

Sing a Song of Swansea Town

by Janie Meneely

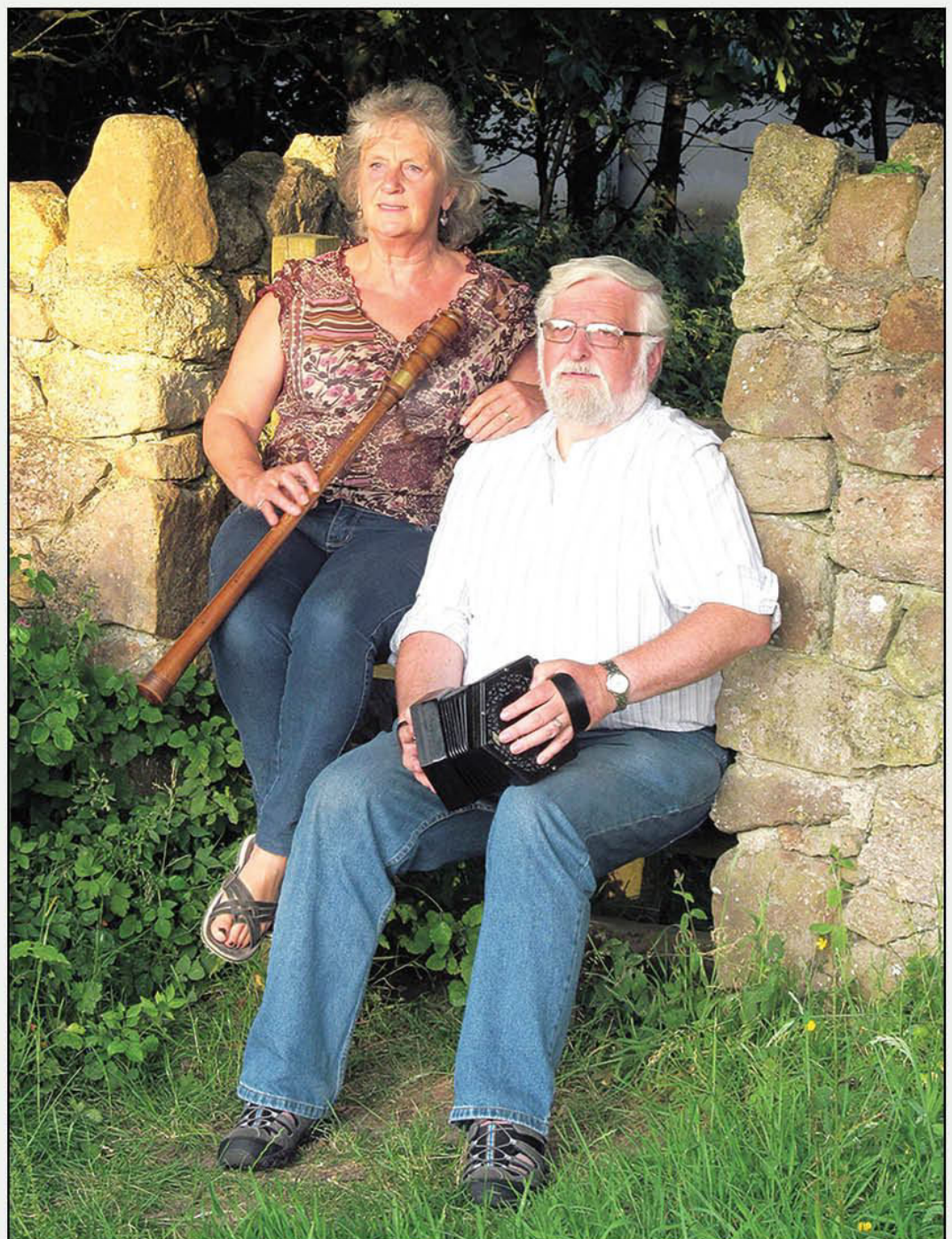


Andrew McKay and Carole Etherton pore through local archives to discover stories that turn into songs recounting the heritage of the Welsh seaside. You've probably heard a few.

