

Isle of Wight and Solent Sea Songs by the Wootton Creekers (Salty Version)

If you enjoy listening or singing these sea songs do give generously to the various IOW and Solent Lifeboat Associations.

Here is a selection of sea songs that have connections with the Isle of Wight and the Solent. These are sea stories that are about shipwrecks, sea battles, smugglers, the Navy, lost loves and more. They were and are sung in pubs, in parlours, in the island's grand manor houses and around snug fires. They are not to be confused with sea shanties which were work songs. They were to give the tempo for the work on board ship. In the past the Solent would have rung to such songs. The only song of this type that we have included is the island version of My Billy Boy, a windlass shanty.

Today many a session is a mix of both types, songs about the sea and actual work shanties. Here is the set we sang and played.

Atherfield Ledge (St Catherine's) Dave
Cherbourg to Wight Dave
Crossing the Bar * Clare
Dark Eyed Sailor Anto
Dibdin's Tom Bowling Neil
Heart of Oak Martyn
Hornpipe choice (Steamboat Hornpipe/Jack's the Lad) Anwyl
Man o' War * Clare
Mermaid Martyn
My Billy Boy Shanty Dave
Nancy Lee Stewart
The Men of Wight * Clare
The Old Miser Anwyl
Portsmouth Suite (To Portsmouth/The Navy/Portsmouth) Anwyl
Rat of Wight Dave
Sailor's Return Anwyl & Dave
Throw Out the Lifeline Dave K

* Taken from original cassettes

Song Information

Atherfield Ledge

Tells the tale of a shipwreck on the Atherfield Ledge which is off an area known as The Back of Wight. One stormy night in the winter of 1314 one of a fleet of ships, chartered by the merchants of Aquitaine to convey wine to England, struck the treacherous Atherfield Ledge. The ship contained large amounts of wine, 174 casks and also cloth. De Godyton claimed the cargo saying possession was nine points of the law. The Merchants, however, claimed redress against De Godyton saying the cargo was no "wreck of the sea".

Later there was a Papal Bull threatening De Godyton with excommunication. He built an oratory / lighthouse on the downs above the Atherfield Ledge as penance for taking the wine. The tower was built so that no other ship would be lost for the need of a light on the deadly Atherfield Ledge.

Cherbourg to Wight

A tale of IOW smugglers. The chorus is found in Noyes book, as is the story. Old Hannah pretends to be ill when the excise men arrive at her cottage. Her chair is in fact hiding a trap door to the cave below where the brandy is hidden. Anwyl arranged this.

Crossing the Bar

A poem by Tennyson written just before his death while he was travelling on a ferry across to the Isle of Wight.

Dark Eyed Sailor

There are many versions of this popular song. I remember hearing Fred Jordan singing it. It is a typical shore song of lost love and returning from sea.

Dibdin's Tom Bowling

It was written by Dibden about the loss of his sailor brother Tom at sea. Dibden was brought up in Southampton. Dibden himself only went to sea once from London to Plymouth although he wrote dozens of sea songs for the navy.

Heart of Oak

Famous naval song from 1760 to the present day. The lads played a bit of brass.

Hornpipe Choice (Steamboat Hornpipe/Jack's the Lad) Anwyl

We played at the Woodvale, Gurnard almost every week for many years. Often a chap would get up and dance the sailor's hornpipe to great cheers. We used to play tunes like these.

Man o' War

Men of War (battleships) pass by the island today. Some rest on the sea bottom close to the island like the Mary Rose (now raised). In the song Susan is sadly saying farewell to her jolly tar.

The Mermaid

An Island version that has a slightly different feel to ones found in Community and School Song Books.

My Billy Boy Shanty

There are many local versions of this song. Again not to be confused with the standard Community and School song book version. Local verses were popular. Chockdog cheese was made on the island. It was a very hard cheese. The original doughnut came from the island. There was still a maker in Newport until recently. It is a windlass shanty.

Nancy Lee

Someone used to sing all these type of songs in the island pubs, very uplifting. I think he was a former sailor. By Michael Maybrick and Frederick Weatherly 1870.

The Men of Wight (March of the Wight Men)

The island was often raided from the sea by the French. This song demonstrates the strength and determination of the Men of Wight to send the enemy back into the sea.

