

COPPER

The FAMILY



A History of Family & Music

James “Brasser” Copper

(1845 - 1924)

by John Copper



Born in Rottingdean village 1845, son of John a farmworker and his wife Charlotte, James was their second child; the first had died in infancy as did four of his siblings. Although clearly from a humble background, James was to distinguish himself amongst his peers by a combination of hard work, determination and a powerful personality.

John had been born on a farmstead outside the village in Saltdean valley in 1817. Newlands was tenanted “copyhold” by his father, George Copper (b.1784). This now defunct form of lease meant that as long as the tenant kept the ground tilled and in good heart the demesne was held rent free, with the landlord retaining timber and mineral rights. Unfortunately this agreement usually expired on the tenant’s death, which explains James’s lowly birthplace in the little farmworker’s cottage in the village.

After a rather scanty education at the village dame-school, James entered full time employment at the age of only eight years. Mr Steyning Beard was the village Squire and owner of the three thousand acre Rottingdean Farm. This had been gradually acquired and enlarged by a long line of his forebears, all Quakers, going back to the sixteenth century. Employed on Mr Beard’s farm at first as a shepherd boy, James was expected to attend to the sheep in all weathers in the role of a sort of human sheepdog, keeping the animals contained and away from

nearby growing crops, as well as assisting the Head Shepherd with his daily tasks. It was hard and tedious work for a youngster, but at least James was able to contribute a few shillings each week to the family income.

At eighteen he voluntarily attended evening-classes with his brother Thomas (at their own expense) to learn how to read, write and reckon. Literacy in the 1860s was by no means available to all. It tended to be the preserve of the sons and daughters of the better-off tradespeople and the privileged classes. The efforts that the two brothers made towards their further education clearly paid off. Thomas, having first been elevated to Head Carter on the farm went on to become landlord of the principal village pub “The Black Horse”, whilst the older brother James worked his way up through the hierarchy of the farm achieving the rôle of Bailiff, or general manager.

Now known by all and sundry as “Brasser” Copper (and, as grandson Bob once pointed out to an interested American fan, “You don’t need a degree in metallurgy to work out why he got that nickname!”) he soon proved himself to be a worthy governor. There was a lot of responsibility that went with the job; sixty-five full time employees, 36 draught horses, two teams of oxen, 8 in each, 16 ploughs, two thousand acres of turf, mostly sheep-run, and a thousand acres arable.

It was said that his deep resonant voice could be heard all over the village by their respective spouses when the men were sent to the various work sites each morning, and lunchbags could be despatched accordingly!

Having been brought up in a close knit family where harmony singing came naturally, both at home and down in the taproom of "The Black-un", Brasser and Tom built up something of a local reputation as singers. So it is with no surprise that we hear of them being called up to one of the big houses of Rottingdean's landed gentry, Sir Edward Carson Q.C.

They were to demonstrate their musical skills to a visiting folklorist and musician Kate Lee. This was November 1898.

It is said that largely as a result of this rich vein of rural music that was discovered in Rottingdean, Kate Lee and her acquaintances in London decided to form The Folk Song Society, now The English Folk Dance and Song Society, the next year, making James and Thomas Copper honorary founder members. This event remained unremarked in the village until brought to light by a visitor from the B.B.C. over fifty years later. So much for fame and glory!

Brasser's influence on the lives of the farmworking families of Rottingdean was unique. He encouraged and nurtured not only the singing of a great many old songs but such rituals as Tater Beer Night, Black-Ram, Hollering Pot (Last Load) and the Village Mummers. Any or all of these customs could very well have been lost to time without his enthusiasm. His favoured maxim "Every song a drink, and let no one go without!" expresses the emphasis that he placed on maintaining good cheer in the community. "Work hard and play hard," he told his son Jim. "You can drink as much beer as you like, as long as it's Singing Beer!"

