

BROADSIDE BALLADS

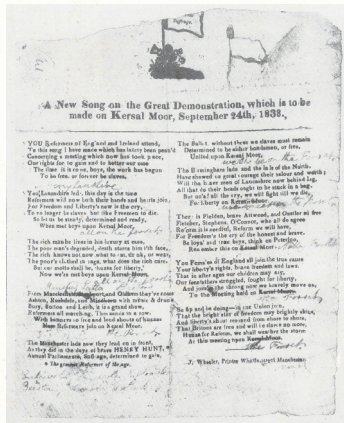
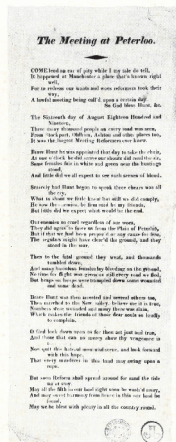
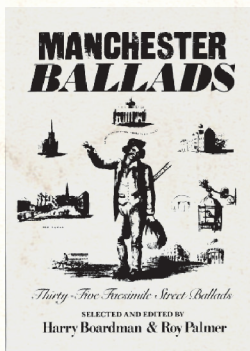
A Brief History

BROADSIDE BALLADS ARE PRINTED VERSIONS OF POPULAR SONG THAT WERE DISTRIBUTED IN THE TOWNS AND CITIES OF ENGLAND FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS.

“The Ballad originated in collective worksongs. People working together at some rhythmic activity... frequently sang both to keep in time in their work and to lighten the burden” (Palmer1980: 9)

The national collection of Broadside Ballads exists across disparate collections that have been held across the UK, often for hundreds of years, by libraries, universities and other institutions. Comprising of songs that were often collected by just a few individuals who, with immense foresight, took the time to visit local singers and also collected paper copies of the penny broadsheets printed regionally. These institutions have acquired and stored a social resource that, when considered as a national collection, unwittingly forms a wealth of cultural and historical knowledge, as represented by the places, stories and characters with the ballads.

By repeatedly using well-known tunes, the songs could reach a wider audience. This also meant that publishers could pay ‘hack writers’ to add new words to existing music, saving money on the production costs as composers were rarely employed. The earliest song in The Manchester Ballads collection dates from 1785, the latest 1882, although within the wider collection of broadside ballads there are printed versions of songs that date back to 1550, and many are thought to be derived from folk songs passed down through the oral tradition for many years before they were ever printed. The earliest surviving collection of Ballads dates from 1556, and is called “A handful of Pleasant Delights”.



The ephemeral nature of penny broadsides was not a problem when they were printed – they were, in many respects, a disposable item. However, this means that they only survived in libraries and archive collections. The EFDSS is based at Cecil Sharpe House in Camden, and is in many ways at the heart of all things folk in the England. The Full English archive is a project to digitalise and make accessible many of the traditional ballads, songs and tunes that have been the basis of English Folk music for centuries. The Full English project also features a coalition of musicians most of whom, at some point, have been involved with Band on the Wall. Essential reading for anyone interested in Broadside Ballads, and the wider collectin of English folk song. <http://www.efdss.org/efdss-the-full-english>

THE MANCHESTER BALLADS

The Manchester Ballads is a collection of thirty five broadside ballads dating from the time of the industrial revolution. Collected by two local historians and folk music enthusiasts and published with financial help from the education offices at Manchester City Council, The Manchester Ballads was produced in a handsome hardback card case, and is in the form of a folio collection of loose-leaf facsimile prints of the original penny broadsheets. There is accompanying text with many of the ballads, giving the biography of the song and, where necessary, a glossary of dialect terms. There are tunes suggested to allow the ballads to be sung communally in pubs and at home, and whilst penny broadsides were produced in the many hundreds, many were written to be sung to well known tunes. The impoverished audience would, with few exceptions, have no ability to read music (Boardman and Boardman 1973) and many would also be totally illiterate, only learning the songs through the oral tradition of singing in pubs, at markets and in local homes.

The Manchester Ballads are, in essence, a snapshot of Mancunian life in the industrial era. However, they are a snapshot from a very selective source, and theme, events, places and characters that are outlined within the lyrics of the ballads should be seen in the context not only of their chance survival, but of the reasons for publication.



The themes in the Manchester Ballads speak of struggle (The Spinners Lamentation 1846), poverty (Tinkers Garden 1837), civic uprisings (The Meeting at Peterloo 1819) and communal tragedy (The Great Flood 1872). However, they also recall good nights out (Victoria Bridge on a Saturday Night 1861), day trips around the region (Johnny Green's Trip fro' Owdhum to see the Manchester Railway 1832) and the various innovations and achievements of industrial Manchester are mentioned, and praised, throughout. Whilst some ballads are songs about specific events (The Manchester Exhibition 1857) , and are little more than a brief account in order to spread news around the illiterate population, there is often an agenda within many of the ballads that is not always apparent at first glance. The temperance movement had strong roots around Manchester, and when set alongside the numerous pubs and breweries that grew up around the factories and houses, the competing messages can be seen when the ballads are read carefully.

