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Among the English folk tradition come musicians are almost rural royalty. The Kipper Family are such and Sean McGhee was granted an audience at Redcar 1990.

Living in the rural setting of the little Norfolk village of Trunch, life moves slow and consequently the influence of contemporary singer/ songwriters and the new directions in folk based rock has little effect on the traditional medium so performers like Trunch’s very own Kipper Family remain pure and true to the finest brand of English traditional folk singing and as ‘the last bastions of the Norfolk tradition’ the Kippers can be found performing at folk festivals up and down the country singing the songs that have been passed down in an aural tradition from generation to generation. Old Henry described it thus. Speaking to his now late father Old Billy Kipper when he was a boy, “We must keep alive the last living link with a life long lost” his father replied “Nevermind all that boy, in years to come daft fools will pay good money to hear us!!”

So now Old Henry and his son Young Sid as we move into an age of computer and video domination give us a glimpse of the days when life was simple and the people simpler still. At Redcar Festival this summer I managed to catch-up with Old Henry all Father Christmas beard, pre-war circular specs and flat-cap and Young Sid immaculately turned out in what appeared to be a three piece de-mob suit with flared trousers, a tie that not so much clashed with the suit as assaulted it, and the eyes!! His hair slicked back using I guess 10 tubs of Brylcreem, obviously what’s new on the Paris fashion catwalks hasn’t yet reached Trunch.

Sitting in a backroom of the Redcar Bowl I helped Old Henry to a seat and managed to hold Young Sid’s attention long enough to get them collectively to elaborate on just what they do. For best effect and in keeping with the rural folk tradition we suggest you adopt Norfolk accents when reading the Kippers answers.

I opened by asking them just how long they’d been doing what they do. Old Henry looked a mite puzzled answering ‘I’m not doing anything at the moment’, Young Sid covered for his father’s slight misunderstanding ‘No, he means singing an’ that’, Old Henry now just about getting the gist of things went on ‘Oh, I’ve been doing that since I was a little boy.’ Once again Sid was in like a flash, ‘No, he means doing it since we become megastars’. ‘Well I suppose that’s, what, five or six years.’ Old Henry said. Sid went on to elaborate further, ‘We started off somewhere, didn’t we? And then somebody asked us to somewhere else, that was the people who were at

the one we were doing who asked us to go somewhere else.' 'And it's been the same ever since, people have been asking us to go somewhere else' added Henry. 'That's right' said Sid, going on to explain just what they do, 'We do all the old folk songs that come from 'round our way.' 'Round our little village of Trunch,' Henry adds. 'And we do some more up-to-date stuff, now and again, 'though father ain't into all that' Sid explained further. 'I think we should stick to the old songs, but he likes to do some of the more modern ones' Henry half complained, Sid, with a bit of pride in his own contemporary hipness replied 'I do, I like to do all these roots ones.' 'I can't understand most of em', Henry retorted. 'I can't understand the old ones' said Sid. Touch I thought! Henry calls a truce, 'My great nephew Kevin, he likes doing the modem things you see. He's got his own band together, Kevin, that's U.B. Quiet, they're called.' 'They're sort of a folk punk band, that's it, very popular 'round our way' Sid explained.

Wondering where they got their songs from I asked if they possessed a record player, Henry answered 'Well, we've got one, but it didn't work very well, Cecil Sharp left it behind.' 'Years ago he came round to try and collect some stuff off us and left it behind' added Sis. It only played the cylinders anyway, can't get them now. Are they like CD's I asked. 'Well I think they're similar to CD's. We tried playing CD's on this here cylinder player, but they didn't work proper. No, answered Henry, 'Perhaps you can use the CD's to help you shave by looking into them? I suggested. But with both the Kippers heavily bearded, I added that perhaps they didn't have razors in Trunch? 'some people do, Sid replied, 'but a lot of peoples not allowed to carry them anymore. That's right.' Henry agreed. Police had a clampdown on them Sid pointed out.