Brasser continued to run the farm up until the Great War, when he handed over to Jim. Father and son lived in No. 1 and No. 2 Challoners Cottages, conveniently just across the road from the farm office. Already somewhat fragmented by Mr Beard's gambling and equine excesses, and now in the charge of Mr William Brown, the business was further decimated by the war. Most of the best men and horses were sacrificed on the Flanders front.

It was the old man's firm belief that the best manure was the farmer's boots. He used to ride a stocky cob horse all over the farm to make his rounds, but after having handed over to his son he was to be seen riding round in a horse and tip-cart (being badly affected with the rheumatics), still assisting with the day-to-day decision making.

When Brasser was in his mid seventies, Mr William Brown's daughter prevailed on him to write down the words of some of his lovely old songs. It must have proved quite a challenge.

Copies of these survive in the family archives and they are a joy to behold. Although phonetically correct, the spelling is touchingly inventive - "Hears a dew sweet lovelie Nancy..." One can imagine the old chap biting the end of his pen in deep concentration sitting at the scullery table.

Brasser's legacy of songs and customs is quite literally priceless. I would venture to say that without his contribution the English Tradition would be much the poorer. The close family bonding exemplified in our singing is our direct heritage from this remarkable Victorian, and it is a vivid reminder of former values, nowadays almost completely obliterated by mass entertainment.

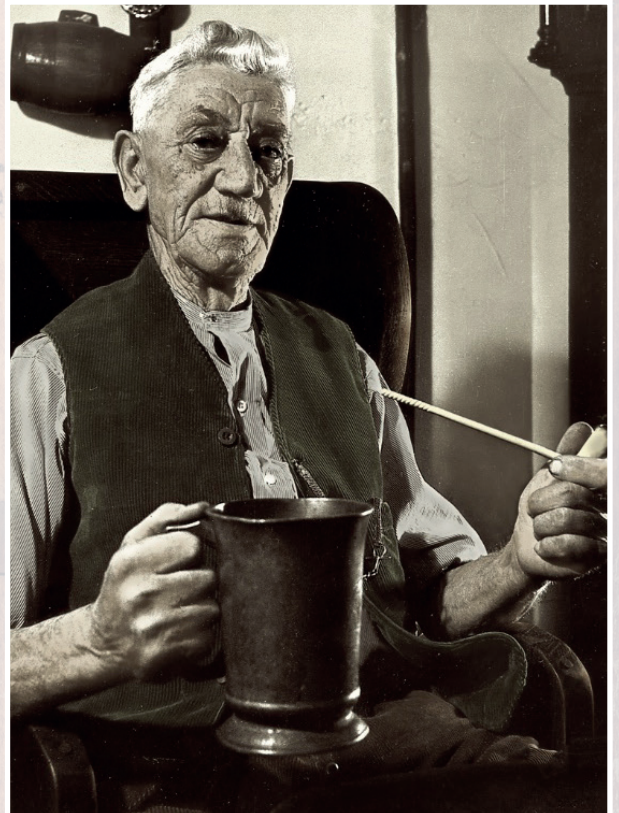
By
John Copper October 2004.



James “Jim” Copper

(1882 - 1954)

by John Copper



Born at Pear Tree Cottage in the village of Ovingdean, just over the hill on the Brighton side of Rottingdean in June 1882, Jim was second son of James “Brasser” Copper and his wife Frances Emily. They had been wed in 1873 at Rottingdean Church, and now aged 36 James senior was a carter employed by Mr Steyning Beard of Ovingdean.

Steyning and his brother George had inherited from their uncle Charles most of the farms and farmland in Rottingdean, Ovingdean and nearby Telscombe. 1882 also saw the passing of George Beard who left his share of the family legacy to brother Steyning, making him landlord of numerous farms in the area and about 3000 acres of farmland.

Jim briefly went to school at the one-roomed Ovingdean village school but soon after, his father was given the job of Farm Bailiff and the family moved to Challoners Cottages Rottingdean so as to be near “head office”. It was to remain the family home for 85 years.