Ask anyone in the folkie crowd for a song about Swansea, the bustling and historic waterfront town at the head of the Gower peninsula in Wales, and invariably he or she will come up with something by Andrew McKay or Carole Etherton (sometimes both). Maybe Andrew's light-hearted *Lifeboat Horses* that recounts a local legend about The Mumbles lifeboat. Or Carole's *Out The Sands* about the ladies who raked cockles at Penclawdd, a mining village. Or the somber *Cobre Days* about the Hecla, the ship that brought yellow fever back to Swansea along with a load of copper ore from Cuba. That one even drew a website message from a lady who'd been doing family research. She discovered that her great-great-grandfather had contracted the fever aboard ship and was the one who was delirious when the boat arrived - a detail McKay notes in the song.

The point is, there really aren't many songs about Swansea or South Wales (that's the *old* South Wales, mind you), unless you count the legacy of work presented by Welsh-language singers. Songs written in English seem to have faded into the hedgerows; only a handful were deemed 'collectible' by scholars on the loose in the days of Phil Tanner and other native singers. So Andrew and Carole started writing new ones, capturing local characters and the stories they told in verses laced with historical tidbits and framed with robust sing-along choruses.

A bio-chemical engineer by profession, the now retired Andrew looks the part of the classic Welsh bard with a crop of snowy white hair, an actor's beard



and a barrel organ of a chest. He was born in Monmouthshire, but he wasn't exactly a local. His parents were from England, his father having been sent to Wales as a resettlement officer following WWII. The family moved to Bristol when Andrew was seven.

He eventually set off for college in London, which is where he caught the 'bug'. This would have been in the late 1960s when folkie fever was running high. "I started going to the local folk clubs, and banged away on the guitar while I tried to sing along," he tells me. After dropping in on a concertina workshop at the Whitby Folk Festival, he bought a concertina and began teaching himself to play. (It turned out to be a duet concertina, a detail that puzzled him at first, but he figured it out...) "I learned one song, and almost immediately went from being the worst guitar player in the club to being the best concertina player. Of course there weren't any other concertina players in the club then, but it was encouraging." These days he proudly calls himself the Crane Driver, after the Crane concertina he plays.

It wasn't until he began work on his PhD in Swansea that he returned to South Wales. "A friend was singing in a local shanty group called Baggyrinkle, and he asked me to join. Of course most of what they sang were sea songs, but I was struck by the fact that the songs were always about London or Liverpool. There was never anything about Swansea - except maybe *Old Swansea Town*." And this was odd, he thought, "...because there were so many great stories about Swansea sailors."

He had found a book that was chock full of diaries, letters and histories of an array of Swansea salts. "long dead," says Andrew, "but you could read what they had to say in their own words." Eventually bits and pieces of their stories found their way into Andrew's first serious attempt at songwriting: *All Washed Up Ashore*.

*Oh it's one more day till we take our pay,
And with cash in hand secure,
We will swagger into town and all the girls will gather round,
Til we're all washed up ashore.*

That seemed to pull the cork out, and suddenly Andrew found himself writing more songs: *Dead Reckoning* came next, about an old salt made redundant in the age of steam.

"...there really aren't many songs about Swansea or South Wales... so Andrew and Carole started writing new ones, capturing local characters and the stories they told in verses laced with historical tidbits and framed with robust sing-along choruses..."

*Dead reckoning,
All that's left to me now is
dead reckoning,
Though I've mastered the seas and
the fresh living breeze,
All that's left to me now is
dead reckoning.*

By then Andrew had a strong grounding in traditional music, and he was writing 'in the tradition', as they say, but he wouldn't call what he was writing folk music.

"You can't sit down to write a folk song," he says, "but if you manage to write a song that other folks start to sing, well then..." Especially if those other folks add something to the song to personalise it - even if they do nothing more than alter a single word or change the rhythm slightly to make the song their own. "That's the only way songs have a life," Andrew says with conviction. He's not one to lean forward and correct a singer of his songs; he prefers to clap enthusiastically. "The worst thing you can do to a song is not sing it!" he adds.

He began hunting for more historical information, especially stories that had some bearing on today's time, like *Navigator Lady*, which tells the story of Sarah Jane Rees, from Llangrannog. She learned navigation from her ship captain father and sailed as the navigator on her father's ship in the mid-1800s, when women supposedly didn't do things like that.

