

Interview – Pam and Ron Ross

Summary (Part 1)

PR says that they first came to Suffolk in 1972. They were already singing in 1973. Anything musical which happened was accidental. RR says it started because there was no folk music in their area when they came, nearest clubs were in Ipswich and Norwich. PR suggests they start with why they were interested in folk music in the first place. Says she wasn't, she was teaching in Swinton Comprehensive School near Doncaster. The RE teacher (Stuart) asked her to go to the folk club (for sixth formers) to make the tea once a week. She enjoyed this and was asked to join in with the choruses. Was asked if she played guitar. She said no but learned some chords to play with Stuart. They had guests such as Robin and Barry Dransfield, Dave Burland (who, PR remembers, used to perform with Shagpile). When she left and got married to RR, they came to Suffolk, and were already singing. PR sang and played guitar, RR says he could "sort-of" play the mouth organ which he had learned age 13/14. They came across Eric Nunley, a guitar player who was into trad music. Also Pete Hyde, John Bryant. They joined together to make music regularly. This grew into a folk club at the Scole Inn. They first called their group Summer Wine but didn't like the sound of it so renamed to Juice of the Barley. Decided to make a folk club because of lack of folk events here. The Scole Inn had just reopened and they were able to use a building owned by the pub. Also used to sing in the pub on a Thursday night. There was a lot of Americana going on in there at the time. Some songs came from books PR had got from Swinton comprehensive, others from John Bryant. Well-known songs. Sang every Thursday for beer, the following Fridays were a "non-event". There were urns hanging in the pub, the biggest of which was filled by the landlady, and it would go round many times. You didn't know what you had drunk because your glass was never empty. There was a huge log fire, which they once roasted a lamb over. The winter was very cold, the fire was nice but there were gaps between the big oak floorboards and the cold air coming up from the cellar inflated your trousers! The folk club came out of the Thursday night music, and was every month. PR says they had some really good people including the Orwell String Band (who played in a straight line and never smiled), Roger and Chris Gambol (RR still plays with them sometimes), Don Shepherd (Eric Nunley was sound engineer, Shepherd had a very loud voice, Nunley was very surprised). PR and RR were still singing when they had their daughter, Catherine. They once sang in Wickham Skeith village hall when PR was pregnant, sang "You Never Shall Have My Maidenhead", met Graham Sessions. PR was teaching physics in Solihull the year she got married. One mature student took all her classes, which was Graham Sessions.

PR says from their beginnings with Juice of the Barley and the folk club they performed at a variety of events for the enjoyment. Says they never pretended to be anything brilliant. Sang once at the Eye Show just after their daughter was born. Parked her in the beer tent whilst they sang. Says they were never "top of the tree" and were never going to be, just "slid into it". PR asks RR when he got his melodeon. RR asks if they'd started morris dancing. PR says that when they started with Hoxne Hundred morris side nobody played anything. RR says he was on the top deck of a bus and someone was playing a melodeon. He asked where they got it from, was a shop in Beccles. He went there and bought his first melodeon for £76. He knew a couple of tunes from playing the mouth organ, which is similar. He played for Cotswold, North West and Clog, so he learned all their tunes. He did not receive tuition but taught himself. He went to lots of workshops. He says it just grew from there. PR says she played piano accordion for dancing for 7/8 years, She does not like the sound it makes very much, although there are some nice ones and can be played well. PR had three at one time, she still has one. Was given one which she has now passed on to Danny Scoggins. He rang PR and RR at 4am before they were due to dance on mayday morning on the common asking whether they would dance.

PR and RR dance with Hoxne Hundred from 1983, almost from when it first started. PR had done clog dancing previously with Heather Bexon (Stow Folk, The Kitchen Girls) who used to come and teach. She is a very good musician, plays fiddle and piano accordion, harmony singer. She ran a workshop-type band for years in Stowmarket called Over Blown and Highly Strung. Around 20 members, PR says it was good fun, largely due to Bexon's organisation. They played one or two ceilidhs. PR says they still see Bexon sometimes, usually on Mayday. There is a Mayday celebration in a field nearby which PR and RR play for, which did not happen this year due to COVID. PR and RR know John Spiers family, he comes along on Mayday and brings home-grown vegetables. They also attend a "cocomass" day with their friends the Watleys. This is centred around fire, a decorated shed and chocolate.