From 1884 the Rottingdean farms were run for the Beards by Mr William Brown, resident in Challoners Manor, a Georgian-style country house originally dating from the fifteenth century which dominated the upper, or northerly part of the village.

Jim resumed his education at the village C of E school leaving at Christmas 1893, age 11.

The local farms were predominantly devoted to sheep. There were six separate flocks each of about 500 animals, and young Jim was put on to work with John Henty, Head Shepherd. He endured the life of shepherd boy for three years.

This lonely and unrewarding existence did not suit the spirited teenager “The old shepherd, he don’t say much, only swear at ye.”

Eventually Brasser gave in to his son’s requests and sent Jim back down to the farm as carter-boy with Bill Reid, “Oistup” to his peers on account of an unfortunate affliction necessitating the periodic ‘hoisting up’ of one side of his face! Here, amongst other skills Jim learnt how to plough with horses. For a brief interlude he also worked with Luke Hillman ploughing with a team of 8 oxen. They were yoked up in pairs and it needed all eight to pull a single furrow plough. This was precisely the same set-up employed by Sussex ploughmen a thousand years previously.

Jim’s break came when he was sent to assist Ben Hilton, a skilled carpenter and wheelwright, working the steam engine and threshing machine. Amongst the family heirlooms we have a very nicely

executed line drawing of a steam traction engine, signed by Jim and dated 1896. This was state of the art technology at the time (in Rottingdean at least), and it clearly captured his imagination. He worked with Ben for many years.

As he was later to recall, by the time he was 18 he was a pretty handy sort of chap. Accomplished in most of the various farm tasks and with a strong aptitude towards the mechanical, he was also blessed with a phenomenal memory. Even in old age Jim could recite all the various dimensions and minutiae of the implements and machines that he had learnt to restore and repair. An ideal attribute for a folk singer.

With a father like Brasser, not to mention Uncle Tommy at the Black Horse, it's small wonder that Jim took to music. The old songs so beloved of the family were soon supplemented with music-hall numbers and other contemporary music. Jim played a penny whistle to some effect, and - with a rather individual style - the clarinet. He always maintained that he would have managed to play the ubiquitous piano, had not his fingers been too massive to strike one note at a time!

Jim also enhanced the family harmonies decorating the melodies with his resonant bass runs, which was to prove a powerful inspiration to later Coppers. He had the rare ability to construct harmonies completely unaided. Explaining to son Bob he said, "I can sort of 'ear you singing in the background," while experimenting with a new sequence of notes. Lively and witty, Jim was very often the focal point at a gathering, whether in hayfield, workshop or taproom. Although very often short of ready cash, he was ever popular amongst his fellow carousers, and was regularly treated to "singing beer" down in the pub. A couple of pennies was enough for a "latch-lifter", and then it was often "every song a drink" till closing time.

Jim was favourite company for a wide variety of friends and family, a great raconteur and full of fun. These qualities helped him to forge deep bonds, not only with his working and drinking pals, but within the family as well. After a particularly riotous Saturday night spent down the "Black-un" he embraced Bob with, "Cor bugger boy, I sometimes wish you'd been my brother, instead of my son, and then I'd ha' known ye longer!"

With the coming of the Great War and its deprivations, and the changes wrought by mechanisation, many of the agricultural skills that Jim had mastered became obsolete. Bailiff of the sprawling farms by 1915, he commanded an empire in decline. After the death of Steyning Beard in 1909 all that family's interests, after 400 years of careful husbandry in the Rottingdean area, were systematically sold off. Much of it had been mortgaged to fund his country-squire lifestyle.

The first farm tractor at Rottingdean was an International "Titan" acquired in 1919. It was a great heavy lumbering monster and bore a close resemblance to the steam engines that it had usurped. Jim was its first driver. He kept careful accounts of its first year; every pint of oil, gallon of paraffin and pound of grease as well as crops, seeds and raw materials, hours worked and break-down time. It proved cheaper to run than horses.

