Note: The following was lifted from the Sid Kipper archive see note

Copy as follows:

In 1996 I was asked to write a brief biography of Sid, for inclusion in the above book. It served as an introduction to a collection of Sid's songs. Since the book has now gone out of print the Mousehold Press have kindly given permission for the piece to appear here. I think it will help some people to understand the complexly simple person that is Sid Kipper.

Chris Sugden.

A Star Is Spawned

Sid Kipper was born on a sunny Saturday afternoon in Farmer Trout's barn in the tiny Norfolk village of St Just-near-Trunch. Which means that Sid is a true Truncheon (and he never has to close the door). Many people have remarked that Sid seems younger than his age. Well, every biography needs a sensational revelation, so here's one straight away. I can now exclusively divulge that Sid is younger than his age! That is to say, he's younger than he has previously claimed to be.

Let me take you back to 1936. In that year the whole village sighed with relief when Sid's parents, Henry Kipper and Dot Spratt, married each other, because it meant that nobody else would have to marry either of them. They set up home on the edge of the village in Box Cottage, and seemed quite happy, in a miserable sort of way.

Henry and Dot never wanted children, but at the outbreak of the Second World War they saw the advantage of the extra rations that a child would bring. So they registered the birth of a son, Sid, who at that stage didn't actually exist. This arrangement worked very well, until the end of the war. When the lax wartime bureaucracy was tightened up it became clear that they might be required to produce the boy. No longer could they claim, as they had, that he had been "ejaculated to London". So Henry enquired of the vicar how they might go about having a child and, after some incredulity, they went ahead. Dot finally, if reluctantly, gave birth to the real, flesh and blood Sid on the twenty-first of September 1946.

But it’s not easy being an unwanted child, as Sid recalls.

“I sort of got the feeling that I weren’t wanted when the rationing got eased. What give me that feeling was when mother used to leave me in shops or on buses, or anywhere in fact. I once spent three days in a cake shop in North Walsham before they managed to trace her and make her take me back. Of course, that was nothing personal. Eventually I learned to keep an eye out for her trying to sneak off. I reckon that must be where I picked up the habit of following women home.”

By all accounts Sid was a happy little boy, although something of a loner. He spent much of his time practising putting his finger in his ear and singing folk songs. He loved nature and when he was not needed to work around the house would go for long walks. He knew where every pheasant and rabbit lived, and he sang to them.

It has to be said that Sid and education never saw eye to eye. The biggest problem was Sid’s singing. It was in his blood, and he had no wish to do anything else. At the age of five, however, he was dragged kicking and screaming to start his formal education at Trunch Bored School. It was a day he will never forget.

“I weren’t kicking and screaming – I was dancing and singing. But I do remember we did have a bit of trouble over the singing. Miss Eels, the teacher, spent all her time telling me not to sing in the classroom. Well, not all her time, obviously. I mean, for a start, she used to go home of an evening. Mind you, I never went home with her, so I don’t know for sure she din’t spend her time there telling me not to sing in the classroom. But even if she did, there was one time she didn’t tell me not to sing, and that was during singing lessons. She threw me out for them. She said I put the others off.”

Eventually a compromise was reached, whereby Sid could sing whenever he liked, but had to leave the classroom and do it in the boys toilets, which were situated at the far end of the playground. In fact he spent so much time there that he taught himself to read from the graffiti on the walls. However, Sid was not a complete failure at primary school. In fact he gained a qualification of which he is very proud.

“I got a certificate for Fifty Yards Breast-stroke Theory – the school didn’t have no swimming pool, so we couldn’t do the practical. I was very good at the breast-stroking, though I never could get the hang of crawling – Cyril Cockle got a Distinction for that.”

On leaving primary school Sid was offered a place at Borstal, but his ambition was thwarted, as his parents couldn't afford the uniform. So he went, with the rest of his class-mates, to the nearby Knapton Academy. Here he was not allowed to sing in class. Nor was he allowed to leave the class to sing, as he had done before. This was because the boys toilets were situated next to the headmaster's office, and the walls were thin. So Sid took to truancy. But in a small village, where everyone knows everyone's business, he quickly had to become expert at evading the Attendance Officer. He spent a lot of time lurking in the woods – a habit he retains to this day.

