

In search of traditional ORKNEY SONGS

WORDS & PHOTOS: Alan Hodge

Ever heard of a 'Song Shop'? If not, Orkney Folk Festival will give you a chance to find out what it's about. During the festival, it will be in Stromness at 110 Victoria Street, which formerly housed a second-hand book shop. You can't miss it – it's right opposite the Bank of Scotland.

The venue is the home of professionally-trained opera singer Emily Turton, one of the trio of enthusiasts who front the 'Big Orkney Song Project'. The others are Sarah Jane Gibbon, singer of traditional Orkney and Scottish songs and internationally-recognised folk singer and bodhran player Aimee Leonard, whose credentials include doing backing vocals and playing the bodhran with the winning Irish entry, Eimear Quinn, in the 1996 Eurovision Song Contest.

She was also a lead singer with the

Irish band, Anam, and toured the world with them.

The plan to open the shop at this time is part of the search the team is undertaking throughout Orkney for local songs that could be lost as older Orcadians pass on.

I caught up with the trio at the Firth Community Hall at one of their 'Song Share' winter programme events, which attracted up to 45 participants. Others similar sessions had been held at St Margaret's Hope, Orphir and Kirkwall and others were set for St Andrews, Flotta, Dounby and Shapinsay, before the start of the folk festival.

The Finstown gathering of folk enthusiasts started with a warm-up opening of songs which they had discovered earlier and an invitation to members of the audience to perform. Discussion sessions were also part of the programme, to see if any more musical gems might

be discovered, and finally there was a workshop which allowed participants the chance to learn a recently-saved song that had been in danger of being lost for ever.

On this occasion, the song chosen was *The Nobleman's Wedding*, also known as *The Unconstant Lover*, which – like many of those collected by the team – have variations in England, Scotland, America, Canada and Ireland.

Elsewhere, it is known as *The Faultless Bride*, *To Wear a Green Willow* and *The Awful Wedding*.

The tale is a warning to faithless lovers of what happened to a maiden who did not wait for her lover's return after several years, before marrying another. This was something that had been quite common when folk were emigrating or working at sea and hope was gone that they might never return.

Aimee told *Living Orkney*: "We started collecting songs at the end of October – people have brought words on scraps of paper, there have been old 78 records and some have even been sung down the phone."

"Added to that, the sound archive in Orkney Library and Archive in Kirkwall, has been a major source of sound recordings and written material. So far, we have catalogued over 60 songs as well as amassing a collection of books and articles in which Orkney songs have been published. The wonderful thing is that we have found a number of different versions that exist of some of these."

Sarah is the group's historian and archivist and it was her suggestion, made to Aimee two years ago, that she might fancy doing a couple of Orkney songs with the Songshop Choir at the folk festival. That sowed the seeds of the project.

Aimee said: "It sounded a fantastic idea to sing Orkney songs. Sarah was the main source of these songs at that time and she gave me a couple of them. I arranged them for the choir and we performed them. Then a couple of months later Sarah and I met up and decided to find more of these songs and try to

see how many of them there were.

"Wherever I have gone, people have said there were no folk songs in Orkney and I have never believed that, because I had known of songs when I was growing up. Sarah and I felt very much the same about the importance of collecting these Orkney songs together and raising their profile so that no-one will ever ask again 'Are there no Orkney songs?'"

Fate was on their side. A Heritage Lottery Fund representative visit Orkney soon after, and the two quickly put together an outline of what they proposed to do, and were able to speak to the woman about it.

They had tentatively asked her if that was something she might be interested in funding and which would involve all ages in the community. The response was an emphatic "Yes, absolutely".

Thus encouraged, they set out to prepare their formal proposal, to run a pilot project and to form a committee interested in applying for lottery money and to be responsible for the project, since, as Aimee said with a laugh: "We could not employ ourselves."

This took them a year, but a further

four months passed before they heard that they had been granted £45,800.

Local sponsors are the Herd Law Practice, Lows, solicitors and A.J.B. Scholes, chartered accountants, and others are Simpsonian Music Ltd and BrassTacks Productions. Aimee's friends, world-renowned guitarist Martin Simpson, of Simpsonian, was at last year's folk festival with his partner Kit Bailey of BrassTacks. Both thought the project was a wonderful idea and generously donated funds to aid the project.

"We had to apply for our own jobs," said Aimee, "because there might have been somebody else better qualified to do it and it had to be done fairly. Fortunately, we got our jobs and now have a fantastic committee behind us. The project could not have happened without the voluntary work done by the committee. They are a truly dedicated team who maintain the website, take photos, help with press releases, provide tea and biscuits and, above all, sing the songs with us.

"We also have musical support from the likes of Alex Leonard and Brian Cromarty, who both accompany the singing trio and assembled



Finstown Song Share event



Aimee Leonard



Emily Turton



Lorraine Bichan



Catherine Baikie



Sarah Jane Gibbon