During the 1920s the fortunes of the Rottingdean farms continued to decline. Gradually the buildings and land were sold off for development. Jim wrote, "Now its houses, houses, houses on the land we used to plough. I don't like it, it makes me prostrate with dismal."

Eventually he got paid off and, although he was allowed to stay in the farm cottage at a modest rent, there was no more money coming in.

Ever resourceful, Jim turned his energies to carpentry, delivering papers and milk and even emptying cesspits with his own home-made pump contraption.

Eventually he took the job of site blacksmith and carpenter on the Sea Defence Project. This at the time was the largest concreting contract in Britain, constructing a sea wall from Brighton to Rottingdean. He built and ran a small forge to sharpen and temper the various digging tools used by the navvies, and constructed the moulds for the huge piano shaped coping blocks which were placed along the top of the wall. Son Bob, now sixteen, was employed on the same project as tea-boy - to 200 labourers!

Ever industrious, Jim's evenings were spent making models in both metal and wood (often oak), tinkering with early wireless sets, and rebuilding old clocks. He also mended boots and shoes and

was an accomplished knitter, making among other garments gloves and mittens.

The old ways were fast disappearing. Jim wrote, "There's only one thing that doesn't change round these parts, and that's our old songs."

In 1936 he set down the words to eighty or so of his favourites, all from memory, including all the lovely old songs handed down by Brasser, in a ledger book salvaged from his days in the farm office. He dedicated it to his daughter, Frances Joyce (b.1910) and son Bob (b.1915) - "Topsy" and "Trooper".

Jim was acutely aware that without a substantial effort on his part many of these priceless treasures would be lost.

By the end of the 1930s both offspring had flown the nest. Bob was a policeman out in West Sussex, and Joyce working in London. Both made regular visits back home whenever time allowed.

Somehow Jim managed to make ends meet. There was an influx of newcomers to the area and they boosted demand in all kinds of services. Jim was a very useful contact for anyone requiring skilled work. Having such a wide array of acquaintances, many from the old days on the farm, he could either take on the job himself, or find someone to fit the bill.

There is an old saying from the time, "If you go into a pub, you can always do a deal with a man." It probably goes back to the market day meetings when all the important business was conducted in the nearest inn. Jim was living proof of its continuing efficacy!

Older brother John lived a short distance away up the Falmer Road. He had been Head Shepherd in the old days, and continued to do jobbing work for nearby farmers. Like Jim, he was a good singer, and the two men liked nothing better than to get together in their spare time and sing the old songs, John usually taking the lead, or treble, and Jim the bass.

John's son Walter Ronald Copper, "Ron", a carpenter by trade, also took to the family tradition and as a bonus had a deep resonant bass voice. He learnt his harmonies from Jim. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, especially at Christmas time, Jim,

John, Bob and Ron sung together.

At this time, however, there was very little interest in the old songs outside the family. Everyone wanted the new popular songs that they heard on the wireless or gramophone.

Wartime brought its own disruptions and challenges, but the family continued in close contact. The Canadian Army was much in evidence in the area, and Jim was looked after very well by some of the NCO's, especially the Quartermaster, in exchange for services rendered. As they say, it's an ill wind!

After the war Bob was in nearby Peacehaven running his wife's father's social club. Jim had handmade much of the oak furniture for the clubroom, and occasionally helped out behind the bar and with general maintenance.

One day he said to Bob, "I heard one of our songs being sung on the wireless t'other day, but they didn't make much of a job of it. They didn't know the the right words for a start! I've a good mind to write and complain." "Yes", agreed Bob, "but don't complain, just tell them we've got about fifty more more like it."

A telegram came back by return to say the BBC were sending a reporter down next day on the train to Brighton station, and would they arrange to have someone to meet him. The result was a prime-time programme on the Home Service "The Life of James Copper", and a full page photograph of Jim on the front cover of The Radio Times. There is no doubt that this chance phone call had a significant influence on what was to become the Folk Revival. Brasser's songs had returned from the wilderness.