"I never bothered none about doing well at school. Even then all I wanted to do was sing and play the accompaniments, so I couldn't see no point in getting no big qualifications. My Uncle Walter was teaching me the piano by the traditional method of beating time on my fingers with the lid, apart from which I taught myself the other instruments. Now that weren't easy, 'cos of course I didn't know how to play them in order to teach myself. It was like the deaf telling the deaf, really. But most of all I was practising the unaccompanied singing. Well, it's not easy to evade the Tendency Officer if you're dragging a piano, is it?"

The Golden Buoy

When Sid left school in 1960 he was apprenticed to his uncle, George Kipper. The exact nature of George's business is not clear, but it seems to have involved such traditional crafts as 'dealing', 'flogging', and 'following lorries waiting for things to drop off the back'.

"I come under the influence with Uncle George, when he was back in the village after a spell away, pleasing Her Majesty. He's a lovely singer is George – much better than my old father. It's a shame he has to help the police so much with their enquiries, or he could be famous without the 'in'.

George taught me all I knew at the time. Mind you, that weren't a lot. I mean, George knew a lot, but he always used to say 'If I told you all I knew then you'd know as much as I do, plus anything you might have picked up for yourself, and then I'd have to be your apprentice, so you'll just have to find things out the hard way like I did, young fellow-me-lad.' He always used to say that. Unless you offered to buy him a drink, of course, and then he said 'A pint of the usual'."

But, as much of George's business seemed to revolve around pubs, and in particular

the Old Goat Inn in Trunch, Sid had lots of opportunities to hear his Uncle sing, and with his keen ear he rapidly learned all that George knew about that. As an apprentice he was not allowed to sing in the pub himself – singing was considered to be man's work, and until a Truncheon had gone through the strange ritual which took place on his twenty-first birthday he was expected to keep quiet and buy the beer.

"Kid's nowadays have it soft. At that time of the day they used to say 'One boy is worth half a man, two boys is worth half a boy, and three boys aren't worth nothing at all'. But they couldn't stop me singing in the privy of my own house, although they wished they could when they wanted to go in there for a sing themselves."

In 1964, at the age of 18, Sid began his National Service. This was a very difficult thing for him to do, not least because National Service had been abolished some years earlier! But Sid has never been one to shun a problem, and he managed to get the Mundesley Dark Infantry to take him on for a year.

"I got fed up with people going on about how the army made them what they were. I mean, looking at some of them, you'd think they ought to go and ask for their money back. Howsomever, I thought I'd like to give it a go. I thought wrong as a matter of fact, because I hated every minute of it. Well, I tell a lie – I didn't hate every minute. I hated every minute except for about twenty minutes in September, with the Colonel's daughter. I quite enjoyed those minutes."

Actually Sid and the army got on surprisingly well, in fact. He has always been a smart dresser, so the uniform was no trouble to him.

"I was always one for dressing smart and up to the minute. I mean, I was the first person in Trunch to wear drain-pipe trousers – that would have been in about 1964, as far as I recall. Then again, they all laughed when I moved on to flares in 1978. I'm a bit of trend settler, as a matter of fact. Of course that's where a lot of these modern folk singers get it wrong. You see, I was brought up to dress in my best for the singing – it's a mark of respect. But these new people, a lot of them don't even wear a tie! It's all Aran sweaters, which are only correct for singing Scottish songs. It's a shame, 'cos some of them aren't bad singers. It's just the clothes that let them down."

He was also very good at soldierly activities like creeping about at night with a gun and shooting things. Square bashing took him some time to come to terms with,

but once he had worked out that it was really just a flat footed sort of morris dance he quickly got the hang of it. Consequently he marched with bells on his ankles, but no-one could find a regulation that actually banned it, and the years of training under his Uncle George had made him an excellent barrack room lawyer, so they couldn't stop him.

"Every now and again I got leave, so I kept in touch with what was going on in the village. There was a new vicar, who we've still got, except, of course, he's an old vicar now. That was Rev 'Call-me-Derek' Bream. We didn't get on too well at first. He was having Hops in the village hall, and that sort of thing. I never went – I was too busy having hops in the Old Goat Inn. But over the years he's made quite a difference to our village. Well, either that or it's got different of its own accord, and he just happened to be there."

