

Singing for 40 years



Pennymoor Singaround recently held a weekend of celebration to mark its fortieth birthday attended by over 90 current and past members. There was plenty of singing, memories shared and concerts or talks from invited guests.

A discussion took place about the folk revival of the 1960's, when several of those present were involved in very popular folk sessions at The Jolly Porter pub in Exeter. Someone remembered Paul Simon being booked for a concert there for a fee of £8!

Clare Penney described how, when she moved to Pennymoor in the late 60s, locals would readily sing and tell jokes and tales round the bar at the Cruwys Arms. One of the men would step dance on half a

barn door which was placed in the middle of the floor, but only if he'd had enough to drink! Song and music sessions happened informally and by the late 1970s became a monthly feature known as the Pennymoor Singaround. From the beginning the ethos was inclusive, which continues to today, with many who'd never had the courage to sing in public giving it a go. In later years friendships were made with singers and musicians in Brittany and Ireland and shared weekend gatherings were held, including for many years in Bampton after the traditional Bampton Fair.

Gerald Palmer, a local farmer, talked about how his wife, Margaret, would make large quantities of pasties and bucketfuls of soup to feed hungry carol singers from Pennymoor at the end of an evening singing and collecting for charity round the villages. Margaret was well known for her songs, witty stories and tales of growing up on Exmoor. Some of these were recorded during the last few years of her life and put onto a double CD by Ross Henrywood which was launched during the weekend with profits going to charity. Margaret's sense of fun and fondness for her Exmoor heritage shines through in these recordings. Sadly Gerald has since passed away and his presence and support is very missed at the monthly singarounds. The CD Exmoor Maid by Margaret Palmer is available from info@barleycornproductions.co.uk

A talk from Mark Norman, author of a recent book 'Black Dog Folklore', described how apparitions of ghostly black dogs are common in Devon. He described one reported at Copplestone Cross and more sightings along an ancient route from there to Torrington. Mark's book mentions the Black Dog procession at the October full moon started by Pennymoor Singaround to Black Dog village, accompanied by song and drums. This no longer happens but the dog created for this, similar to an obby oss, was on display and is now used by Mark for talks and events.

Jason Rice, from the Dartmoor Pixie Band, spoke about memories of Exmoor sessions and Pennymoor events when he was a child growing up in a musical family. He described singing in public for the first time at Song and Ale and his first trip to Ireland with Pennymoor members at the age of 17. He played tunes on his grandad's accordion and demonstrated Dartmoor step dancing with Rob Murch playing banjo.

Jackie Oates described how she first encountered unaccompanied folk singing at Pennymoor and said this was a 'sparky moment' which triggered a passionate interest and eventually a successful career in folk. From a background of classical violin she began to sing, very nervously at first, and also play traditional folk tunes.

She is currently juggling the demands of motherhood with performing, recording and being musician in residence at the Museum of Rural life in Reading. She described her current research on the songs of women lace makers and mentioned that many of our nursery rhymes are derived from these songs.

This was followed by a presentation from Jim Causley, who mentioned his involvement in Pennymoor as a big influence and source of inspiration. He is still a supporter of the singaround and is involved in the annual Jan Stewer evenings of Devon songs and stories held at Puddington Village Hall in May. He sang several Devon songs including a cider song from Whimble, where he grew up, followed by amusing anecdotes and a Jan Stewer story read in Devonshire dialect. He also accompanied a song from his dad, Ross Causley, on the accordion and did some hilarious impressions of various Pennymoor singers which were easily recognised.

The weekend had many highlights, including a late night session of singing on the traditional wobbly log, for those brave enough to attempt it! It provided an enjoyable and important opportunity to remember and celebrate the contribution of Pennymoor Singaround to so many individual lives and to the creation and sharing of our folk culture over the past 40 years. Here's to the next 40!

The story of Jan Stewer

The character of 'Jan Stewer' was created by A.J.Coles who brought him and the other inhabitants of 'Muddlecombe' in a series of Deven dialect yarns. He was a master at Puddington School, the next village to Pennymoor. Every May Pennymoor Singaround put on a 'Jan Stewer' night in what is now the village hall but was once the school so the readings take place on the very spot where he taught. A.J. Coles captured the Devon sense of humour and the tales are as funny now as the day they were penned.

Song and Ale Weekend

Held every June since 1982. From 90-100 people, 99% of whom are singers, gather to sing almost all weekend from Friday evening to Sunday lunchtime. Not an amplifier in sight and rarely is a song repeated. Our present home is the London Inn in Marchant Bishop.



From Land's End to John O'Groats

In 2011, three Pennymoor Singaround members and Cora the Dog walked from Land's End to John O'Groats avoiding roads wherever possible using long distance and local footpaths.

Before leaving we contacted all the folk clubs, groups and sessions we could find along the way, inviting them to take part in the creation of a folk archive by arranging an evening where we could record what they were singing, playing and dancing. We also invited anyone to join us on the walk for as long as they wished. Many took up the opportunity. It took us three months, camping along the way and walking in total 1244 miles. We are at present engaged in organising the recorded material into an accessible archive which we hope will be a resource for all.