In Festival Year (1952) Jim, John, Bob and Ron, representing unaccompanied English Folk Music, sang at the Royal Albert Hall in a two-day international extravaganza of folk dance and song. Numerous radio and live performances followed.

Jim Copper carried the torch of traditional song through a period that saw its wholesale destruction by mass entertainment all over the country. It is sad that he did not live long enough to see his son and nephew consolidate this achievement, or indeed to be reassured of the future security of his father's legacy in the hands of younger generations.

By
John Copper, October 2004

Ron Copper

(1911 - 1978)

by Vic Smith



Folk World Loses a Giant in Ron

RON COPPER of Rottingdean died on Saturday January 7th 1978 in his 67th year and was buried the following Thursday in St. Michael's Churchyard in Rottingdean, the village where he had spent almost his entire life.

Ron was born into a family that had worked on the estate farms in Rottingdean for generations and followed his uncle James Dale Copper into carpentry. James had been the estate carpenter and Ron trained and worked as a carpenter in the village until the outbreak of World War II when he moved to work as a shipwright on the warships in Portsmouth Harbour. This was his only period living away from Rottingdean.

At the end of the war he came back to Rottingdean and he took the "Queen Victoria" pub in the High Street. The previous landlord was his father-in-law and Ron was there until the time of his death.

This was the other trade in the family, Ron's grandfather's brother having kept the "Black Horse" in the village.

Ron's health had not been good for seven years. He had a series of strokes and heart attacks in that time and a major aortal transplant four years ago, but he

fought back from each setback with a cheerfulness that was contagious. He was in good voice when the Rottingdean Mummers performed their play in the "Queen Victoria" just before Christmas.

He was the eldest of three boys and cousin Bob, four years his junior, was as close as any brother. And, of course, it was Bob and Ron who inherited the love of the family's collection of traditional songs.

Particular credit is due to Bob and Ron for maintaining their interest in the difficult years of the 1930s and 1940s after the songs had lost their social function in the pubs of the village and before the collectors and enthusiasts of the folk revival had come along to encourage them.

Ron always sang the bass line and served as an inspiration to his nephew John's bass singing and to countless others in folk song harmony groups. His harmonies were usually fairly simple but always delivered with a solid assurance.

His range went considerably lower than most singers and even then he was able to really boom out the notes. He never dominated the group singing but one was always well aware of his absence from it.

Though their ages were quite close, Ron seemed to be of almost a different generation from Bob.

Partly this was because ill health aged Ron more quickly but the more cosmopolitan Bob, writer, broadcaster, song collector, has much broader horizons than Ron had. When Bob reminisces about his father and his uncle, he could well be talking about Ron at these times.

Rottingdean was well aware that it had lost a much loved character for the church was full for his funeral service. Floral tributes lined both sides of the path from the gate to the church door. Ron was buried in a church whose registers have births, death and marriages of each generation of the Copper family going back to 1593.

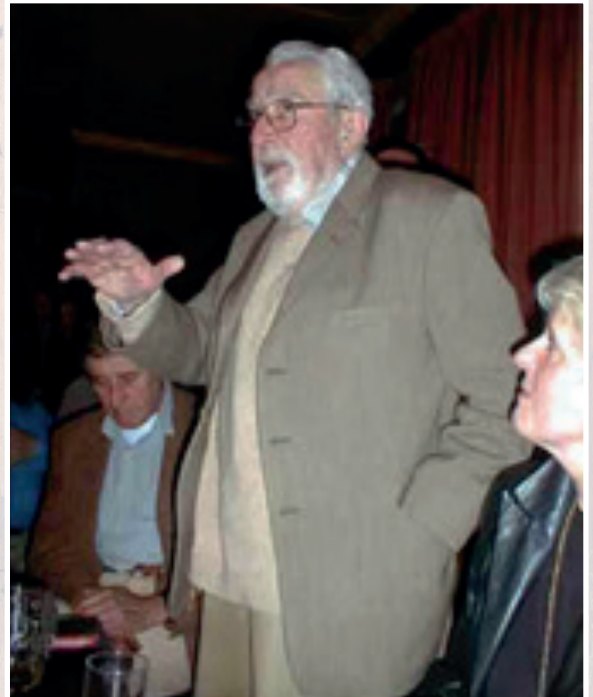
He leaves a widow and two sons, one of whom, Roger, may become the third generation as landlord at the “Queen Victoria”.

