

# **Fifty Years of Folk**

An incomplete and inaccurate history of Stockton Folk Club  
1962 – 2012

This is a work in progress. Incomplete because Stockton Folk Club is still very much alive and because it has been necessary to leave out a lot of detail. Inaccurate because the author's memory and research skills are imperfect and because not all the source material is totally reliable. It seemed important though to get something down on paper while we have chance. It is hoped that this account will stimulate further recollections of events and characters in the Club's history and that readers will respond to correct the omissions and mistakes of the author and to add their own stories.

John Lawson

March 2012

## 1. How it all started

Early in 1962 an advert in Melody Maker alerted readers to a folk night in Newman's Coffee Bar in Dovecot Street, Stockton-on-Tees. This was set up as a monthly (?) venture by Tony Foxworthy, local EFDSS organiser. Stan Croft remembers meeting Dave Manship there. Johnny Handle, who had recently started at ICI, recalls being surprised and disappointed by the material performed "as it was only vaguely anything to do with folk, and more like scout and girl-guide songs, with a few skiffle and blues items!" An "excruciating rendering of 'Miss Otis Regrets'" made up his mind to start a separate venue. Johnny already had experience of the Folk Song and Ballad Club in Newcastle which he started with Louis Killen in 1958.

### EARLY DAYS      by Johnny Handle

(From the Club's first newsletter in July 1962)

My impressions of Stockton on arrival during the winter of 1962, was that one meeting a month of the English Folk Dance and Song Society was not enough to encourage an active interest in folk music on Teesside. So I decided to start a weekly club of my own, after enrolling Ken Crawford and Dave Manship as regular singers. An immense pub crawl of Stockton produced few good sites for pub premises, until at last I found the "Nut" or "King's Head", tucked away down Lawson Street off Yarm Lane.



Johnny Handle

The place seemed to have an atmosphere and cosiness so we started the club there in April. I wondered at first what sort of people would come and listen, - at Newcastle when we started four years ago, there was a large number of people who only came once and then went back to Jazz Clubs which they preferred. Not so Stockton folk. Most of the members now come regularly, many finding a new interest in folk music.

At first we had no definite policy, the ideas building up as we went along. I concentrated on British and Geordie material. Ken sang both British and American, while Dave kept the old spurs jinglin' with his popular mid-western songs. Having several contacts with other singers I booked some guests including Lou Killen, Ray Fisher, Laurie Charlton, Ron Duke and John Brennan. Their diversity of styles and [material] helped to make the evenings more interesting and to prove what a fund of British songs exists.

Colin Ross comes from Shields to play the fiddle, melodeon and pipes, while the local lads keep up their end with rheumatic squeezebox and fancy banjo picking. The guest spot from the floor proved popular and Graeme, our local bard, found a new audience for his excellent songs.

On the now legendary “Blaydon Races Neet”, food was provided for the members including the traditional “Stotty Kyeks” (Teesside’s fatty cakes), the munching of 95 pairs of jaws being a suitable accompaniment to the Tyneside music hall songs.....

*This newsletter also listed the Committee:*

Johnny Handle (Jesmond); Ken Crawford (Faceby); Dave Manship (Ormsby); Graeme Miles (No fixed abode!); John White (Marske)  
Treasurer & Secretary John McCoy Middlesbrough

[There were two John McCoys. One is pictured below in the early Fettleers playing left-handed guitar, usually known as Johnny or occasionally “Irish John”. The other, listed in the archives as “Gonk”, had earlier started a Ballad and Blues Club at the Leviathan Hotel in Middlesbrough and went on to lead successful R & B groups The Crawdaddies, The Real McCoy etc. I’m told that the treasurer and secretary was Irish John.]

For years there has been a question mark over exactly when the Folk Club started. The 20th anniversary was celebrated on 22<sup>nd</sup> March with a visit from the Elliots and the Birtley Club (which started in March 1962), and the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, too, were marked in March. A recent scan through the small ads in the Evening Gazette for March-April 1962, however, revealed a series of ads for “The Folk Song Club starting this Tuesday / tomorrow night / tonight King’s Head, Stockton”, where “tonight” was **Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> April**. By the following February, when the record books start, it was meeting on a Monday night, the slot it has occupied ever since.

