

# DOWN THE SHIP:

## ALVAR SMITH IN CONVERSATION WITH KATIE HOWSON



**O**n the 9th of November 2025 an evening of East Anglian music at Sheffield's New Musical Traditions Club played host to a live album recording for Veteran: the traditional music label. The performer was Alvar Smith, a retired gamekeeper and traditional singer from East Suffolk. Joining Alvar on stage was Katie Howson, who talked to Alvar in-between songs about his life and music, and Suffolk's most famous inn; the Blaxhall Ship.

**Katie Howson:** I started going to the Ship not long after I moved to Suffolk about 1978, but it took me a long time to meet Alvar, because he wasn't going to the pub at the time, but you were when the Peter

Kennedy film of singing in the Ship *Here's a Health to the Barley Mow* - which features your grandfather Arthur Smith singing the title song - was made in 1955?

**Alvar Smith:** Yeah, but I was only about 10 years old! *(laughter)* In them days, especially in the Ship - though I suppose it was like that nationwide - women and children weren't allowed in. There was only a few women in the bar, but they were sort of 'heavy drinking women', *(laughter)* but most women weren't encouraged to go in there.

I used to go there with my grandmother because my father had been a career soldier, and

when he came home after the war, he liked dancing. My mother also liked dancing I suppose, so they used to go off to dances and I used to get farmed out to my grandparents down at Blaxhall; and of course, every Saturday night they went to the Ship.

It was a sort of a tradition; everybody went to the Ship - ideal time to do a robbery! *(laughter)* The only trouble was they h'en't got nothing to pinch! *(more laughter)* But that was how it was, everyone went to the Ship, and so I went with them. But as I was only a kid, I was only allowed in the kitchen. We used to sit in there with Mrs Hewitt [Landlady], other ladies and one or two more kids

**Howson:** And so was that actually a public room in the pub, the kitchen?

**Smith:** Well, that was if you was invited! *(laughter)* I suppose my grandmother was invited in because my grandfather [Arthur Smith] used to sing a bit. He sang the *Barley Mow* in the film. But when Keith Summers done a recording down there [1953] he didn't sing it, that was sung by Jack French. But by the time they made the film proper, Jack French had, erm, ceased to be alive. I won't go through the circumstances, but he'd ceased to be alive and so my grandfather took it over.

**Howson:** One of the main singers in the pub at that time (I think he died shortly before I got there) was Cyril Poacher, and you sing a lot of his songs. He had a bit of a reputation as a rogue, I think it's fair to say isn't it Alvar?

**Smith:** He was always known as the richest cowman in East Anglia! And as soon as he got his wages on a Friday night, he used to put it all in the one-armed bandit! *(laughter)* Usually while someone was singing a song too, so it' go CLANG CLANG CLANG! *(more laughter)*

He was a terrible borrower of money, you know? He'd have all his wages gone by Friday night, and on Saturday he'd be borrowing off people. He had a quid out of me one day, I went home at night and my father said "Where you been?" and I said "Down the Ship". He said "Was Hurrop down there?" They always used to call him Hurrop, I don't know why. I said "Yeah". He said "He didn't borrow no money off you did he?" "Well yeah I lent

him a quid until next Friday". He say "Well, you'll never see that no more". And he was right - I didn't! *(laughter)*.

**Howson:** Not just Cyril but the Ship and the whole village, really, had a reputation for being quire ferocious. I'm sure you never had anything to do with that side of things yourself Alvar; what was the reason you didn't go in there?

**Smith:** Well it was pretty rough, yeah. I didn't go in there at all when I was working. I was gamekeeping you see, and you didn't wanna go in to pubs, 'cause if you went in pubs, poachers knew where you were! *(laughter)*. They'd only gotta look through the window! *(more laughter)*. I didn't go in again until I retired.

Musical accompaniments didn't very often happen in the Ship, especially in the early days. Occasionally, there'd be one man playing single row melodeon, and that's about all you got in there - and he probably played the same tune about 25 times during the night! But he was a good player, and his name at the time I was first going in there was Frank Pierce. He was my father's uncle, not mine, but I always called him uncle. He was a lovely player, and he used to get on right well with Bob Roberts, he was very friendly with him, they done a lot of playing together.

**Howson:** One of the other singers in the Ship in the early days was Bob Hart, did you know him?

**Smith:** I knew him, but I didn't know him that well, you know? I spoke to him and saw him on occasion, and I learnt his songs,

but he was in the First World War - he was a lot older than me! I was just like a teenager really. But he was a lovely bloke. Got half his jaw blew away. I think he lost it in the trenches.

**Howson:** There was a chap used to go in the Ship called Kensa Diaper. He was a good stepdancer, and his big song at the time was *Flash Company*, one which you've taken on Alvar. The Ship has always attracted tourists, and one day we were in there and this young couple from London got up and sang *Flash Company* very fast, and whilst strumming an autoharp. When they'd finished, Kensa got up and said "This is how we sing that song round here", and sang it again! *(laughter)*.

**Smith:** His father was a lovely old boy, he lived in a bow-top caravan on Tunstall Common. I used to go round there with Sunday papers when I was a teenager, and he was always doing something with wood! One morning, I went round there he was riving out hubs for rabbit snares. He was riving these bits of ash, then splitting them down four ways to make these hubs. I was so intrigued I stood there watching him. Well, he looked up to speak to me and cut a bit out of his figure! Anyway, he said "do you wanna learn how to make 'em boy?" I said "yeah, I like the look of that". I suppose I made thousands in my time now.

Alvar's new album *A Sailor and His True Love: Traditional singing from the Blaxhall Ship* will be released later this year on the Veteran label.

Mossy Christian

Opposite: Alvar Smith in the Blaxhall Ship © Megan Wisdom