Vic Smith, Folk News, February 1978

Bob Copper's

Report for 2000

***Aside to folkies.**



The year 2000 was always going to be an extraordinary one. There was a sense of change in the air. The end of an old era and the beginnings of a new one. For instance, after a lifetime of denoting the current year in Roman form with a profusion of incoherent letters posing as numbers - from MCMI (1901), through the cumbersome MCMLXXXVIII (1988), to MCMLCIX (1999) - we were going to wake up to the fact that we could manage with just two: MM. What other novelties and excitements awaited us was a matter of conjecture.

For us, the Copper family, it was to prove a truly momentous year. On our visit to the U.S.A. in February we, the four senior members, were joined for the first time abroad by four of my delightful grandchildren, all in the twenties and thirties age group and all of whom have inherited the love of the old family songs. (The other two would have been with us but for prior engagements). We had Andrew and Sean, and Ben and Tom (*in good Dame Durden fashion) to back us up in Chicago; Lansing, Michigan, and, later, Cleveland, Ohio at the annual festival of the Folk Alliance.

At the University of Michigan, Lansing [actually Michigan State University in East Lansing], where our appearances were met with great enthusiasm, I noticed that in packed halls the front three rows of seats invariably were occupied by fresh-faced, nubile girl-students who applauded madly at the end of every song. I was just beginning to think that my luck had changed when reality descended upon me and I remembered that as we sat on stage there were four tall, fresh-faced English boys standing

ranged behind us whose joint vocal contribution added richness and vitality to the sound.

It was a wonderful moment; the highlight of the year. The family tradition had taken a firm and significant step forward: this time into its fourth century and seventh consecutive generation, (My great, great grandfather, George Copper, born in Rottingdean in 1784, was a celebrated village singer) and I was made aware that the songs we had been so anxious to keep alive were in safe hands and hearts for at least, let us say, another fifty years. And this all happened in the remarkable year of MM.

The year proceeded in a thoroughly satisfactory way with two further visits to America, San Diego and Los Gatos in California and, later, to New England, with a number of festivals and club appearances in this country in between. And we laid plans for a re-issue in CD form of the tracks on the Bob and Ron Copper, English shepherd and farming songs, L.P. A great year but for me nothing came up to those appearances in the U.S.A. with my "brisk and bonny lads".

by
Bob Copper

Bob Copper's

Report for 1999

by Bob Copper



Hullo there!

What a great year for traditional singing 1999 has been. A hundred years after the formation of the Folk Song Society in London, when my grandfather and his brother were rewarded for their contribution of Sussex songs with honorary founder-memberships, the interest in preserving traditional songs and music has spread world-wide.

In February John (Copper) and I met lots of old friends and made many new ones at the 11th Annual International Folk Alliance Conference at Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jon (Dudley) and Jill unfortunately had a prior commitment so were unable to come along with us, thereby missing quite a number of "firsts" - the first time the Rottingdean songs had been sung in New Mexico (at least, by members of the family); the first time we had eaten alligator steaks; and the first time we had suffered a puncture - in our hire car - from a cactus needle.

March found us all four at the Folk Revival Conference to celebrate the centenary of the Folk Song Society at Brooklyn University, New York where we talked to packed audiences about the role the Copper family has played from the start in the preservation of the old songs and singing style. We sang a lot of songs too, with much enthusiastic support from all present in the choruses.

