

History of the 'much travelled' Wooden Horse Folk Club

The Wooden Horse FC started life as the Travellers Rest FC in Crab Street, St Helens way back in 1970 or 71. For a good number of years this club was run by its founder, Graham Tabern and co-residents Wally Litherland and Len Blackwell, collectively known as Rough Edge. Later Graham's wife Bernadette joined them. This was a splendid club; much supported by Bernard, the landlord at the time.

As time went by the Rough Edge had to co-opt members of the audience to act as residents in times of crisis (flu epidemics, holidays etc) Among those asked were Big Ian, a Ships engineer on Supertankers and his oppo, little Pete Harrison - the former 6'5" and the latter 4'11"! About this time Judith and I had teamed up with two other regulars to form, in 1973, Blackthorn. Multi-talented Bruce Rothwell; now a Mister Big in the folk world of New Zealand (North Island) and multi-multi-talented John Murphy; later of Garva, McGuire, Murphy and Fahey and numerous other combinations of smarty-alec talent, were the other members. This led to us residenting at the club.

We lasted a little while until John went off to Ireland to learn to play the pipes (failure!!) and Bruce headed for the Antipodes in search of fame and fortune and a steady job.

When Rough Edge decided to bow out from the running of the club their place was taken by Moonshine, a duo of Vince Luddon and John (surname forgotten). I remember that Vince was a leading light in the local G&S society taking all the difficult tongue-twisting male parts, such as the Major General in Pirates, the List in the Mikado and the Nightmare scene in Ruddigore(?).

Eventually they threw in the towel and into the breach stepped Bernie Forkin as organiser along with the rest of Caught on the Hop, Mick Burrows, Steve Jackman and Alan Hopkins (later substituted by Steve Padgett). All went well until an idiotic landlord decided it made commercial sense for him to lose the thirty or so people who came each Sunday to the club, in favour of the six regulars (three of whom filled his Best-side whilst the remaining three crowded out his tap-room.

So the club moved to the George and Dragon in Billinge. Brilliant! Bob Hardy the landlord would sing Maori songs to us when the mood took him and furthermore he could never tell the time! Here the residents were Caught on the Hop, Bric-a-Brac (Alan and Margaret Marsden and Ian and Hazel Cafferkey), 'Lead Fingers' Eccles and Quartz (who had come together just at the time of the demise at the Travellers Rest. Three years, maybe more, of happiness when Greenall's decided to upgrade the pub. For 'upgrade' read 'ruin'!

The room was to be unavailable for 6 weeks. In the event it was nearer twelve months. The club moved rapidly to the Nalgo Club back in St Helens.

We tried, by heck we tried, to make a go of it but the concert room was too big for singarounds and too big for the audiences we could attract for a guest night. So it was move No 3.

We landed back in Billinge this time at the Eagle and Child, a wonderful Landlady in Eileen Walker, a belting bar staff, Izzy, Betty, Vonia and Hazel and a perfect sized room. Andy Anderson joined the residents during this stay. Ah bliss, years of security, until Eileen took ill

and the relief landlord couldn't prevent the local jobs from getting out of hand. Bernie had had enough and nursing a black eye so it was back on the road again.

For move No 4 the road was very short because we moved from the top of Main Street to the bottom. To be precise we moved to what had been residence No 2. By this time it had changed its name to the Pavillion where we performed in the stone built barn at the side of the pub. We had our own bar, the landlord gave us money each month to pay for national guests, and then the brewery moved him! The next incumbent closed the bar and placed his Jukebox by the clubroom door. What a p*****k. When the pub started to get raided regularly by the Drug Squad the time was ripe for another move.

Jim and Pauline, along with Eric and Sue, took us out to Eccleston, St Helens, where we set up camp in the Stanley Arms. Here it was decided that we ought to re-title the club with a moveable name i.e. get away from pub names. So it was goodbye to the Travs / George & Dragon / Nalgo / Eagle & Child / Pavillion Folk Club, we would become the Wooden Horse, in view of our many escapes! Lovely room, stone floor, pillar in the middle, what more could you ask?

Back in Business (Mike Bartram and Norman Wilson) replaced Andy Anderson at this time when Andy and Sheila emigrated to North Wales. The Whole Hog (Rob Peacock and Frank Parks) became residents - great assets to the club. All went well until the landlord put on a Day of Folk on his car park - it was a tremendous event; but unfortunately he didn't apply for a licence and he was heavily fined. Move number 6.

They say every cloud has a silver lining and this was the silver lining for the Wooden Horse. We moved to The Junction at Rainford Junction some 4 miles north of St Helens. A pub with an entertainments licence, a selection of real ales, a belting room and squeaky floorboards - this is heaven for a folk club. Unfortunately several resident changes have had to be made over the last few years but the stalwarts are now Back in Business, LocTupTogether, Mark Dowding (who replaced Rob Peacock when the pressures of promotion and residentship became unsustainable.) and Quartz.

We remained happy and prosperous at the Junction under the hospices of Mike and Alison for about 15 years until a revaluation of the pubs rent put it once and for all out of their reach. Mike and Allison moved to fresh premises at the Swan at Winwick and invited us to move with them, but it was too far from our traditional patch and we stayed at the Junction under a selection of "temporary managers". The final straw came when one manager sacked the cleaner and bought a Rottweiler and kept it in the function room. He then tried to instigate a £1 entry fee per person for using the function room to cover his cleaners bill (the one he sacked - remember?) - more correctly entitled the dogs latrine. Enough was enough and we gave notice (told him to stick the room, dog, and charges up his pipe).

We started a search for a new home straight away and very soon Frank and Maureen Parkin rang with news that Squires Bar in Billinge had an available upstairs function room. We hot footed it over to Billinge and checked it out, downside was that the room came with a hire fee, but upside was cheap beer and a great manager and staff, and a room with great singing acoustics, our escape tunnel surfaced in the church yard just behind the bar and we made for liberty. Our first night here was 16th May 2010.

We had almost 6 happy years at Squires, the only fly in the ointment was the room fee, and not forgetting the "stairs from hell". We are all getting older and the stairs seemed to be getting steeper - replacement hips, knees, bad backs and decrepitude were all affecting the members and keeping them from attending the club, we felt a move was needed to accommodate our changing needs. The tunnel was started yet again.

This move was different to the others as we had time to cast about and find a first class home. A few pubs were secretly interviewed and rejected, but Paul and June Olsen lived a stone's throw from our previous home in Rainford, and came back with rumours that the Junction had been finally run into the ground by the Pub company, and had been put on the open market, and bought by a local music mad family, completely refurbished, extended, and the function room was now a first rate venue complete with sound desk, PA, and stage. If that wasn't enough they had a passenger lift up to the room from the bar area, and served food and a selection of cask ales suitable for thirsty folkies.

We made arrangements to view with the Boss Paul Draper, the reports had been correct, Paul turned out to be a very knowledgeable musician and music fan and was keen to have another musical genre in the junctions stable (or should that be engine shed?) with day's, date's, and time's discussed and agreed it was back to the club at Squires to put a move to the vote, a vote which was carried overwhelmingly. We broke the news to Squires with heavy hearts, but they said they understood our reasons and wished us all well, the tunnel lights were lit, and civilian outfits passed out and we were on the move again.

We hit the ground running at our new home on 7th February 2016 with a full fanfare from social media we launched a club facebook page and with our web magician Eric Grossmith we hit the T"internet again for the first time since we were at the original Junction all those years ago.

4th March 2016