The Old Miser

A miser had one daughter who secretly courts a sailor. The miser hears of this and sells the sailor to a captain. The damsel tries to buy the sailor back but the captain says no. She mourns her loss. A Portsmouth Song.

Portsmouth Suite (To Portsmouth/The Navy/Portsmouth) Anwyl

The first one is a song/round from 1612 and the other two are Playford tunes from the 17th century. The last tune has now become famous.

Rat of Wight

Tells the story of Captain Gilbert Lee who steered the Rat of Wight into Newport Quay to warn of the Spanish Armada approaching. They had spotted them off Penzance and had raced back up the channel.

Sailors Return

Another story about a sailor in disguise. She thinks he has died. Variant of a dance tune. A Portsmouth song.

Throw Out the Lifeline

An old favourite sung on the island. Rob always used to do it. Originally a hymn, sometimes done in a musical style. Dave K. keeps it fairly serious.

Technical Details

These were recorded over a few years ago in the summer when various friends called in. We used a cool room in our Brittany Farmhouse as it was very hot!. Martin, who did the original recordings, used a laptop we had, some software and a couple of mics. The recording gear we used this time was not his. The software kept crashing as it was not the correct version but he manfully ploughed on and made it work somehow. He added some of the original cassette songs to this set. Yes there was good French wine to make the red blood dance!

The Wootton Creakers

We are a mixed bag. We creak! These are the people who turned up to play and sing. Plenty of room for more in the future!

Martyn. Press ganged into the merchant navy aged 16. Trained aboard a hulk in the Thames. Sent off around the world in one of the last tramp steamers. Went to the Gulf states with a mixed cargo of cars, motor boats, hard liquor, munitions, army buses, bulldozers, confectionery, perfumes etc. Then onto China with a cargo of sulphur. Across to Japan and down to Australia with steel and back with sugar. Africa, USA, Ireland.... Many more stories but sadly unprintable! Now he is an environmentalist.

Stewart. Passed by the IOW in Dec 1965. His family left Southampton to emigrate to Australia. Last view of England. Spent some years in the Pacific cruising the various islands. Riding out hurricanes. Played in the ship's band. Crossed the channel many times in a 36' Bermuda rigged yacht with just a compass and no lights, they almost hit tankers. Never quite understood why he was crossing the channel so often but suspected it was to do with the deep red wine below.

Neil. Has ridden the Swellies through the Menai Straits, sleeping in the bow of a yacht. On another occasion he thought he was sailing up a quiet Spanish river but in fact crossed over to Morocco. Travels the world but is never sure where he is, may have been to the IOW! Recently bought an old GP14 dingy, did it up - sanding and varnishing, rigged it up, set out and it sank!

Anto. She visited Anwyl and Dave often on the IOW when we first lived there. She was a member of the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, Fishbourne. Anto later went on to sail extensively in the North Sea, Baltic and Channel. Now retired to Devon. Plays a mean English concertina.

Dave K. Spent many years on cruise liners taking people round archaeological sites when the liner docked. This was mainly in the Med. but also went to many other places in world... Far East, Canada..

Clare. She was here in spirit. In fact she was home on the IOW! We hope you heard her singing. We put on three of her original recordings.

Martin. Many thanks for doing the recording. It is a long time since he did the original 4 track cassette recordings. Martin was bathing near the Lorelei rock on the Rhine when he suddenly went under. A gush of cold water had hit him. Fortunately someone nearby pulled him to safety. He now believes in sirens, mermaids and such like.

Dave. Lived in Cowes and then in Wootton. Did up a dingy and sailed around Wootton Creek. Plays in various groups. Now lives in Brittany.

Anwyl. Lived on the IOW in the 70s and 80s. Member of the Royal Victoria Yacht Club, Fishbourne. Capsized in the ferry lane and was rescued by a French crew. Another time the rigging caught and the boat sailed right up the concrete slipway almost into those drinking their G&Ts.

Instruments used:

Guitar (Guild), Mandolin (Kentucky), Concertina (A.C.Norman), Melodeon GDA (Saltarelle), Accordeon Diatonique (Dino Baffetti), Whistles (Sweetheart & Chieftain). Banjo 5 string (Gold Tone), Tenor Banjo (Gibson), Autoharp (Keith Young)

“Sea Brass” used Trumpet, Tenor Sax (Hanson), Baritone (Conn), Tenor Sax (Conn)

And a good time was had by one and all - me hearties!