Derek (known to some as Dingley Del) has been an important influence on Sid's career. His songwriting, in particular, brought other sorts of music to Sid's attention, and over the years Sid has sung a few of Derek's songs himself.

"Well, sometimes I get bored with the old songs and fancy something a bit more groovy and up to date. More often, though, it's the audience who get bored, and need waking up. That's when I give them one of Del's numbers. By the end of one of them they're begging me to go back to the old songs again."

A Plaice In The Sun

After National Service Sid went back to work for his Uncle George. And in 1967 came the great moment when he went through the rite of passage into manhood and public singing. The ceremony itself is a closely guarded secret, known only to the adult males of St Just-near-Trunch, and I've been unable to get any of them to describe it to me. Certainly, it involves a lot more than Sid claims.

"Well, it's just a sort of passing out ceremony, really. You have a few drinks, sing a song, have a few more drinks, sing some more songs, and so on until you eventually pass out. Actually I hold the record for the person who had the most drinks and sang the most songs before passing out. Well, I do if you only count people who lived to tell the tale."

Once Sid was allowed to sing in public people had to admit what, in fact, they already knew – that here was the sort of singer that comes along only once in a

generation, if that. And what's more, he was a genuine all-rounder. From front bar chorus to back room ballad Sid had real class – and that's not to mention snug bar story-telling and courtyard dancing. The lad was so talented, so superior to the older singers, so much better than any of his contemporaries, that in no time at all they were heartily fed up with him.

"Well, I mean, that was just jealousy, weren't it? I was better than them, louder than them, I knew more songs than them, and they din't like it. It din't bother me none, though, because by then I was being asked to go along to other pubs in the area to sing there. I used to get free beer and the like. You see, people today don't realise what it was like then. If you were one of the top singers then you were somebody. I'm not sure just who you were, but you were somebody. And that somebody was somebody who was respected, and looked up at. All the young women wanted to be seen in your company. Mind you, that weren't so wonderful, 'cos as soon as you got them alone, and there was nobody to see them with you, they didn't want to know you no more."

At about this time Sid had a brush with fame. It happened one night when he was singing in the White Hearse Inn, in North Walsham, when a stranger in a suit came in and sat by the bar. This meant, of course, that he was sitting near Sid, as singers always sat by the bar so as to avoid any interruption in the flow of free pints. He was visibly impressed by the power and range of Sid's voice.

"He was – he was visibly impressed. You could see that. So when I had a break from the singing this bloke in the suit started me up in conversation, and asked a lot of questions. He said did I want to be a pop star, like that Cilla Black? He said did I realise there was a gap in the market? Well, I knew the answer to that, so I said yes I did – that was where the gents lavatory used to stand before it blew up. He said no, not North Walsham market – the record market. He said someone called Bob Dylan had been electrocuted, so they was looking for a new folk star, and did I want to be It? Well, I said I couldn't be It because I had both feet off the ground when he touched me, but after a bit I realised he wanted me to make hit records and the like.

So then I had some questions for him. The first one was whose round was it? He said we weren't in a round. So I asked did he realise that if he bought me a pint I'd be in his debt, and he took the hint, and bought me a pint. Well, by the end of the night I was in his debt a lot, but that was alright 'cos I didn't have no intention of paying him back. You see, there was a fly in his ointment. I couldn't do my own

songs. He said old traditional songs didn't make no money for nobody, so they wouldn't do. Well, that was what I was known for, so I said no thank you and thought no more about it. Not till I heard he'd gone on to Sheringham and signed up some bloke called the Singing Postman. Then I realised I'd missed an opportunity, and you know what they say – opportunity never knocks twice in the same place."

The Silence Of The Clams

Seeing the Singing Postman rise to international fame and riches, such that he had his postman's uniforms handmade at Burtons The Tailor, Sid might easily have become bitter. So he did.

"I thought that should have been me on 'On Your Marks, Get Set, Go', having all them roadies dancing round in their short skirts. I didn't want to sing just to a few people in the pub no more. I thought I should be doing big places, like Cromer Pier, like he was doing. It took a long time to get over that. In fact I don't reckon I really got over it till that Ralph Harris recorded one of his songs – then I realised what an awful mistake it would have been."