BALLADS AS SOCIAL MEDIA

The Manchester Ballads represent an early form of social media in stage projections for this project, one of the slides refers to the penny ballads as a nineteenth century version of Twitter. Whilst this may be stretching the point a little, in many respects printing, singing and hearing broadsides was the only cheap, quick and widespread method to disseminate news, opinion and social comment without the permission of powerful (London-based) newspaper publishers and outside the control of any editorial power. Freedom to discuss events and express opinion is a vital part of the social identity of Mancunian working class society, as recorded across the centuries in novels, songs and academic literature, by writers as diverse as Elisabeth Gaskell (Mary Barton), Ewan McColl (Dirty Old Town, The Manchester Rambler) and Morrissey (Manchester — so much to answer for, Strangeways here we come).

A ballad such as Peterloo has an obvious subject matter, and it undoubtedly adds to the understanding of this pivotal event — but just as official versions of events are ‘spun’ by politicians and media outlets today, we should remember that the ballad writers often had their own agenda and reasons for publication. Nevertheless, the ballads often support and add to the understanding of Mancunian life in an era before newspapers were commonplace, and before literacy was widespread in the working classes.

Many of the songs that make up the The Manchester Ballads collection survived through luck or chance (Boardman and Boardman 1974), and in many cases penny broadsides are archived only as a result of being overlooked in the forgotten corners of a long-established library. At the time of writing, they were never given a second thought by the established publishing houses and in formal literary circles. Discussing the Victorian publishers neglect of vernacular and provincial song, Vicinus highlights a particular booksellers reluctance to stock broadsides, explaining that “Gregson and his contemporaries did not consider weaving songs and dialect poems literature.” (Vicinus 1973: 740). The fact we have so many surviving examples is down to circumstance, not planning.

The excavation of industrial era buildings is ongoing around Manchester, and will no doubt continue as development and gentrification renews and replaces buildings around the city, but alongside the investigation of these tangible remains, there is the opportunity to use material from the creative industries past and present to help interpret and evaluate the cultural identity of people who live in a version of Manchester that is strangely familiar and yet, at the same time, largely unrecognisable to scholars of the future.

Without the preservation of, and future reference to, these historical sources how will we actually know that...

‘MANCHESTER'S IMPROVING DAILY’?

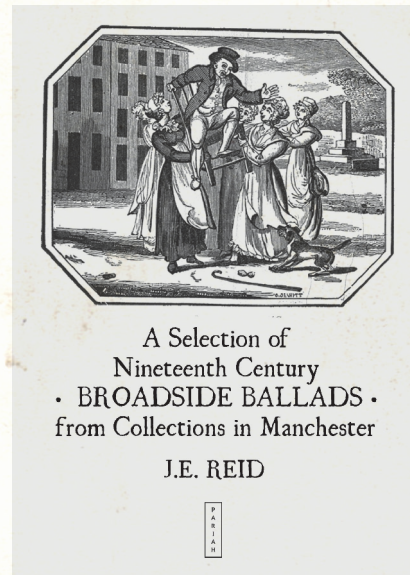
THE MANCHESTER'S IMPROVING DAILY PROJECT

The specific songs that are included in the Manchester ballads were taken from various archives, and the project was undertaken by Roy Palmer and Harry Boardman in 1980, as a logical extension of their previous research into ballads in general and the Mancunian collections in particular. The project is named ‘Manchester’s Improving Daily’, after the ninth ballad in this collection. This project started in earnest in February 2015, with band rehearsals and research meetings.

The Manchester’s Improving Daily Project now adds another dimension to these songs, with modern interpretations of the Manchester Ballads performed by roots reggae sound-clash veterans Edward II performed alongside traditional versions performed by Jennifer Reid. Alongside some research into the areas, characters and themes that feature in the ballads, the Mancheser’s Improving Daily Project aims to bring these Mancunian stories back to life and up to date, with and a series of event to promote and distribute the Manchester Ballads to a wider audience.

