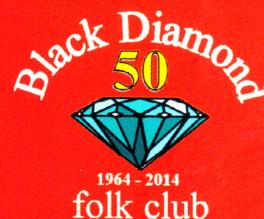


Folk in our pub

In a growing world of trendy bars and microbreweries, it's a sad fact that many traditional old British pubs are struggling to survive. In the latest of our series of features about how important your local pub is to folk music, and vice versa, Phil Cross and Paul Ryan introduce The Black Diamond Folk Club in Birmingham.



Our club, originally started in May 1964 by Stan Burgess, Chris Scott-Warwick and Ron Wheeler, had its first home at The Hungry Man, when it was known as The Macdonalds Folk Song Club. There was a good turnout, with numbers swelling to 40 by the second week.

However, on the third Friday that the club had been running, the organisers were informed that the pub was closing that weekend. This meant an immediate relocation, a pattern repeated in the club's 52-year history.

A room was found at The Australian Bar where the club developed its penchant for chorus singing and, following increased numbers, what had started as a singers' club became one running alternate guest and singers' nights, which continues today.

Erik Gooding soon joined the founders and so it ran until 1968. A committee, which is made up of performers and audience members to reflect the ethos of the club, then took over its running.

The club has always been a singers' club with musicians, rather than vice versa. We do like a good chorus and, although traditional material is in the 'bones' of the club, the variety of guests booked over the years has helped to retain and grow our audience.

We are lucky to have a hard core of regulars who support us. In the 60s and 70s we booked popular guests like Nic Jones, Tony Rose and The Young Tradition at least once a year. Now we have a three to four year cycle in order to book all the guests our audience wants to see.



The club's backdrop banner, designed by John Crane.

We have booked a wide variety of different acts, such as Magic Lantern, a shadow puppet/folk theatre group founded by Taffy Thomas in the 1970s. Some of the members appearing during that group's lifetime included Bill Caddick, Pete and Chris Coe and Tim Laycock. Other unusual acts booked have included folk plays, mummers' plays, youth choirs, morris dance teams and even hand-bell ringers. A recent addition to our guest list is Pepper's Ghost, who show themed glass slides on an original Magic Lantern projector, accompanied by suitable songs and music.

We have run club swaps with other clubs, put together folk music quizzes, and once or twice a year we have singers' nights with free food, which are always well attended.

We produced a CD for our 45th birthday, with the current residents singing songs that had been part of the club during that time. We have a vast array of photographs, updated weekly, of guests, regular floor singers and our audience going back to the 1970s. Our website, which includes a brief history of the club and many photographs, is visited by people from around the world.

The memories of our audience members sometimes surprise our guests. For example, when Richard Grainger introduced a song he had found, called Teesside Bridges, he didn't know Erik Gooding had written it. So we were well ahead when it came to the chorus and Richard still remarks on this.



Landlord of The Lamp Tavern, Eddie Fitzgerald.



Committee at the club's 50th Birthday in May 2014 (left to right): Dick Nickolls, Dave Thomas, Jane Kremer (front), Marje Stanley, Margaret Redwood, Andy Casserley, Jan Casserley, Phil Cross, Derek Catley, Des Redwood, Paul Ryan.

We mark the club's special events by booking multiple guests or extending celebrations over a weekend. For our 25th birthday, Martin Carthy and Les Barker finished the night with an impromptu version of The Nose of Allendale. The following night we had a big sing, with food, attended by over 100 friends from across the years. Our 50th birthday, in May 2014, which took two years to plan, was run in a similar fashion, when we invited many of the people who had been involved with the club over the years. The guest on the Friday night was Pete Coe, an ex-resident and committee member. Saturday's event included afternoon and evening concerts with guests, friends old and new, as well as a meal and birthday cake cut by founder member, Ron Wheeler.

In 1993 we became the Black Diamond Folk Club, and, in 2006, commissioned John Crane, a local graphic artist who has worked in all aspects of folk, to create a backdrop that the club could transport to future venues.

We have been a city centre folk club for 52 years and, in that time, have resided in 17 different venues. We became experts at moving the club in a week and, during our second of two periods at The Globe, we finished there in rather unusual circumstances. Cloudstreet were our guests when the pub had a visit by a fire officer and the police. To our astonishment, they closed the clubroom mid-song as it didn't meet current regulations. So we continued the night in the lounge bar.

Following the closure of The Globe at very short notice, we moved to our current venue, The Lamp Tavern – a tiny hidden gem. Eddie Fitzgerald, our convivial landlord, provisionally let us use the room for only six weeks. We therefore put an article in the Birmingham Evening Mail and went searching for a room again. In the meantime, Eddie realised the folk club had the potential to bring new people into the pub. So he soon offered us the room on a permanent basis. To have Eddie on our side, as owner and friend, has been of great benefit to the club. His cheerful demeanour and shrewd judgement of people mean he regularly steers likely patrons to us. To come to the pub on a Friday means real ale and a warm welcome, not just from us, but from the regulars in the bar (including Jockey Men's Morris).

So here's to 2017 and, if you are in Birmingham on a Friday, visit our website, blackdiamondfolkclub.org.uk, to see what's on and come along.



Audience in club room.