

Designing Popular Activities: Songs and Heritage

With thousands of fascinating buildings throwing open their doors each September, Heritage Open Days is certainly worth singing about. Keith Gregson, former history teacher and experienced singer/songwriter, knows this better than most and gets children singing in HODs projects with schools, museums and libraries across the Tyne and Wear region. Whether traditional, contemporary or composed by pupils, songs are a lively way to get to grips with your local heritage.



There are also songs for every subject and all occasions. Work and working places, love and courtship, the hardships and wonders of day-to-day life, local characters: all are celebrated in song. And that's before you even begin to think about landscapes, seascapes, monuments and specific historical events. In this section, Keith shares some of his ideas, tips and experiences to help you add a little music to your teaching.

A SONG FOR EVERY BUILDING, A TUNE FOR EVERY PLACE

When Sunderland Library Service asked Keith to come along to some of its branches and work with primary school pupils in the week before Heritage Open Days, he used the local event directory for inspiration.

Selecting 20 events and properties from the directory, Keith then matched each one to a suitable song, usually with a chorus. So, for example:

Working on the Railway was ideal for the Bowes Railway
Hard Times at the Mill went with Path Head Water Mill
The Blaydon Races was the obvious choice to go with a guided walk around Blaydon.

Because each event in the directory had a reference number, Keith could put all the numbers into a 'lucky bag' for enthusiastic pupils to draw out at random. When a number was picked out, Keith would read the details about the property, explain any historical information that was needed and then sing the song, inviting pupils to join in with the chorus.

For example, property number 135 in the local event directory was the Sunderland Maritime Heritage Headquarters. The entry read:

Workshops and museum in offices. Cross Gladstone Swing Bridge (1875). Next to former Dock Office (1850). Tours: Meet at Dock Gates, Barrack St. Children's activities including quizzes, treasure hunt, pirate face painting, dressing-up and find the captain. Children to be accompanied – 2-5 Saturday and Sunday – Tour 45-60 minutes.

Keith chose the *Capstan Sea Shanty (Billy Boy)* to go with this property. This song was first written down (in the form known today) by Richard Terry, a member of a family of seamen and ships' captains who first heard the tune on the North East coast. By singing the song, pupils not only remember the local man who wrote it and learn dialect words such as 'hinnie' and 'girdle', but the repetition of phrases helps to reinforce children's understanding (and appreciation) of language and rhythm.

*Where have ye been all the day,
 Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
 Where have ye been all the day
 Me Billy Boy?
 I've been walking all the day
 With me charming Nancy Grey,
 And me Nancy kittled me fancy
 Oh me charming Billy Boy.*

*Is she fit to be your wife?
 She's as fit to be me wife
 As the fork is to the knife.*

*Can she cook a bit of steak?
 She can cook a bit of steak,
 Aye, and make a girdle cake.**

*Can she make an Irish stew?
 She can make an Irish stew,
 Aye, and singin' hinnies* too.*

*North Eastern specialities.

When sessions finished, class teachers would be given Heritage Open Days directories to take back to school and distribute to pupils at the end of the day. In this way children were encouraged to visit local events with their

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families and report back to the class during the following week. Some schools also took the opportunity to make Heritage Open Days the inspiration for new artistic or written work in their classes.

IF ONLY LIMESTONE WALLS COULD SPEAK

Churches, temples and other places of worship are among the most well-represented properties that take part in Heritage Open Days. Music is an effective way of enlivening pupils' interest in these buildings.

When Keith Gregson visits schools to support pupils who are learning music and history, he often makes use of a song he wrote in the 1970s called *Limestone Walls*. He was inspired to write it by two ancient churches – one in Hartlepool and one in Sunderland – which had survived amidst landscapes that were altered dramatically during the Industrial Revolution. One of the churches stands at the heart of Sunderland's shipyards and dates back to Saxon times, while the medieval church in Hartlepool is now cloaked in the shadow of a massive brewery.

Limestone Walls

If only limestone walls could speak what a story they would tell of
 Farmers, just then factories and the sound of the old church bell ringing
 Kings their crowns and victories and bidding men to seek for the
 truth that's as old as the limestone walls. If only they could speak. If
 only they could speak.

Walls have ears we're always told
 If they had tongues beside
 They'd tell a tale that's seldom told
 Of the passion and the pride
 Of a village changing to a town
 They watched it as it grew
 And as people came from far and near
 The old observed the new.

When the parish was a powerful place
 And the vestry not a room
 But the name of those who governed
 For the weaver at his loom
 The husbandman who tilled the earth
 Would often form his views
 Round what he heard within these walls
 When he heard the weekly news.

Now time has rung the changes
 Bringing ups and bringing downs
 And throughout the land the villages
 Have turned into our towns
 Yet gazing down on every one
 Are the windows large and small
 The eyes of the age old parish church
 The eyes that saw it all.

Limestone Walls is a great, evidence-based song that encourages children to discuss concepts of time and change (verses one and three) and the role of the church as the hub of parish life (verse two). The chorus also mentions the ringing of bells for a coronation and a victory in battle: both of these incidents were recorded in the parish registers belonging to one of the churches.

The song can be used at any religious building, but it is ideally suited to older parish churches – particularly those that survive in an urban/industrial environment. Many other songs can be used in a similar way: for example, *Matchstalk Men* would be ideal for a visit to a Lowry gallery, while Ralph McTell's *Red and Gold* deals with a specific place and event in the Civil War.