George Kipper being off the scene at the time, being 'unavoidably detained' yet again, Sid concentrated on his own business of supplying game – although some customers found his habit of delivering the goods in the early hours of the morning somewhat disconcerting.

"I still used to sing to myself, but I only used to do it at night, in the woods. Mind you, the gamekeeper used to find that hard to believe when he wanted to know what I was doing there."

These were Sid's wilderness years, at least as far as public performance went. Not that he lacked offers.

"The Womens' Bright Hour was forever after me to perform for them, but I thought that would be a bit of a come down after having nearly been famous, so I refused. My cousin Annie used to be after me to sing too. She said wouldn't it be a shame if the old songs died out, and all that squit. But I didn't take no notice because everyone knew she hadn't been right in the head since she went to North Walsham Grammar School for Girls. I don't mean she actually got taught there, but she did once visit it as third reserve for the netball team, and, like I say, she was never the

same after."

And so, for some fifteen years, the finest voice of a generation lay dormant. When the singing started in the Old Goat Inn Sid would simply order another pint and sip it with a brooding look in his eye. Even the most lusty chorus song could not tempt him to join in. He didn't step dance, or tell stories, or perform or participate in any way shape or form whatsoever.

"Which is just a fancy way of saying I didn't do nothing, which is exactly what I did do. Mind you, I done other things. I done my crafts, like making sweetcorn dollies and so on, and I done my game business, and I played my cricket and my bowls and so on. And in my spare time I was seeing a bit of Raquel Whelk – well, I saw several bits of her, actually, but never all in the same place. She was always playing hard to get was Raquel, but she weren't a very good player, so she always lost. If you don't believe me, ask anyone".

Sid is often asked why he has never married. In fact Raquel is usually the one doing the asking. After all, at this stage of his life Sid was all set to settle down in a small village, where a wife would be an asset if only to stop the tongues of the old women from wagging.

"Ah, but I had a better way of stopping them wagging. I used to go up to one of the old women and tell him straight that my business was none of his business, and that went for my personal life too. That and a good stare used to do the trick. And if you want to know why I never got married I'll tell you the same thing."

And so the years went by with Sid singing only for his own amusement. And as this is about Sid the singer there's little more to be said about this period.

Return Of The Octupi

But of course Sid did start singing in public again. For in 1980 a rumour began to circulate that the Cockle family were better singers than the Kippers. Sid's father, Henry Kipper, decided that he'd better start singing in public himself, in order to protect the family name from the gossips. Sid soon realised that he would have to join him, in order to protect the family name from his father.

"Well, he'd only have proved the rumour right, wouldn't he. I mean, if George had been about I wouldn't have bothered, 'cos George could sing the Cockle Family into

a cocked snook. But with his being away again there was only me to save father from himself."

Henry Kipper was a proud man. This was always a surprise to those who met him, since it was immediately apparent there was little of which he could be proud. Nevertheless he had become custodian of the family tradition when his own father, Billy Kipper, died in 1948, leaving his elder son the blue family songbook.

"Mind you that weren't so much, 'cause Uncle George got the red family songbook. Years ago Billy used to get up in the Old Goat and say 'Would you like one out of the red book or the blue book', and they always asked for the red book, 'cos that was the one with the good songs in. But my father always pretended the red book never existed, which was silly really, 'cos it was there all the time, large as life, propping up the wonky leg on George's wardrobe."

Sid was later to resurrect the songs from the red book when he went solo in 1992. But here I'm getting ahead of my story.

"Well I'm not. What happened was father started to go round singing Billy's old songs, and I thought that was my duty to go along and help him out. I used to do what they call 'counter-melody'. The idea was to try and counter what father was doing to the melody by distracting people with some different notes. After a while I got him sounding quite good. Later we decided we ought to have some sort of a stage-name (although we never sang on no stages, so it was more of a corner-of-the-pub name really). We thought of loads, but none of them was quite right. We tried The Sugarbeatles, and The Bloody Moos, and things like that, but father wasn't happy with none of them. He said we had to have a name what went along with the serious old folk songs we was doing. It was Aunt Ruby who eventually come up with one."

