



Choir leader Chris Samuel leads a carol.

# Folk in our pub

In a growing world of trendy bars and microbreweries, it's a sad fact that many traditional pubs are struggling to survive. In the latest of our features about how important your local pubs are to folk music, Anne Gregson takes a seasonal look at the tradition of pub carols - in her home town, and beyond.

Every year since 2010, we've had some wonderful sessions in what is becoming a continuing tradition of singing unusual carols in the pubs of Bradford on Avon in Wiltshire. We have three sessions on Sunday afternoons in December, in a different pub each week. The carols we sing come partly from the Sheffield tradition but mostly from Wiltshire and the surrounding counties.

My husband Chris and I were inspired by a visit to South Yorkshire to experience the Sheffield carols, which gave us the idea that we might be able to do something similar in the pubs of our own town. The Sheffield carols are sung in pubs in villages near Sheffield. This is the most significant of a few remaining traditions in England where Christmas carols have been sung in social settings for generations. A similar tradition takes place in Padstow in Cornwall, where carols are sung in the streets.

One morning we were walking through Bradford on Avon and by chance met up with three friends, Candy Verney, Chris Samuel and Nick Nicholls. Both Candy and Chris led community choirs teaching songs with harmony parts by ear. Nick and Candy had also experienced the Sheffield carols. We discussed our idea with Chris and Nick, who had been thinking along similar lines. We formed a steering group and Candy and Chris agreed to teach carols, with harmonies, to their choirs. We chose two pubs in Bradford on Avon and arranged to sing the carols on two successive Sunday afternoons in December.

We started with carols from Sheffield and other traditions, plus local carols that I researched from Wiltshire and neighbouring Somerset. The closest one I found was a beautiful carol called Carlingcott, also the name of a village just eleven miles away. I also found a book called Carols of the Westcountry by Glyn Court, a treasure trove of interesting local carols.

A distinctive feature of our pub carol sings is the band of musicians. The music they play doubles up the vocal lines of the singers, with instrumental breaks between the verses known as 'symphonies'.

The band rehearses separately from the singers and it was very exciting when everyone finally got together at the first pub sing - from the first session, the band and singers sounded wonderful together.

This year is our eighth year of carol sings, which remain popular and well attended, with singers and musicians packing the pubs. Over the years there has been a gradual change in the repertoire to increase local content. Candy has moved on and we have been joined by local choir leaders, Sian Penlington and Masha Kaestner.

From 2013, we decided to run a 'learning' session to give more people a chance to learn the carols and harmonies, as the only people learning the carols were members of local choirs. This year, realising one session was not enough, I volunteered to lead a group to learn the carols so that the harmonies that sound so glorious in the pubs are not forgotten over the years.



The band in full flight.

This year's pub carols in Bradford on Avon take place at 4pm on 2 December at The United Church (learning session); then pub sings at 4pm on 3 December at The Swan Hotel, 10 December at The Dog & Fox and 17 December at The Bear.



The pubs get very full during carol sings.

## A brief history of (pub) carols

The English Christmas carol has a surprisingly complex history. When we first started the Bradford on Avon carols, I was a mature student reading music at Bath Spa University. As part of my course I wrote a dissertation on the history of English Christmas carols, which uncovered the archaeological layers in the history of the carol.

Many pub carols, particularly around the Sheffield area, originate from the West Gallery tradition. In the early 18th century, choirs were brought into parish churches to lead congregational singing and wooden galleries were erected to accommodate the choirs and musicians.

However, as the choirs gained significant control over their music, relations broke down between them and the church authorities. In the mid 19th century, the church disbanded the choirs, dismantled the west galleries and organs were installed. The church authorities introduced a new repertoire of carols and hymns for congregational singing. Most of the familiar carols sung in churches and carol services today come from that time, a mixture of carols that were composed at the time, a few much older English carols and adaptations of folk carols from other countries.

In some areas people wanted to carry on singing the old gallery

carols so, as they were no longer allowed to sing them in churches, they sang them in pubs. The pub carols were usually sung for secular reasons, such as the beauty of the songs themselves and to keep them alive, rather than through religious sentiment.

The Bradford on Avon carols are part of a new chapter in the story of pub carols, and there seems to be something of a renaissance in progress. The existence of such living traditions as in Padstow and Sheffield have inspired the creation of some revivalist traditions, each with its own character. For example, the Stroud tradition started in 2001 at a pub called the Prince Albert, where gallery carols are sung each Sunday lunchtime in December. According to Bill Hicks, one of the founders: "The Prince Albert Carol Consort came out of discussions in the pub among a group of eight or so regulars who'd a fondness for singing but no shared repertoire." The carols were "plundered from books and CDs" as well as from members' research. At first everyone either sang the tune or improvised harmonies. Later, a pianist joined them and taught harmony arrangements at rehearsals. They are careful to make it an informal session for everyone to join in with.

The Stroud sessions were one of the inspirations for our sings - if they could do it, so could we.