[Incidentally, the club which met on Fridays in Newman’s Coffee bar (fortnightly according to Melody Maker) later moved to the Black Lion and became the Song Swap Club. So far, I’ve been unable to find exactly when it started or what happened to it after about June ’62.]

## 2. Growth

*Ron Angel continues the story (from his Introduction to “Sitting in the Sun”, a collection of songs and tunes written by members, 1992)*

We were fortunate from the very beginning of the Club we had fine original songs appearing. One of the founder members, Graeme Miles, single handedly started what has become the Teesside Tradition; songs like “The Guisborough Road”, “Greatham Marshes”, “Ring of Iron” and “The Baltic Taverners” (also known as “The Procession”) were just the forerunners of a phenomenal output of songs about urban and rural Cleveland. The man who actually organised the Club, Johnny Handle, was also producing original songs ... in addition to making herculean efforts towards keeping the fledgling club going. At one time he was learning three new songs a week, and doing the first half-hour himself whilst hoping to be relieved by Dave Manship, Graeme Miles, Ken Crawford and John White (known as the gang), who used to come rolling in after about 45 minutes. Johnny Handle set the standards for the new club, insisting on good order when someone was singing, urging people to have a go, and giving praise and encouragement when they did so. He also started off

the instrumental tradition of the Club, learning to play traditional jigs and reels on the melodeon, an instrument which most of us had never even seen before. It was a sad day for the Club when he became redundant at ICI and had to go back up to Tyneside. Deprived of its leading light and main driving force, the Club waned visibly, and numbers dropped week by week until we were left with eleven members, two of whom had just started.

After much discussion, we accepted the theory that part of the trouble was that no-one would take responsibility for starting the night, so it was decided to form a Group (wonderful new word for the 60s) for that express purpose. The group was named The Fettlers (local iron-making tradition and also the general Northern English meaning of [fettle] “to put something right”) and had the duty of starting off the evening with half-a-dozen songs and rounding off the night with a few resounding choruses, as well as keeping order generally and leading any choruses that happened to come along in the course of the evening.



Left to right: John White; Graeme Miles; Ken Crawford; Ron Angel; Johnny McCoy  
*(photo probably taken by Dave Manship who was also in the group, briefly, before he left to go to sea)*

This had the desired effect and attendances rapidly improved with remarkable consistency, week after week, until the place (The King's Head) became so crowded that we had to move to the Stork & Castle, a couple of streets away. This was a much bigger place, with the bar curtained off in a recess in the back corner and a fine, big stage. The audience continued to grow apace until it became quite normal to see a queue of people 30 yards long waiting to get in at the beginning of the night.

At this time instrumentals were still very few and a fair proportion of Country and Western songs were still being sung. We had become aware, however, of the English Folk Song and Dance Society by this time, and that most of the fine traditional songs we were hearing and singing had been made available courtesy of the EFDSS. We also became aware of an attitude of mind known nowadays as Political Correctness. Members argued interminably over what was allowable as “Folk Song” and what was not: heated discussions and furious arguments became so common that the Society

was referred to familiarly as the “English Folk and Ding-dong”. (And the years rolled on and nothing changed.) Some of us joined, however, and remained fee-paying members for nearly 30 years. *[And some of us still are]*

### 3. The Venues

In its first ten years the Club moved frequently between the licensed premises of Stockton. Here’s a list with approximate dates from the archives:

April ’62      The King’s Head (Lawson St.) In the words of one of Johnny Handle’s songs, “They’re knockin’ ‘em down, the old pubs, Around the town, the old pubs...” . Sadly this one’s long gone.

Dec. ’63      The Stork and Castle (Brunswick St.) This was the Clubs’ heyday with audience numbers often reaching 150, occasionally 200. Another pub that’s gone.

March ’66      Columba House (Church Rd.) -- the Knights of St Columba were our hosts. This is where I first found the Club [JL].

Sept. ’66      The Buff’s Club (Norton Rd.) – briefly.

