so before the doors opened and a crowd of unlikely looking carol singers surged towards the bar. Somewhere to the front of the assembled locals an organist sounded a few bars and the pub erupted into song. I didn't recognize any of the carols except three versions of 'While shepherds watched' to tunes I'd never heard before. As I got my ear in to the repeating lines and fuguing parts I found I could sing the whole carol without squeaking the high notes or dropping an octave. The tune was pitched for the normal singing voice; what a blessing! And the carols – no embarrassment here - just full throated, lusty singing for the pleasure of the sound and the company.

I visited the Royal Hotel annually for the next five or six years before moving to Stroud.

These largely eighteenth century carols, with their fuguing parts, were generally sung in two parts in the Royal Hotel, although 'old Wilf' declared that 'when he were a lad there were often three parts and the young singers were not doing it like it used to be'. Wilf also sang one or two solos in a high tenor voice including 'Cris Cringle' and the Victorian melodrama 'The Mistletoe Bough' – a natural comfort break opportunity if ever there was one.

What a revelation it all was, but why did I find it so exhilarating?

Well, this was community singing where everyone without any self consciousness sang their hearts out. No choirmaster or censoring hand here, just the natural musicality of people singing for pleasure. Then the character of the melodies and harmonies, tunes asking for unfettered singing but with an ear for one's neighbour in both part and time. Oh and the words – no compromise here - the poetry and passion of the past. I can live with that.

Christmas 2001 saw our first foray into these carols, largely based around the pub singing from Yorkshire. Well, quite reasonably, we copied what we heard from the recordings of the Yorkshire and Derbyshire traditions. Ten carols, usually in two parts, for the first Christmas – not a bad start! They were our core repertoire. However we were not constrained by a cherished legacy of local carols or a particular way of singing them. We were free to evolve our own tradition.

So as our company of singers travel the 'Albert Consort' journey how have we fared?

One of our first collisions was how the tune was carried and the need to pitch it for both men and women to sing comfortably supported by the harmony parts. This encourages a straightforward entry for people into our tradition as it does in Yorkshire. It is interesting to

see in Anne Gregson's paper, *The English Christmas Carol*, how the increasing complexity of the West Gallery singers' music distanced them from their community and was seen as a contributing factor in their demise.

Our repertoire although continuing to reflect the unique character of these old carols has drawn increasingly from the tradition of the South and South-West. Singing workshops at Folk South West in Sidmouth has helped us create our own distinctive collection of carols linking north with south.

The pace of our singing is quicker than that in Yorkshire, and although gently criticised by some people used to that slower style, it reflects the taste of our singers.

Carols are now sung in three or four parts, loosely described as 'tune', alto, tenor and bass, apart of course from those wayward souls who improvise happily to their own vocal proclivity.

So here we are with our new 'local' tradition, still evolving, that took the 'Village Carols of Yorkshire' as a starting point but has adapted both the repertoire and style to suit a fresh circumstance. Like all living traditions we recognize the character of the past but celebrate our inheritance through change.

We don't know how long our carol singing will last but hope it will take root and flourish into the future.

As the Carol says 'We singers make bold, as in days of old, to celebrate Christmas and bring you good cheer'.

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**Bob Bray**

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