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DEEP DOWN IN THE MINE

Keith once spent two weeks around the Heritage Open Days weekend working with pupils from Years 5 and 6 at the remarkable 'F' Pit (Coal) Museum at Washington, Tyne and Wear. Pupils from local schools visited to work on the Victorian period or the local history element of the primary history syllabus.

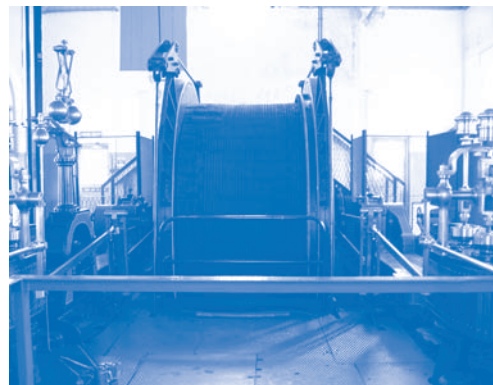
Each two-hour visit comprised a tour of the working pit-haulage engine, demonstrations of miners' equipment by museum staff and a song session. Keith used a number of songs from the 19th or 20th centuries, but over the two years the museum has been open for school visits Keith has worked with staff and pupils to write five new songs (two rounds and three chorus songs).

The round *Deep Down in The Mine* (see right) was developed by Education Officer Marie Harrison when she realised that pupils were using many 'd-descriptive' words (literally). Keith added a tune to her lyrics.

The song *The Wheels Go Round* is based on the workings of the winding engine and a smaller working model, which can be operated as the song is sung.

Both pupils and teachers were keen to take both songs back to their schools to use in assemblies, giving them the chance to share with others what they had learnt about mining history. Keith was invited to one of these assemblies at Sunderland High School, at which a group of pupils performed the song brilliantly.

The 'F' Pit Museum opened its doors for Heritage Open Days itself, and many of the pupils who had been involved in Keith's sessions returned with their families to show them the engine, the wall displays and the models that had inspired some of the songs. In some cases, older members of the family were former miners who were able to contribute stories and information to the wealth of oral history already collected about the mine.



THE ROUND

Deep down in the mine
It's dirty and dark
It's dreary and damp
It's dismal and dangerous
Down in the mine
It's dirty and dark
It's dreary and damp
And it's dangerous work

THE CHORUS SONG

The wheels go round – the wheels go round
What a clinking, clanking sound
Hauling up from underground
When the wheels go round

Jim brings the water to the boil
The fire is lit by Billy Moyle
Young Tom brings up a tub of oil
And the wheels go round

Tom oils the pistons clean and bright
Like stars that shine all through the night
Jack rings the bell to show all's right
And the wheels go round

Up from the boilers comes the steam
The pistons work just like a dream
Tom's like a cat that's got the cream
And the wheels go round

The pistons drive – the gears fly
The drum goes round both low and high
A rope flies out across the sky
And the wheels go round

Keith Gregson, who is currently working on a project that will use song to support pupils' work on the Victorian era, can be contacted at keith.gregson@talk21.com or on 0191 5109206.

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SOURCES FOR SONG

Children find live music particularly inspiring and, if you can fund a local singer or persuade a retired musician to perform appropriate material, it is well worth it. Better still, if you have the voice and the courage, perform the songs yourself! Pupils may well giggle at first but, in time, they learn to both appreciate and value such a different approach.

If you choose to do this, you will find song books very useful. General collections used by both primary and secondary schools can yield up some good songs, although you will find many more in anthologies with a specific historical or educational theme. Among the best of these are the many volumes produced by collector Roy Palmer during the latter half of the 20th century. His *Oxford Book of Sea Songs* (OUP, 1986), which was republished as *Boxing the Compass* by David Heron Publishing in 2001, is packed with songs that are ideal both for use before and after visits to sites with maritime links. You can find out more about sea songs by visiting www.chanteycabin.co.uk If you're looking for historical songs with a more general theme, Roy's *Book of British Ballads* is ideal, as are his *Poverty Knock*, *Painful Plough*, *Valiant Sailor* and *Rambling Soldier*.

If you prefer to use recorded music, remember that the chance to use a record player is now – for most children – a rare opportunity that will help them to get to grips with our recent heritage! You can pick up cheap turntables in charity shops or in auctions, while a few new models are still available in catalogues. Second-hand shops and flea markets are also ideal places to riffle through piles of cheap records, giving you the chance to build up a collection of appropriate folk and contemporary songs for very little cost.

You can also buy many songs that would be ideal for Heritage Open Days projects on compact disc. In North East England, for example, a massive academic campaign resulted in the production of a 20 CD *Northumbrian Anthology* (www.northumbriaanthology.com). This is a treasure trove containing songs on mining, all aspects of the sea, agriculture, public figures and the buildings they were connected with. Additionally, folk artists such as Bob Fox (www.bobfoxmusic.com) and Johnny Handle have made some excellent recordings, while the work of the evergreen Fairport Convention (www.fairportconvention.com) provides insights into history from the Peasant's Revolt to the Second World War and beyond.

Finally, you can draw on a range of school-friendly projects to help you use song to explore history and architecture. Keith Gregson, for example, has created a CD package – *Whatever Happened to the Ponies* – comprising written and recorded material based on life in the Durham coal mines in the mid-20th century. It contains 16 songs, composed with former miner Jim Moreland, an interview and a mass of differentiated support work. Keith has also devised an *All At Sea* project, based around his visits to schools in the guise of a 225-year-old ex-fisherman. This contains a CD and support material which can be used before and after the 'seaman's' visit.