Oct. ’66      The Stork and Castle

Mar. 68      The Leeds Hotel (Bishopton Lane) -- only for two weeks

Mar. ’68      The Talbot (Norton Rd.) A large room with a stage but the floor also accommodated two snooker/billiards tables and we all had to cram into the spaces between and around them. The Club received one week’s notice when Fitzgeralds planned to relaunch the venue for snooker. Renamed Manhattan’s, this imposing building now stands empty.

Around this time the Club occasionally decamped to the “Kirk” (the Kirk Levington Country Club) which was owned by John “Gonk” McCoy and Ken Crawford. Nights there included a gig by Johnny Silvo and the ’68 Christmas party as well as some memorable Club ceilidhs.

Sept. ’69      The King’s Head

Oct. ’69      The Black Lion (High St.) Stockton’s beautiful 18<sup>th</sup> century coaching inn, together with its neighbour the Vane Arms, was an integral part of Old Stockton. Tragically, they were demolished to make way for the Castlegate shopping centre.

Oct ’69      Back to the King’s Head for one week, then again to the Black Lion. It was getting difficult to keep track of the Club!

Mar ’70      The King’s Head again, briefly, then the Sun Inn (Knowles St.). Conveniently just off the High Street, the Sun Inn became home to the Club, but not immediately. In the early days records show that the room was often “crammed to

suffocation” and it wasn’t long before we returned to the Talbot and the snooker tables.

May ’71 The Talbot    Nov. ’71 The Sun Inn  
Dec. ’71 The Talbot

Feb. ’72        The Sun Inn, and here we’ve stayed for more than 40 of our 50 years! A decline in numbers means that suffocation is no longer a danger and the excellent acoustics in the back room have contributed to the Club’s continuing success. So too has some excellent hand-pulled Bass (most of the time) and the good people (most of the time) who served it: they are among the characters who help make the Club’s history. There were formidable landladies Megan (who once barred the Wilsons) and her daughter-in-law Irene, while raucous and flamboyant barman Graham was certainly unforgettable. He once turned up at a folk club Christmas party dressed as Fatima the belly dancer!

Numbers fluctuated: late in ’85 Megan threatened the Club with an increase in rent or eviction if attendance didn’t increase. Fortunately an appeal to members and an article in The Evening Gazette turned things round and a singaround in late November attracted 60 people, including 28 singers. Early in ’86 the room was full to capacity for Martin Carthy and for Vin Garbutt and things were looking good again. Megan’s successors have generally had more Monday-night customers in the Folk Club than in the front bar even though numbers in both have declined.



The Sun, incidentally, has been (and still is) host to very different music nights, many of them much louder than the Folk Club. In the early days it was venue for a Friday night bluegrass night which was attended by some of our members. This has led to confusion between the two nights but I am assured by Dave Manship that they were separate ventures and our books confirm that Monday night was folk night.

Just occasionally we’ve lost the room to a key, televised football match, say, so for completeness (just in case anyone plans a pilgrimage to all our venues or their sites) I should mention The Tilery (now gone), The Castle and Anchor and The Riverside (now closed) where rooms echoed briefly to our choruses. But long may our association with The Sun continue! *[Remember, this was written in 2012 – times change!]*

#### 4. The Annals

Stockton Folk Club has a possibly unique record of who performed at the club, not just guest artists and residents but floor singers, and of what they sang or played. This

has been written down in a series of hard-backed notebooks which go back to February 1963. We are currently up to volume 31, although sadly two volumes are missing: we're hoping they'll turn up one day in Ron's house!

As an historical archive the books often leave something to be desired. It is common to find only a first name or nickname for a performer, although more recent books have a separate list of regular performers which helps in identification. In particular, the Fettleers were nearly always just listed as "Group", making it difficult to follow the changing line-up (see below). Song and tune titles were sometimes guessed or misheard (it still happens), so that a few years later even the performer has a job to work out what he or she sang! The alternative titles can be very entertaining, though.

Just as a taster, here are some of the floor singers recorded in Book1:

Albert (Elliot); Alice (?); Burt (Spurrs); Colin (Mather); Dennis (Haynes?); Dot (Angel); Ellis (Holliday); Fred (Osborne); Geoff (Atkinson?); Gonk; Harry (Lockey); Jim (Wright); Lance (Vernon); Stan (Croft); Stan (Gee); Vell (?)