One of his newer songs, *The Churchman's Road*, is about the Reverend James Buckley, a Methodist preacher who ran the local brewery (he inherited it from his father-in-law - what's a man to do?). Folks say he preached his Sunday sermons in Carmarthenshire, where the pubs were respectfully closed on the Sabbath, and afterwards crossed the border into Glamorganshire to

have a drink where the pubs were open.

Jerry the One-Legged Rigger, describes a fellow who would scamper up the mast to work, his empty trouser leg just flapping in the breeze. That was all Andrew gleaned about the fellow from a snippet of history he had been reading. "But there was such rhythm in that name: Jerry-the-one-legged-rigger. I had to write a song about him," he recalls.

It was a hard slog. "There wasn't any information about him except that one mention, so I basically had to imagine him into being." To do that he read every scrap he could find about the Swansea waterfront, and slowly a figure began to emerge, cobbled out of real people and real ships that had been part of the local maritime scene. "Here was a fellow who clearly came from a sea-going background - maybe he was born at sea, and grew up on sailing ships, working as a sailor until he lost his leg. With no other trade to pursue, he was able to make a living taking care of the ships that came into port, even if he couldn't go with them. I could just sense the longing he must have felt as each ship left the dock."

*By the time he was born
he'd been twice round the horn,
For his Mam was his Dad's navigator,
He was born in the dark
on an old Swansea barque
About thirty miles from the equator.
By the time he was three
he'd spent four years at sea,
What he didn't know didn't figure,
Now his sailing is past,
but he's still up the mast,
He's Jerry the one-legged rigger.*

*Oh you may have a dock
where you float round the clock,
And your ships may be faster and bigger,
But there's one thing we've got,
which we're sure that you've not,
That's Jerry the one-legged rigger.*

This is the song that he is most proud of, he says.

Meanwhile, Andrew had met Carole Etherton, a lively brunette from Sussex who had been singing with the Shellback Chorus. The timing was apt. Andrew was starting to drift away from Baggyrinkle. He was looking for more vocal variety; he wanted to use more instrumentation - he was, by then, getting pretty good on the concertina; and he wanted to sing with Carole. Who wouldn't?

Carole had been singing mostly a cappella when she met Andrew. She had been writing songs, too, and she and Andrew were able to "mix and match from the beginning," she says.

She'd entered into the folk scene back in the 1990s when a girl from work invited her to the folk club in Horsham. "I fell in love with it and became a regular attendee," she says, thinking back. "The inclusion and simplicity - sharing the music rather than having to be a performer." Those were the things she liked best about it. "It was a singaround that I went to, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It took me a long while to pluck up the courage to actually lead a song, but I finally did." And then there was no stopping her. To her delight she discovered all sorts of clubs to go to, "so you got drawn into the whole scene," she says.

She joined the Shellbacks, which was all well and good (the group has since disbanded). Each member would choose a particular song to lead, and she wanted something a bit feisty rather than, in her words, "the dull woe-is-me woman-on-the-shore sort of thing." She was in Portsmouth (UK) and wanted to find a character, preferably a lady of the night, to write a song about. "So there I was googling away, and up pops Mary Baker - turns out she was from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but I didn't figure that out till later." Mary Baker was by all accounts the hottest seaport madam going in Victorian times. Jackpot! Carole came up with a song about her, something with a simple chorus that could be sung by male or female voices.

*My name's Mary Baker,
a Madam is m' trade
I take care of the sailors,
see the money paid
Pretty girls I hire them all the while
With dainty little figures and
sparkling smile*

Portsmouth town, Portsmouth town
You'll always find your pleasure
here in Portsmouth town
Portsmouth town, Portsmouth town
No girls are ever better
than in Portsmouth town

For whatever reason (!) the song never got sung by the Shellbacks - although at the Portsmouth (NH) Maritime Folk Festival a few years back, Carole was able to sing it in the very street where Mary Baker's 'establishment' stood. But the floodgates had opened.

"I had written two or three songs before I met Andrew," she continues, "but when we finally got together we found that we had the same interest in social history and the same sort of style of writing. We started putting some songs together to build a set list - songs we'd written, songs we knew, and we sang them at a singaround at a festival. The organiser heard us and booked us back for the next year: West Somerset Folk Festival."