So began the career of Sid Kipper and Henry Kipper, soon known throughout north-east Norfolk by their snappy new name, the Kipper Family. Henry, a born-again defender of the folk tradition, insisted that they only perform the songs which his own father had painstakingly written in what was now a dog-eared blue foolscap notebook. Not only the songs, but also the manner of singing them were to be preserved just as Billy had handed them on.

"They had this thing they called the oral tradition round our way. Very popular it was. The idea was the fathers used to pass on all their old songs to the sons –

where they could be traced. That was the idea, but most people's fathers was only human, if that, so they kept a couple of the best songs back for themselves and passed on the rest. That happened for generation after generation, until you get to where we are today – with all the old rubbish left. So we were doing all these old songs about jolly ploughboys and their jolly ploughs and that was all we was allowed. Well, no, to be fair, father did let me do one of George's now and again, but that was only because he was family, and father felt sorry for him, what with him not being able to get out and do them for himself."

A fight once broke out in the Nelson's Arm in Knapton when Cyril Cockle declared that Billy had only written the songs down as examples of what nobody liked any more, and proceeded to silence the pair by putting 10 pence into the jukebox to play Stand By Your Man. For more than a year father and son toured the area, singing their old songs to people who didn't want to hear them, each too proud, stubborn and stupid to be the first one to suggest giving it up.

There, But For The Grace Of Cod

And this is where I enter the story. One day in 1982, my friend Dick Nudds and I received a letter from Sid's cousin, Annie Kipper, telling us about a traditional singing family from Trunch. Dick insisted this was a practical joke, and the place couldn't exist. But I knew better – I always did. I had distant cousins in Trunch, and my aunt once passed through the village when lost. So, being enthusiasts for traditional song, Dick and I went in search of Henry and Sid.

"I can sort of remember sitting in the Old Goat one afternoon, just innocently drinking after hours, when these two blokes with beards come in. The whole pub went quiet, just like in the Westerns – except there weren't no piano player. Well, no, actually there was a piano player, but you wouldn't have known that 'cos there weren't no piano.

Ernie Spratt, the landlord, he asked what did they want?. They said they was sorry to come in when the pub was closed but they was looking for the Kipper Family. Ernie said never mind that, what did they want to drink? So they ordered a couple of pints of Old Nasty, which was their first big mistake, other than coming in the pub to start with. After a bit they asked about the Kipper Family again, so Ernie asked what they wanted us for. They said they'd heard how we knew some old songs what we might not want.

Well that was how we knew something was up. You see, that was exactly what Cecil Sharphouse had said to my Great Uncle Albert sixty years before. So Ernie asked the six and four-penny question – had they got any money? Yes, they said, so he sold them a couple more pints of Old Nasty. They looked as if they thought they was getting no-where, but they weren't – they was getting drunk."

We only drank three pints as far as I remember. But I will never forget the odd couple at the table in the corner of the bar, who were watching us in a disconcerting manner. There was an old man with a white beard, and a younger man with a scar on his cheek. And then they started to sing – loud enough at first, and then slowly fading as we slid, unconscious, from our bar stools.

Star Fish

As soon as we were discharged from Cromer Hospital we went back to the village and, to cut a long story short, persuaded Sid and Henry to place their careers in our hands. For a year or more we polished these rough diamonds, until we thought they were ready for the big wide world. But was the big wide world ready for them? It was. Their rise to fame was meteoric. In 1984 they turned professional, and were voted Most Promising Newcomers by the readers of Folk Roots, the most prestigious folk magazine in the country. Henry was particularly flattered at being described as a newcomer in his seventieth year. Thus began seven years of touring, recording, and radio and TV work.

"It was like a fairy story, really, with me and father as the fairies."

They were heaped with awards and certificates, perhaps the most glamorous being Radio Orwell's award as 'Most Popular Club Act' in 1985.

"That was a mistake, of course, 'cos we didn't use no clubs in our act at all. I think they must have got us mixed up with some jugglers who were going about at the time. They was called the Skipper Family. They used to do a lot of work on Radio Norfolk at one time, although after a while the novelty of a juggling act on the wireless wore off. One of them, Keith Skipper, carried on for a while, but he had to interview people and play records during the juggling to make it sound a bit more interesting. In the end they got fed up with the holes in the ceiling and got rid of him. I believe he does his juggling in the paper now!"