With that sorted out we went on to talk about their great family tradition, Sid opening with 'Now you see most of these old songs what we do come through the family, his father', 'My old father, Billy Kipper,' said Henry. 'My old Grandfather,' adds Sid as an afterthought. 'As far as we know he was,' Henry points out, going on 'You see he knew a lot of old songs and he writ 'em all down in a book, and we've still got the old book.' Was this the large, old, weighty looking book they had on stage? I asked. 'That's right,' Sid replied, `and he writ down everybody else's old songs as well while he was at it. The other thing we've George do some songs don't we? That's right. He does a lot of things and gets caught for some of them, that's why he's not here at the moment. He did a lot of song writing. In fact there's a story about that. Father will tell you the bit about his song what he writ when he was a boy.' 'When he tried to play a trick on father,' Henry began, 'You see my

father, Billy Kipper, he was what they called a Guardian of the Tradition, and he had to decide what songs to allow into the old family tradition and what songs to keep out So George thought he�d play a little trick on father,� �A little joke,� Sid chips in. Henry continued, �And he writ this song, he just made it up. It was rubbish, it was called �The Wild Rover�, �That�s the one!� adds Sid. ‘And of course father saw the joke straight away.� Henry said. �Pity nobody else did ,� Sid pointed out.

With being folk ‘megastars’ as they pointed out, there’ s a lot of traveling about involved, meaning a lot of time out of their village of Trunch. Did they miss the village when they were away? ‘No, not really’ begins Henry. ‘It’s quite exciting for father, isn’t it?� Sid pointed out. �Gets me out of the house� Henry added. Sid was eager to explain, ‘You see what a lot of people don’t realise you see is the inspiration behind us going around doing all this is really my old mother, his wife.� Henry butts in, ‘Yes that’s right, my wife, Dot, his mother, well… as far as we know, she�s the one who encouraged us to go out the house and get singing. She says, “for goodness sake get out of the house.”‘ Sid echoes the fact, ‘She says “bugger off and do some more touring, I’m sick of the sight of you” she says, and we tour about ’til things have quietened down a bit at home, then we go back again.’ ‘We’re going back home again tomorrow, ‘cos we’ve got a darts match’ I’m told by Henry, Sid pointed out they had to �cos it’s our dart board.�

I went on to ask them how they travelled about, and what mode of transport they used. Sid answered ‘We borrow a car generally, if we can find one, with the keys in preferably, That’s the simplest way. Sometimes we get a train, though they don’t leave the keys in them very often. You’re wasting your time really with them. Bike, if it’s not too far, father gets up on the crossbar, that’s if we’re doing local work, but we don’t do a lot of work locally. We don’t get asked much, don’t know why.’ Henry explained, ‘Trunch was the cultural village of Norfolk this year and they asked us as a special thing to mark the cultural year, they ;ked us to go to Glasgow.’

It might sound a strange coincidence but both Kippers were born on the days War One and Two broke out.

Henry replied �Yes, the day World War One broke out, that was me and it was noted in my father’s diary, it was written down “The end of civilisation as we know it.” he didn’t mention the war though.’ And I asked Sid, was he born on the day World War Two broke out? ‘So they tell me, I don’t remember much about it myself, but that’s what I’m told. Mind it took a lot of time for World War Two to get up our way, first off we never took much notice of it. I’ll tell you now, there’s a bloke in our

village now that was ejaculated to the village in the war, and they never came to collect him.' 'No, he's still about.' adds Henry. Sid elaborated further, 'And he's still got to follow all the ejaculation rules, He has to carry his gas mask and the little short trousers, he still has to wear don't he?' 'And a sign 'round his neck with his name on.' said Henry. 'And he has to go to school everyday' remarked Sid. 'That's a rum old do' quipped Henry. 'It is, I reckon they ought to have come for him by now, we ought to send him back if they don't come for him soon 'cos we aren't getting the coupons for him anymore.'

Although the Kippers songs are described as folk music by audiences I was interested to know whether they saw what they did themselves as folk music. Henry was quick to reply 'No, it's just singing. 'We'd never heard of folk music, not 'till they asked us to go these folk dos. And we said "what's it got to do with us?" and they said "that's what you do, folk music"!!' Sid explained, ' Bit of a shame really 'cos in the old days we used to go down the pub, the Old Goat and have a sing. We can't nowadays they have a proper folk club there and we can't get in." said Henry with a touch of weariness in his voice. 'We haven't been booked yet, no not at the Old Goat folk club. That's the first Thursday in every September,' Sid pointed out, continuing 'mind you they don't have a guest every year. They put the hat round and when there's enough money for a guest, the committee drink it. Usually.'