Sometimes, especially in the early days, the records broke down completely! Footnotes such as, "...will be written up when I can find the bit of paper..."; "[*the scribe*] went home early, records not completed"; "Sorry .... Too drunk to write", tell their own stories. Often the scribe was just too engrossed in the music. Nevertheless, the books make wonderful, nostalgic reading for those involved. The standard of the records has improved over the years and, with a bit of digging and sifting, the archaeologist can unearth a fascinating history of folk music in Stockton and the people involved.

The scribes were anonymous, which is a shame as they too deserve recognition (and in some cases should be held to account for the awful jokes and strange drawings with which they enlivened the records!). It's worth mentioning a few who made regular entries: Rita Angel, Ron, Les Richardson, Chris McGowan, Olive Elliot and currently Joy Rennie, with apologies to the many others who contributed to the moderately accurate annals.

## 5. The Teesside Fettleers

Graeme Miles is credited with coming up with the name, The Fettleers, for the group. With many changes of personnel, the group was very much identified with the Club which was popularly known as the Fettleers Folk Club. This changed in 1971 when club and group amicably parted company, leaving Ron Angel and Frankie Porter, who both remained part of the group, to run the Club.

Up to this point the line-up had at various times included Graeme, Ron, Ken Crawford, Dave Manship, John White, Johnny McCoy, Ellis Holliday, Cliff Robson, Geoff Atkinson, Alan Wilkinson, Alex McLean, Stewart "Mac" McFarlane, Dave Lewis, Vin Garbutt and Frankie (and probably a few more along the way). Big Mac and Dave Lewis had also sung with The Creel, another group that did regular resident spots at the Club.

Ron, Mac, Frankie and Sean McManus made up the Group when they made it to the Albert Hall and it was this line-up who recorded the much-treasured albums "Ring of

Iron” and “Travelling the Tees” as the Teesside Fettleers in ’74 and ’75 (the first of these with some help from Johnny Collins). The Teesside was added, I believe, by the record company and the group went on to put the region on the folk music map with original songs by Graeme, Ron, Bob and others, along with traditional songs from Durham and Yorkshire. Sean McManus was replaced by Garth Flack, but when he in turn left in 1977 the group disbanded leaving a lot of disappointed fans and two years worth of unfulfilled bookings.

That’s not the end of the story. Stew McFarlane and Bob Skingle revived the group several times in the 80s and 90s to produce three more albums and it is still going strong. Further participants have been Richard Grainger, Terry Dickinson, Brian Edwards, Adrian Beadnall, Paul Ruane, Dave Hardy and Stan Gee. We look forward to hearing the current line-up of Mac, Bob, Adrian and, latest addition, Dave Hutchison as part of our anniversary season.

Those who never heard the Fettleers can learn more and listen to clips of their music (from several embodiments of the group) on the website <http://teessidefettleers.com>

## 6. Alumni

The Fettleers weren’t the only club regulars who went on to make a name for themselves. We can’t claim exclusive connections, but a number of artists can list Stockton Folk Club as one of the places they honed their skills. Certainly the most successful has been Vin Garbutt who regularly tours the world to great acclaim as singer, songwriter and whistle player. His “Best Live Act” BBC Radio 2 Folk Award also owes something to his hilarious patter. Others who have made it on the world stage are Eddie Walker and Richard Grainger.

One of the mainstays and great characters of the Club in the King’s Head and the Stork and Castle was Jim Wright who is remembered as an inspiration to those who heard him.

The Bond brothers, Peter, John, Nigel, and Trevor, were a big part of the Club in the late 60s and early seventies, often in fine harmony as the Comfee Travellers. It was Peter who went on to make his name as singer/songwriter. Other local groups who made an impact at the Club included the young Distillers (Sandy Still, Alistair Russell and Ian Stansfield) which was a springboard for Alistair to go on to spend 13 years as part of Battlefield Band; residents Jackaroo were Rita Angel, Dave Milner and Dave Lewis (later replaced by Eddie Walker), while Dave Martin’s “Blue Anchor” had various line-ups, the best being Dave, Nigel Bond and Colin Irvine. In their youth, several of the Wilson Family were frequent performers, while Jean Haste was a regular who could hold her own with the professionals.