THE RESEARCHER AND THE BAND

“Twenty years ago I had a memorable Glastonbury Festival. 1995 was a vintage year for the festival and the weather was amazing — dust, rather than the infamous mud, was the only problem. I saw many bands play that weekend, and Edward II is one of those that has continued to delight and surprise over the years since. The Avalon Stage, a place many consider to be the spiritual heart of the festival, was home to Edward II that year — and whilst the finer details are lost in a blur of cider and time, I know that a good night was had by all. Twenty years later, and Edward II are back with this project — a collection of reworked industrial-era northern songs, and I am a research archaeologist with an interest in industrial — era Manchester. In 2010, I crossed paths with Gavin and T from Edward II at Band on the Wall, the iconic Manchester venue that is, in many respects, the Manchester home to E2. The local nature and uniquely Mancunian origins of the songs that feature in this project cropped up in conversation whilst talking to Gavin about the plans that Edward II have for 2015, and the chance to dig into the history of these songs was an opportunity not to be missed. Thankfully, the Arts Council and The Heritage Lottery Fund have recognised the merits of the project, and have backed the production of various events during 2015, with an album and accompanying book planned for 2016.” David Jennings, Archaeologist



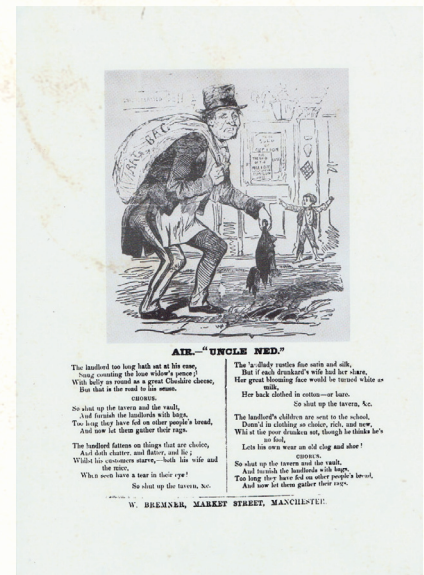
Manchester was the first industrial city, and although the area does not have a strong association with folk song and dance tunes like that of the rural morris tradition, a rich source for Edward II in the past, there are still songs to be sung and tunes to be played — you just need to dig a little deeper.

The Manchester Ballads reflect the pivotal events that span centuries of industrial and political change. Songs reflect the troubled times workers endured, from the civic strife of Peterloo and Kersal Moor to the more optimistic stories behind Victoria Bridge on a Saturday Night and Manchester’s Improving Daily.

Many of the Manchester Ballads date from the period that Engels and Marx lived and worked in Manchester. There is a table next to a window in Chethams Library where they are known to have worked – the same library that held many of the broadsides in its collections. In his introduction to Engels Condition of the Working Classes in England, David McLellan notes that Engels’ “personal observation was supported by reading masses of papers, statistical reports, and pamphlets” (McLellan 1993: xiii). He lived around Angel Meadow (McLellan 1993), which is just a few minutes walk from the Swan Street area of New Cross, a major loci of broadside production at the time. Many of the pubs in the area lay claim that Marx and Engels were visitors, and they probably heard the broadside tradition being sung in pubs and markets around Shudehill.

“It is intriguing to think Engels’ work was perhaps informed in part by reading some of the broadside ballads, perhaps even some included in The Manchester Ballads.”

After living in Manchester for just two years, Engels described the impact of city life on individuals as a “brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together within a limited space”(Engels 1845 :37). However, archaeology shows that even when faced with the harsh reality of living



in cramped, urban poverty people still strive for comfort, often embodied in the smallest of things. A recent study that identified the cultural traits of nineteenth century Irish diaspora residents at Five Points in New York shows how humble personal possessions — uniformly cheap items that in other contexts would barely justify a mention — can embody the hopes and aspirations of a community. The seemingly trivial information contained within many of the Manchester Ballads, whilst not tangible remains like the blue and white pottery so revered by the residents at Five Points, is still very indicative of the way people lived through adversity. Reading through the Ballads is a glimpse into the everyday world of the narrators and protagonists within these urban folk songs.

Edward II have also recorded a version of Dirty Old Town, a song familiar to many, with the narrative of hard times living in Salford recalled by local socialist firebrand Ewan McColl. The lilting melody belies the harsh reality of life in the industrial north. Whilst this song is modern in comparison to the Manchester Ballads, it sits perfectly alongside the other songs, as the social and personal histories that are featured in the Manchester Ballads paint a vivid picture of life in in the past. Many of the places featured in the older songs are still familiar today, yet the events are from another time. The living conditions and privations that the early Mancunians had to endure are beyond our understanding in many ways, and yet there are familiar tales too, with songs of love, loss, nights out and day trips to places of interest.

This collection clearly shows that whilst a ballad may describe a prison (New Bailey Treadmill 1824), an execution (Allen, Gould and Larkin 1867), a new technology (Mr Sadlers Balloon 1785) or a soldier leaving to go to war (The Soldiers Farewell to Manchester c1800), the underlying message of a defiant, happy and resolute Mancunian spirit is never far away.