Within their set I noticed a sometimes uncanny similarity to other songs, particularly their own composition, 'Awayday', which sounded almost identical to Steeleye Span's `Gaudete'. Had they heard of them? 'Steeleye Spam?' answered Henry, 'No we've never heard of them.' Sid agreed. 'The Latin song 'Awayday' our vicar suggested that.' Henry began before Sid elaborated further, 'It came from Nathaniel Kipper one of our old relatives. We did a bit of research to that one. We researched that one and 'Crab Wars' the ballad opera what we recorded, now father remembered that.' 'That's right, went back 3-400 year that did' explained Henry, 'took a lot of remembering that. Funny how it came about. We were off down the Old Goat one night when father says, "bugger me, I've forgotten something… Sid began before being interrupted by Henry, 'You know how it is, you get that feeling when you know there's something you've forgotten.' Sid carried on 'And I said, "what is it?" and he says "and old ballad opera" and then he remembered it, there and then, and we got the Vicar to write it all down before he forgot it again.' As well as their singing, on stage the Kippers perform on a variety of odd and quite unique instruments. I quizzed Henry and Sid on the names of the instruments. 'Well father plays the Tremelodeon' An extended, extra length melodeon with a sound uniquely

its own said Sid. ‘And Sid plays the Trunch blowpipe’ said Henry, with a bit of pride in his voice. Sid pointed out to me, ‘I’m what they calls a multi-instrumentalist really. I play the blowpipes, the crab shells and the walnut shells.’ Had he ever thought of putting his own name on walnut shells, and selling them on instrument stalls at festivals? I asked Sid ‘You mean like “Sid Kipper walnut shells”. It’s a good idea.’ Sounding a little confused, Henry asks ‘To make sure nobody pinches them, you mean?’ ‘No, he doesn’t mean that. He means sell them, we could setup a stall, it’d be a lot easier than singing, a lot easier money’ Sid explained to his father. I suggest that he could have a family of nut instruments, starting with Hazelnuts followed by walnuts then coconuts. Sid was quick to correct me. ‘No, now that’s where you go wrong you see, because the coconut shells have nothing to do with the English tradition, that is a foreign thing that’s come in and that’s why I’m trying to go back to proper original walnut shells I play. If you want horse noises it should be walnut shells. Coconut shells aren’t horse noises, I don’t know what they are, giraffe noises, I don’t know. It ain’t proper, it aint right.’

I asked Sid and Henry did they get people coming into the village to tape them as “the last custodians of Norfolk folk music”. ‘It’s been going on for years. Cecil Sharp started all that. It’s before my time, but Cecil Sharp he used to go around collecting folk songs off people, and then he used to cut out all the dirty bits, didn’t he, and then he used to publish books for all these folk songs, without the dirty bits in you see. Then all these people, it was their hobby, they used to get the books and go around and try and find the dirty bits and fill them in. Sort of like stamp-collecting really. There’d be hundreds of them around the village.’ ‘In the old days You couldn’t move for folk song collectors, they’d sit in the Old Goat and show each other their dirty bits. He came round ours once, Cecil Sharp, well twice as a matter of fact, and he saw my old father. Father told him to bugger off.’ Henry remembered. ‘Well he didn’t want his dirty bits cutting out did he?’ added Sid.

With Sid’s attention slipping and Old Henry looking likely to nod off any moment, I thought I’d better wind things up quickly with the catch all question, what had they lined up for the future. Henry pointed out, ‘I haven’t anything planned, it’s a bit late for me to plan anything really.’ ‘You haven’t much of a future have you father’ said Sid with all the subtlety of a rhino. ‘Well I’ve got the darts match tomorrow, and I’ll see how I feel the day after. I’m a bit worried about him, I reckon he ought to settle down with a good woman and carry on the tradition.’ Henry added. ‘Well I can carry on on my own without getting settled down.’ Sid retorted. ‘I don’t know about that, you ain’t got a good woman for a start.’ Henry retaliated. ‘I don’t want one, you got

one and look what happened to you.’ Sid replied. ‘How’s the old family tradition going to carry on?’ Henry quizzed Sid. ‘Well there’s Kevin, my nephew, ‘well as far as we know’ Sid pointed out, ‘I suppose he’ll have to do. he’s not bad, Kevin, at least he show’s an interest in the tradition and the old songs.’ Henry said with a touch of disappointment in his voice. Sid once again replying with his own brand of diplomacy replied ‘Well you’ve got to face it when you’re dead and gone, there’s nothing you can do about it anyway.’ Henry, not one to be outdone, threatened Sid, ‘Well when I’m dead, I’ll probably conic back and haunt you!’ ‘Will you? Well you can do the gigs then. It’d be good that, The Ghost of Henry Kipper Live on Stage.’ Sid quipped. And on that happy note I left the Kippers, fun to the last word so to speak.

(supplied to us by Chris Sugden)