

Bill Smith and his songs

By Andrew Smith

This page contains three separate items provided by Andy about his father's singing:

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1 Bill Smith and His Songs

Some of my earliest memories are of my father, Bill Smith, singing songs as he hand-milked the cows, or drove the little Allis-Chalmers on our small farm in Middleton Scriven. It was the early 1950's, before mains water and electricity. I remember him singing 'Seventeen come Sunday', 'Billy Muggins' and occasionally a few verses of 'The Outlandish Knight'. Sometimes, on the way home from the cattle market in Bridgnorth, we'd stop at The Down, and a couple of pints later he'd sing 'Ram she ad a dee', driving the last three miles back to the farm;

*'Now I once did court a bonny lass, and a bonny lass was Sue,
'Er name was Tittle-ma Tarra-ma Tee, and mine was Tarra-ma Too,
I once did go a courtin' 'er, when 'er old mon was at "wum"
'E says if I catches you 'ere again by gad I'll tittle yer . . .'*

In the late sixties I started taking an interest in folk music, but to my great shame, it never occurred to me that Bill's songs were relevant. It was 1979 before I got round to recording him. By 1983 I had recorded about sixty songs and fragments, and a couple of hours of conversation.

Born in 1909, Bill was the son of a farm labourer from Diddlesbury, the fifth of nine children. Shortly before he was born, his grandfather, John Smith, had been visited by 'a big mon from London' who spent the day listening to, and noting his old songs. Flattered by this attention, Bill's family were keen to encourage their young son when he started to show ability and he was often asked to sing for the family at home.

He left school on his fourteenth birthday and left home to work on a local farm. Sixty years later, at the age of seventy-four, Bill recorded songs he had learned at school including 'The Cuckoo' and 'The Two Magicians'. I later checked and found them to be practically note-perfect from 'English Folk Songs for Schools' by Baring-Gould and Sharp.

In his late teens Bill became a regular at The Tally Ho! at Bouldon;

'Oh, they sung in one or two pubs in Ludlow. Tally Ho! was the main. Tally Ho! was so very . . . oh dear; if you spoke when somebody was singin' they'd be down your throat.

Used to get some beautiful songs. Real old-fashioned songs, you know, it used to be great. But you couldn't speak, an' if you wanted to go outside, you'd gotta wait 'til they'd finished that song. Oh, they was very particular. An' you know, they was the roughest lot o' blokes you ever saw in your life. Ten times rougher than I am when I go t' work: ripped jackets an' sleeves.

But d'you know what? In the Tally Ho! in them days, they was more stricter than in your club!

"Shut yer bloody mouth!"

"If you gotta speak, get outside!"

"Let the chap sing! You've asked him to sing haven't you?"

"If you car shut yer mouth, get outside!"

"Wait 'til 'e's finished. He's obligin' you by singin'!"

As a young man Bill couldn't always obey the discipline required by the old singers;

'I was sittin' there, an' there was Arthur Lane over there, me 'ere, an' George Arnold there. An' I was tormentin' Arthur Lane you know. An' o' course, he said,

"You'll 'ave this, if you go on!" (Makes a fist)

'An' my God, 'e went' wuff', [but] I leant back, an' 'e 'it poor owd George Arnold straight on the nose!

I was out under the table an' out through that door an' gone like a shot!

"Great fun" I said.'

There was a wide mixture of song at the Tally Ho! As well as traditional songs there were music hall songs, sentimental Victorian parlour ballads, and army songs. Bill was encouraged to bring songs back home and sing for his mother and younger brothers and sisters.

In the War Bill stayed on the land, becoming a member of the Home Guard. He met his wife, Veronica, a Land Girl from a relatively well-connected London family, and after the War they took the small farm in Middleton Scriven. Singing became Bill's activity to accompany solitary labour rather than a social pursuit.

We left the farm in 1968 and Bill took various jobs, ending up as a grounds-man at Bridgnorth Golf Course. It was the easiest, least stressful job he ever had, and probably the best paid. In this friendly atmosphere Bill started to remember some of the songs from his youth.

'Sometimes when I'm on the tractor it'll come straight away, a song, you know, an' I'll burst out into song! You'll 'ear me goin' all round an the golfers goin' "Good ole Bill!"

I don't do it lately. I used to think the revs of the tractor drowneded it, but it doesn't. Anybody can hear you quite a long way off. Givin' the golfers entertainment for nothink? Andrew, How could you?'

'I was on the tractor, I was goin' across the field an' it come to me about the farmer's daughter, (The Banks of Sweet Dundee) an' damned if I didna' sing it, straight away. An' all the golfers lookin' at me!

"'Allo Will! You sound 'appy this morning!"

'Appy yes.'

'It used to be if somebody'd sing a song, if 'e sung it twice, I'd get up next morning, I'd go to work an' I could sing that song.

But you bear in mind, when you forgot about it, an' you didna' want any contact, then you forget 'em dunna you? I ana 'eard singin' like that for bloody thirty years. Never sing like that. They said to me one night in the New Inn, "Come on sing us a song Bill" So I said, "Oh well" an' I sang about three lines of "Two Shillin' I Gave for Me Trousers" an' they bloody clapped an' said, "Go on, we'll give you another pint if you'll sing a bit more." "We'll buy you another pint!"

"But I couldna' go on."

I stopped recording Bill in 1983, shortly after Veronica died. Bill's health was deteriorating and he just didn't feel like singing. He was, however, clearly pleased that something of his youth could be passed on, and would be valued by another generation. He died in 1987, before his younger grandson was born. Bill would have been so thrilled to hear his grandson sing his version of 'Tommy Suet's Ball'.

