

John Arthur Howson (1949–2022)



John Howson, who died on 13 June 2022 aged seventy-two, was a song collector, record producer, writer, musician, and singer, whose extensive fieldwork in Suffolk resulted in written publications and a series of commercial recordings on his own label, Veteran. He expanded the label's catalogue with recordings of traditional singers and instrumentalists from other parts of England, and also from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

John was born on 22 September 1949 in Liverpool, the only child of Lilian (née Hughes) and Arthur Howson, who owned a grocer's shop in the Kensington district of the city. After attending Newsham secondary modern school, he took an engineering apprenticeship, but at the age of twenty-one he suffered an industrial injury that severely damaged his right hand, and he then retrained as a craft and design teacher. He had started attending folk clubs while still at school, including those organised by The Spinners and the playwright Willy Russell. He was soon performing as a singer, although his guitar playing was curtailed by his accident, and he later took up the banjo, playing with an over-large plectrum. He made his own dulcimer and ran and hosted folk clubs in Liverpool.

In 1977 John met Katie Hayward at Southport's Bothy Folk Club and they moved to Suffolk the following year, marrying in 1979. There he taught at Stowmarket high school. The attraction of Suffolk was the county's reputation for traditional music, especially the early 1950s BBC and Peter Kennedy recordings from *The Ship* at Blaxhall, and Keith Summers's more recent fieldwork in the 1970s. John concentrated on the mid-Suffolk area, documenting the music and its social context in his book *Many a Good Horseman* in 1985. John had a broad, eclectic view about what was worth recording, although most of his fieldwork was with an older rural population. Alongside the 'classic' folk songs that Sharp or Vaughan Williams would have recognized, he also collected music hall ditties, parlour ballads, and comic and sentimental songs, learned by the singers from a variety of sources, including the radio. He also recorded musicians playing mainly melodeons, accordions, and mouth organs, which in the context of a Saturday night pub get-together might prompt someone to get up and step-dance – vernacular, community-based music-making.

Alongside the book *Many a Good Horseman*, John released a cassette of field recordings of the same name, both of which were reviewed in this

journal in 1987, alongside an LP of recordings made by Mike Yates and John, and four other cassettes released from 1984 – the start of John’s own label, initially called Vintage. Further results of John’s fieldwork were contained in six themed cassettes, *Songs Sung in Suffolk*, released between 1987 and 1991, leading to a book with the same title. By this time Veteran was releasing cassettes of traditional singers and musicians from other parts of the country – carol singing from Padstow, Bob Cann’s melodeon playing, Sussex’s Gordon Hall, and Northamptonshire’s Jeff Wesley. Most of these recordings would not be regarded as ‘fieldwork’ but rather as specific projects for the purpose of showcasing singers’ repertoires – singers who would otherwise not have had their own ‘commercial’ recordings. Some of the recordings were made by others, but all the cassettes were produced by John.

Having developed a love of Irish music during his early life in Liverpool, John also released albums of Irish musicians based in England, such as Lucy Farr, Packie Byrne, Bruce Scott, and members of the Liverpool Ceili Band. Veteran’s Irish catalogue was extended to include singers Roisin White and Maggy Murphy, and the album of 1970s recordings reviewed in this issue. By the 1990s John had embraced CD technology – some earlier cassettes were re-released in this format, while other recordings appeared on compilation CDs. There were many new releases as well, including archival volumes of singers Phil Tanner and Fred Jordan, dulcimer players in East Anglia, and ‘The Shepherds’ (Northumbrian musicians Will Atkinson, Joe Hutton, and Willie Taylor).

Many Veteran albums were reviewed in this journal, and time and again the reviewers praised the high quality of the recordings, the high production values, and the excellence of the sleeve notes. It was clear in all that John did that he had a great respect for the music, and especially for the people who sang and played it. His fieldwork and CD releases greatly increased the profile of traditional music and its performers.

Some of the Suffolk musicians and singers recorded by John were included in his and Katie’s Old Hat Concert Party, which visited several festivals, including the National at Sutton Bonington and the Sidmouth Folk Festival. Audiences were delighted, but so too were the performers, knowing that their music was being appreciated anew. John’s digitized recordings are now in the British Library’s National Sound Archive. In 2000 John and Katie established the East Anglian Traditional Music Trust to promote educational and community-based activities, and organized an annual Traditional Music Day in Stowmarket. John’s article on Liverpool ballad-maker Edward Rushton was published in the *Folk Music Journal* in 2022.

Derek Schofield

De Montfort University, Leicester