All the above were later booked as paid guests. More recently, in the same category, we can list Steve Dawes and Helen Pitt; Dogwatch (John & Joy Rennie); The Raffleites (Mary Vipond, Alison Tasker, Alison Whittaker, Gill Bytheway-Rawlings and Joy) and Steve Lane. The Young ‘Uns (Sean Cooney, David Eagle and Michael Hughes) acquired their group name in the Sun, emphasising the age gap between them and an ageing membership!

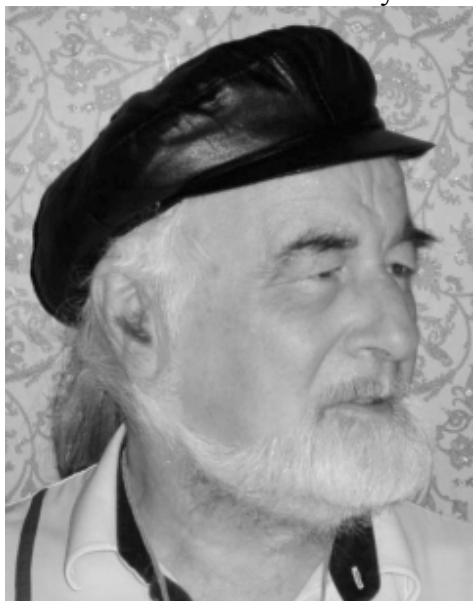


It would be remiss of me not to mention my colleagues in the Endeavour Shantymen. Set up by Richard Grainger, the group also included at various times Ron Angel, John Calvert, Sean Cooney, Steve Dawes, John Rennie, Mike Shorttle and Graham Walker. The shantymen were never booked at the Club but could be relied upon to finish the night with a nautical chorus or two whenever required.

This selection of performers is bound to have omissions but is in no way intended to belittle the contributions made by the many other floor singers and instrumentalists who have been vital to the club's success and to our enjoyment. Thank you all!

## 7. Ron Angel

Any history of Stockton Folk Club has to single out one man and that's Ron Angel. He wasn't there from the very start. According to Graeme Miles, Ron's wife Rita came first and brought him along shortly afterwards, although Ron had it that Johnny McCoy told him about the new club. Whatever way he got there, he remained at the heart of the Club for over 44 years.



He is remembered first as a performer. A fine solo singer with a wonderful timbre to his voice, he rapidly built up a great repertoire of songs to which he added regularly over the years. He also combined to great effect with Rita, another fine singer, guesting at other clubs in the area, and with the other resident group singers. He was an expert whistle player who could also blow a great tune out of a recorder, piccolo, harmonica or the ocarina he wore like a medallion. He was very active in teaching local schoolchildren to play the penny whistle and he also played in several ceilidh bands, for the Cleveland Cloggies and for The Locos-in Motion morris team.

Ron wasn't a prolific songwriter and was modest about his achievements. Dave Turner noted how, when asked where a new song had come from, he'd answer casually, "Oh, I found it in my bag". Yet these found songs included some of the best to come out of Cleveland like The Chemical Worker's Song and Steelmen, and Ron was always delighted when he heard that yet another group in Canada, say, had recorded the former and cited it as traditional. Sadly, some of his later songs like the wonderful Don't Go to Morpeth and Die haven't been published. His tunes are less well known but the collection of his songs and tunes "Out of the Sun" in 1989 revealed some real gems like The Ayresome March and The Linthorpe Hornpipe and there were more to follow. This little book also has more to tell about Ron's background and activities than I can fit in here.