2 The Old Singers

'God, I reckon I missed my chance, but I never thought I'd ever want a song. Else I'd 'a give them blokes a tanner each for all the songs they'd write for me, and I should 'a 'ad every one. You know, 'cos I knowed all the tunes of every song, as soon as they'd do one verse I'd got the tune of that song then.

Oh, they sung in one or two pubs in Ludlow, like the Tally Ho! and New Inn, and the Royal Oak. Tally Ho! was the main. Tally Ho! was so very . . . oh dear; if you spoke when somebody was singin' they'd be down your throat.

Used to get some beautiful songs. Real old-fashioned songs, you know, it used to be great. But you couldn't speak, . . . an' if you wanted to go outside, you'd gotta wait 'til they'd finished that song. Oh, they was very particular. An' you know they was the roughest lot o' blokes you ever saw in your life. Ten times rougher than I am when I go t' work: ripped jackets an' sleeves.

But d'you know what? In the Tally Ho! in them days, they was more stricter than in your club!

"Shut yer bloody mouth!"

"If you gotta speak, get outside!"

"Let the chap sing! You've asked him to sing haven't you?"

"If you car shut yer mouth, get outside!"

Oh they was snotty lad, you know. If a bloke was mate, you'd got to . . . And not only that, you hadna' got to go and walk across the room to fetch a pint of beer, mate!

"Wait 'til 'e's finished. He's obligin' you by singin'!"

And they was such old-fashioned old cronies, you know, strong chaps. They was like in their fifties, then.

Poor owd Tom Vaughn, he was a very friendly chap and a very happy-go-lucky chap, but he, Oh he got arthritis or rheumatic terrible. He walkin' about with two sticks. An' 'e used to walk all down these bank for 'is beer. 'Im an' Billy Thomas as used to live with 'im, to lodge with 'im like. An' 'e'd walk. An' when 'e got down there 'e'd be puffin' an' blowin', an' 'e'd give 'em a song. 'Billy Muggins' was 'is song.

Our Mam used to love me to sing 'Billy Muggins'. 'Er used to laff at that song. I'd sing there at 'ome if I was in a good temper.

But there come a different lot of blokes there. All kids an' girls an' these owd juke boxes an' this sort o' thing, and this spoilt everything, you know, spoilt everything that did.'

From conversations recorded in 1982 and 1983 with Bill Smith, Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

(C) Andrew Smith, November 1998.

3 Songs recorded from Bill Smith 1979 –1983 by Andy Smith

A Drunken Family	1 verse	
A Group of Young Squaddies	1.5 verses	
Agricultural Show (The)	A few lines	
All been having a go at it	1 verse	Music Hall song
All of a sudden he stopped	3 verses	Music Hall song
As coming from a music hall one evening	Few Lines	Music Hall song
Banks of the Sweet Dundee –	7 verses	Broadside Ballad
Barbara Ellen	4 verses	(A very conventional version)
Billy Muggins	4 verses	Music Hall song
Camera Boy (The)	4 verses	Music Hall song
Children's Home (The)	2 verses	Late Victorian parlour ballad
Christmas Day in the Workhouse		
Cinderella (The)	1 verse	presumably Music Hall
Come Lasses and Lads	2 verses	probably learned at school
Creeping Jane	3 verses	
Cuckoo (The)	2 verses	probably learned at school
Don't Send My Boy to Prison	2 verses	
Down the Road	1 verse	
Early one morning I rose to admire (The Bramble Briar)	4 verses	
Flanagan	1 verse	
Henry My Son	5 verses	
It there wasn't any women in the world	1 verse	presumably Music Hall
If you meet a man in woe		Poem
Irish Girl (The)	2 verses	
John Giles	3 verses	
Khaki Trousers (Lavender Trousers)	2.5 verses	Music Hall song

Little Fish	Few Lines	
McCafferty	3 verses	
Molly O'Morgan	1 verse	
Mother she brought the donkey	1 verse	
Nightingale (The)	2 verses	probably learned at school
O It's a Lie	4 verses	wartime soldiers song
Old German Clockmender	2 verses	
Old Mrs Biggar	2 verses	nonsense song
On the banks of Allen Water	1 verse	probably learned at school
Ours is a nice house ours is	2 verses	Music Hall song
Outlandish Knight (The)	11 verses	
Over the garden wall	3 verses	
P.C. 49	3 verses	Music Hall song
Ram she ad a di (Similar Coppers to 'Wop she ad it io')	4 verses	
Ring ting a ling	2 verses	radio song
Seventeen come Sunday	6 verses	
She won't get up in the morning	Few lines	radio song
Ship that never returned	1 verse	
Sixty three and it seems to me	Few lines	
Sow a Thought		Poem
Take a little table	1 verse	
The Mountain and the Squirrel		Poem
Three men went a hunting	3 verses	
Tommy Suet's Ball	3 verses	
Two Magicians (The)	3 verses	probably learned at school
Two shillin' I gave for me trousers	2 verses	Music Hall song
Village Pump (The)	4 verses	

Way up yonder	3 verses	
All jolly fellows that follow the plough	5 verses	
Wheel the perambulator John	2 verses	
Wheezy Anna	3 verses	
When I was a bachelor	1 verse	probably learned from Britten/Pears 78
Who will o'er the downs so free?	1 verse	
Willow Tree (The)	2 verses	
Young sailor cut down in his prime	4 verses	
Your Sweetheart Grace	1 verse	

Plus conversations / stories!