Suddenly these two Norfolk 'boys' were touring from the Shetlands to Cornwall –

which wasn't one of the best arranged tours, since they had no engagements in between. The Kipper Family were soon established as firm favourites on the folk scene. Their first album, 'Since Time Immoral', was followed by five others, the last being an edited recording of Henry's retirement party, 'In The Family Way'. Sid and Henry also appeared with their own band, The New Trunch Coronation band, and toured several times with Rev Derek Bream.

It seemed they could go on forever. But seven years of touring and singing and sleeping in strange beds took it's toll on the old man – and on the younger man too.

"I didn't have no trouble with the touring and the singing and the sleeping in the strange beds – the only trouble I had was having to tour and sing and sleep in strange beds with the old man. He snored, you know – and not just when he was asleep. But the main thing was he was holding me back. I mean, that was kept a secret at the time, but I was asked to join the Fairport Convention, but they didn't want father, so I had to turn it down. Also, I wanted to play a lot more musical instruments, but father wouldn't have it. He said 'You'll play all them instruments over my dead body', so I said Yes, I would, and the sooner the better."

To those of us 'in the know' relations between father and son were clearly becoming strained. It was the little things, like one of them leaving the room whenever the other came in. I knew matters were getting serious when Henry failed to accept Sid's offer of a drink one night.

"Things got worse between us when the Trunch Trumpet voted me best Young Thruster of 1991. Father was livered! He wanted to know why, if he could be a Most Promising Newcomer in 1984, he couldn't be a Young Thruster in 1991? I said he should be glad he couldn't enter 'cos he'd be sure to come last. He said he'd forgotten more about folk singing with one hand tied behind his back than he'd ever known, and I should hold my row. I said I was surprised 'cos I thought he'd forgotten more than that.

There was a whole lot more like that, but the upshoot was we sent each other to Coventry for a month. Mind you, we still sang together, which was a bit difficult, 'cos we couldn't discuss what we was going to sing. So it was a question of being first off the mark singing what you wanted, and the other one had to catch up."

"Things got worse and worse with me and father, and in the end there was only one solution. We organised a surprise retirement party for him, and the whole thing was

a café compléte, whatever that is. Well, whatever it is, the whole thing was one of them. We done a farewell tour, and with one bound I was free."

Shortly before Henry's enforced retirement the English Folk Song and Dance Society had announced the founding of an Old Folkies Home, and asked for anyone who knew of any worn out old folkies to get in touch. They were inundated with replies, but Henry got a place on the grounds of seniority (a number of the worn out folkies nominated were only in their early forties).

The home was a model establishment, with regular activities for the inmates. For instance, every day there was a 'singaround' in the lounge, where the old people could sing long boring ballads to each other with their hearing aids turned off. Once a week, as a treat, a folk song collector would come in with a microphone and pretend to record them.

But now we have lost the old man. He passed away on July 29th 2000. Henry's obituary is elsewhere on this site.

Going Sole-oh

And so, on the second Friday of 1992 Sid gathered up his music stand and instruments, along with some songs from his Uncle George's red songbook, and set off for his first solo performance, in Chichester.

"Of course, that was a bit nerve wrecking, but inside I was loudly confident. After all, I only had to play my instruments and sing my songs. I knew I could do both them things alright. The only thing I hadn't actually practised was doing them both at the same time. But I needn't have worried. I got to this folk club, which is upstairs at a pub, and they were busy putting out the chairs. But after I'd explained that I weren't a dance band they put all the chairs back in again, and we waited for people to arrive."

Gradually the room filled up, and only a few people said "I thought Sid was the old one – that's who I came to see". And all too soon Sid was on his feet introducing his first song.

"I launched off into The Stick Of Rhubarb, and right from the start they was with me. What's more, they was still with me at the end, which is always a good sign, 'cos sometimes they sneak off if you sing with your eyes closed, and you don't

notice till there’s no applause. All in all that was a great start to my career as a solo megostar.”

Much has happened to Sid Kipper since then. There have been – and will be – albums, books, radio series, TV drama, specialist shows, and more. Much of it is covered at other places on this site. But, for now, let us leave him at this point, when he finally achieved his destiny as

“a solo folk-singing, storytelling, multi-instrumental megostar”.