All these talents came together, of course, in the Teesside Fettleers but here I want to concentrate on his role in the Folk Club. For it was Ron who did more than anyone to keep the Club going through the 70s, 80s, 90s and into the new millennium. There

was the behind the scenes activity like booking guests, looking after the money and being guardian of the annals. There was leading by example: Ron continued to start the night off when there was no longer a resident group and carried on the tradition of maintaining good order and good choruses. Ron did more than his share as MC, but this wasn't something he was keen on, and he encouraged others to take on this role. Indeed, encouraging people to take part was one of Ron's biggest contributions: encouraging and praising performers, new and old, helping instrumentalists learn new pieces at tune nights and promoting singarounds and the knurdle (an informal session to introduce the night) as a format for everyone to have a go.

Why is all this written in the past tense? Ron last sang at the folk club in February '07 shortly before he underwent major heart surgery. During a slow recovery he turned out to hear the Young 'Uns in June '07 and joined in the knurdle but continued health problems meant that this was his last visit. Several of us have tried to arrange a night out in The Sun for Ron over the last few years and failed. He's greatly missed.

## 8. Guests

As noted above, right from the start Johnny Handle was bringing guests of the calibre of Lou Killen and Ray Fisher from Tyneside. In a contrast of style, the first guest recorded in the annals was bluesman Long John Baldry, a friend of "Gonk".

Among the luminaries of the folk world who made more than one visit to Stockton were Ewan McColl & Peggy Seeger; Cyril Tawney; Martin Carthy & Dave Swarbrick; Christy Moore; Nic Jones (in The Halliard); Peter Bellamy; Fred Jordan and Tony Rose. Of course, there were very many more guests ranging from the very well known to some now forgotten, from local singers to transatlantic visitors. A lot of them were the journeymen singers who often came for not a lot of money, who came back because they enjoyed the atmosphere and audience-singing that you get in a good folk club, and who built up a fan base in the process.

I've recently put together an index of guest artists from the record books, their names and the dates they came. As already noted, two of the books are missing so this index is incomplete but if anybody wants to inspect it, just ask. From the index I've put together a list of the top ten most booked guests:

1	Dick Miles	26 visits recorded
2	Geoff Higginbottom	23
3	Eddie Walker	18 ( <i>21 if you include Jackaroo</i> )
4	Gordon Tyrrall	16
5	Richard Grainger	15
6	Brian Peters	14
7	Marie Little	13
8=	Vin Garbutt	12
8=	Blue Anchor	12
10=	Jez Lowe	11
10=	Tom McConville	11
10=	Gerry Hallom	11
10=	Tony Wilson	11

This section has again been very selective. In pursuit of brevity and objectivity I've omitted several of my favourites and, no doubt, a lot of yours. Let's just say thank-you to all the artists who have brought their songs and music to Stockton and shared them with us over fifty years.

## 9. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The folk club scene is rather different these days from how it was in the late sixties. Stockton shares the problem with most clubs of an ageing and decreasing membership and of finding ways to attract a new audience. That is not to say that the Club is in poor health: there is still a good mix of singers, songwriters, melodeon, concertina and whistle players, pipers and storytellers keeping the tradition alive. Numbers typically fluctuate in the range 20 to 40 but we can still occasionally fill the room. One such occasion was in 2010 when we celebrated 40 years in The Sun with Johnny Handle joining the party.

When Ron "retired" in 2007, the management passed to John & Joy Rennie and John Lawson. This caretaker arrangement became long term so we hope members think the caretakers *are* taking care of the Club. We are greatly assisted by a pool of stalwarts who act as MCs on Monday nights: currently they are Steve Dawes, Steve Lane, Mike Shorttle, Dave Turner and Cris Yelland (with the management doing their bit too).

New developments include the website and an e-mail newsletter. In the last few years Denis Dunning has put hundreds of photos of our guests and regulars on his website (see Links page on ours). The guest list includes some new names, encouraging the next generation of performers, as well as keeping a place for established favourites.

We hope to pass on the club to a new generation of folk enthusiasts as somewhere where they can keep the old songs and tunes alive, find an audience for their own, new ones and share the great enjoyment we and our forebears have had over 50 years.

## 10. Acknowledgements

My thanks to Johnny Handle, Ron Angel, Graeme Miles, Dave Manship, Stan Croft, Colin Mather, Tinker Dick, Ron Hampton, Albert Elliot, Trevor Lister and several of my contemporaries in the club for sharing their memories and providing snippets of information and contacts.