That was the green light. Since then she and Andrew have been playing folk clubs, festivals, local organisations and charities, Australia, New Zealand, America, and Ireland... England, Wales. More recently she has dyed her hair grey to match Andrew's, but her eyes still sparkle with delight whenever the subject of music comes around. So what is that instrument she plays to accompany Andrew's duet concertina?

"At first I tried to accompany Andrew on the whistle," Carole says, "but it just didn't blend well - it seemed too shrill against the concertina." So she went hunting for something that would work better, and she found it on an old-music website: a cornamuse. Imagine a cross between a shawm and an oboe. Since she already played wind instruments, the cornamuse wasn't too hard to master, and its low-throated notes added a warm texture to their performances. (Never mind that it's an effort to get the thing through customs.)

Carole is probably best known for her hauntingly beautiful *Closing Of The Day*. A lullaby, the song is far more introspective than the 'story songs' that she and Andrew routinely come up with. It is probably Carole's favourite, she says. It's also the one most people are taking up to sing on their own.

Blackbird sings his merry song at the closing of the day

"...You can't sit down to write a folk song... but if you manage to write a song that other folks start to sing, well then..."

*Golden sun slips gently through
the sky and slowly fades away
Now the white owl is hunting
And moon beams are dancing
As darkness wends its way
And blackbird sings his merry
song at the closing of the day*

While their earliest efforts at songwriting tended to be sea related, in the last few years they have reached further inland. On a recent trip to the county archives, they stumbled on a treasure trove of oral histories that had been recorded back in the 1970s, interviews of people who had been working in Swansea at the turn of the last century: coal miners, tinsmiths, ferrymen. "These were real voices saying, 'This is what I did,'" Andrew said. His cup of tea!

Among those voices was that of Charles Mew, who spoke about his experiences in World War I, when more than half of the Welsh soldiers who fought never returned. At one point during the war, Mew was about to enter one of the trenches when a shell went off next to it and he was buried alive by the blast. All through the night, he said, he struggled to breathe, to just breathe, until help came. Several of his comrades died before they could be pulled from the dirt. Andrew's song, *Let Me Breathe*, describes the event in gripping detail.

Beyond the songs themselves, Andrew and Carole love music hall traditions (they organised the music hall at Bude Festival for five years), and have begun adding 'dramatic' reading/singing to

their sets. An audience member pointed out to them that a duo from Wales really ought to be performing something by Dylan Thomas, so they cut a slice from *Under Milkwood* and put it to music.

These days they live in Llangennith, far from the madding crowd. It sometimes makes travelling to different folk clubs difficult, but they wouldn't change the scenery or the wealth of inspiration for anything in the world. Naturally their efforts produced two CDs: *Silver, Stone And Sand* and *Characters* (*Pennbucky To Llangenny* is an earlier solo CD from Andrew; some of these songs have been re-recorded) along with a pair of songbooks, all available from their website, where you can also find the lyrics to most of their songs: www.cranedrivinmusic.com [note: there's no "g" in *cranedrivinmusic*].

They are working on a new album that will include recent creations: Carole's *Ireland Farewell* and Andrew's *Old Road*, two songs their audiences have been hearing recently. The new CD will undoubtedly showcase songs they haven't even written yet.



Rolling Down the River

Andrew McKay and Carole Etherton run Swansea Copper Folk (this is their 4th year coming up), a gathering of singers who meet around eight times a year to have a folk session aboard the tour boat, *Copper Jack*, as it cruises down the River Tawe past Swansea's historic copper workings. The disabled-accessible boat (privately chartered for the occasion) sells beer and snacks. After the session, the group often dines together ashore. The event doesn't have a regular schedule so you have to sign up on the email list unless you're lucky enough to spot a brochure. There's a regular nucleus of people who try to come every time, plus a lot of newcomers - some of whom aren't even acquainted with the folk scene; they just thought it sounded like fun. Space is limited to 30 spots; reservations are made in advance. There is often a waiting list, so if you're interested, sign up early. You'll find them on Facebook at Swansea Copper Folk or on the website: www.copperfolk.wixsite.com/copperfolk