RR says Mike Bexon has also been an influence. He is a melodeon/accordion player, played for Hagganeth Morris. Heather Bexon was a great influence on PR and RR's dancing because she taught. They also used to go to Haughley on a Sunday morning. RR clarifies that this is North West Clog rather than Suffolk step. PR says she went to dancing lessons aged around 4 and learned tap dancing. She says that "shuffle and step" was already there, the step dancing was not totally alien. PR used to go to Reading Cloggies once a year which was in a school hall. She says she was privileged to meet lots of incredible people, Sam Sherry, Pat Tracey, Ian Dunmuir, The Flets. When PR and RR used to go to Whitby, they had an ongoing step workshop throughout the week, RR was taught by Sam Sherry. PR and RR met Jean and Ian from Newcastle. The Newcastle clog dancers devised Newcastle clog notation which had foot positioning etc. Very thorough, you could almost learn from the paper.

PR says she went to Reading for years. She says she got "sucked into" it. Not everyone did the step dancing when Hoxne started. She had never seen it before she started. Describes PR and RR as "victims of circumstance". MW asks why they carry on doing it, asks what it is they like about folk and folk events. RR says he loves the music and songs, and the personalities of the people singing it. PR says she feels as though it fits. RR says he also likes other sorts of music. PR says about the dance music, they are constantly being attracted to new tunes, if they didn't play any instruments they wouldn't be as attracted to tunes. They choose tunes because they think they would like to play them. PR wonders if you don't play an instrument, how you decide which are your favourite tunes. They are not picky, playing tunes from anywhere. Songs are different she says. She doesn't really know what attracts her to a song. Some of the old songs tell stories which are not modern, with no modern equivalent, such as industrial songs. There is a historical connection. She enjoys the provenance. However, she is attracted to songs regardless of where they come from. Likes Graham Miles, Mike O'Connor because the songs are beautifully crafted. They just "have to be sung". She says she is not a great performer, doesn't look forward to performing because her version might be the first time someone has ever heard the song and that's a big responsibility. You always tend to go back to the first time you heard something, a definitive version, so it has to be good. She doesn't enjoy the pressure of that. Says Hugh Williams has written some good songs, such as I Can Jump Puddles, which is about a man who had Polio. This had left him with life-changing mobility problems, had written a book about it. Hugh Williams wrote the song about that. PR says she sang it at the village hall once. She got to the end and was approached by an audience member and said she'd cried because she had two adopted children and one of them had had polio. PR says she didn't know whether to be happy or sad. Says perhaps she had sung it reasonably well as there had been a reaction.

PR says they are still choosing new things. Says RR mutters "too many good tunes"! PR says you only have so much time so you have to leave things on the back burner and come back to them. You can't

learn every tune. RR says he plays with a friend (Steph) sometimes, have done a couple of concerts. Used to meet on a Tuesday night (before lockdown) for a "tune swap" with a few others. Struggles to remember tunes he hasn't played for a few months. Steph writes tunes by using rhythms from phrases she notices in her own speech. She is also a very good fiddle player. MW thanks for the interview. Says it has been interesting to hear everyone's experiences. PR says it is interesting how you can get pulled along by the small things in life, in the way that they got into folk music. Says she will get her flute fixed when lockdown is over. Explains that the Winster Gallop set, which they are about to play, they learned from FolkWork's David Oliver. PR went to a workshop run by Ian Stephenson and his father. Ian Stephenson did Newcastle Folk Degree. PR admires his musicianship. Says he and others formed a group called 422. Offers MW loan of their CD. Talks about Sam Pert and the Hut People. Was impressed by how good they were. Talks about the Rat Pack and their involvement in Northern folk music. This was the time when David Oliver wanted people to play in sessions, so he spent time noting down what people were playing in sessions. Brought out books and CDs of those tunes. PR and RR bought one, good CDs for learning tunes. Could use them to play by ear. PR thinks he did a lot of good with this. He was a nice person. Ran sessions at Towersey Festival PR and RR went to Towersey for 35 consecutive years with their children. Their son's birthday was always at Towersey. Used to go to Whitby then travel down to Towersey. Would celebrate at the festival/during travelling.