The big thrill of that occasion for me was the meeting up with two very dear friends, Alan Lomax and Peter Kennedy. It was the first time for many years that we all three had been together and it took our minds back to those early days when the revival of the 1960's and '70's was nothing but a twinkle in the eyes of a handful of enthusiasts. We recalled that January night in 1952 when I sang with the family line-up as it was then: Dad, Uncle John, cousin Ron and myself, (the "boy"), at the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Festival at the Royal Albert Hall, London. That was where I first met Alan and we have been the greatest of friends ever since. At Brooklyn too, I had the pleasure of meeting again John Langstaff, who I had last seen at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the EFDSS in 1958 - my, how the years pile up!

During the summer we had two opportunities to sing our songs in our native village of Rottingdean, Sussex to raise money for worthy charities. In May under the extensive roof of an old sheep-shearing barn which has been converted into the delightful residence of Mr and Mrs Peter Hampton, we helped to raise funds for Christian Aid Week. And in July, in aid of the Kosovan Refugees Fund we sang on the terraced lawns of the local manor house, the home of Sir Jack and Lady Helena Hughes. Both events were a sell-out and a total sum of around £1,500 was realised for the charities mentioned. A few days

later we appeared at Camden Lock, London billed in the company of an illustrious constellation of stars from the musical world to mark the occasion of the 20th anniversary of “Folk Roots”, that popular and indispensable trade-magazine of the world roots and folk singing tradition.

Later in July we all went to the annual summer camp of the Country Dance and Song Society at Pinewoods, a charming, pine-clad, lakeside venue near Plymouth, Mass., USA. This was the first time we had been there as a family following my solo gig at the camp four years before.

Throughout the year my six grand-children have joined us on local gigs as and when it has been possible. They have been building up their “singing hours” as diligently as any trainee air-pilot does his “flying hours”, in readiness for a proposed trip to the USA in the new year when we hope to have at least a representative presence of the younger generation with us.

So it has been a pretty busy but very rewarding year.

Bob Copper

The photo of Bob Copper was taken after he received an honorary Master of Arts degree from the University of Sussex, Thursday 27 January 1999, from the Chancellor, Sir Richard Attenborough.

The Coppers in California

Report for 1999

by Bob Copper

The Copper family toured California in June-July 2000. Jon Dudley gives us an insider's view in What We Did On Our Holidays.

And of the family's hosts, Dave Swan, of Oak Ash and Thorn, provides a charming account of the gig at the Freight & Salvage. (This is in a discussion list thread [at the Mudcat Cafe] that begins very well, but ... creeps.)

IMAGE REQ.

After a couple of weeks travelling all over California from the Mexican border, to San Diego, Los Angeles, Yosemite and Santa Cruz - I'll tell you about just two of the memorable gigs...

Picture yourself halfway up a mountain in The Santa Cruz Highlands in the grounds of a charming, small white church, the sun is going down and you realise that in the foreground is a simple rugged cross, whilst in the distance is an uninterrupted view of Monterey Bay. Such was the idyllic setting for a gig organised by our host and friend Phillippa. Now Rottingdean this ain't, nor Lewes nor anywhere else within our ken, so we had quite a few emotions to deal with. Safe to say as usual we enjoyed ourselves doing the only thing we know how - sing a few songs, tell a few stories and try and let our audience 'pull up a chair around the kitchen table of the cottage in Rottingdean a hundred years or so ago'. Now believe me, in such a place as we found ourselves, this involved a considerable feat of imagination, on everyone's part! Still, it seemed to work and as the evening wore on, as the air became chillier, the warmth of the audience increased and sure enough, the old songs (for it's the song not the singer, remember) wove their spell, and what had softened the hearts of folks all those years ago came back to haunt us thousands of miles from home and more than a lifetime later.

Now let's move up to The Freight and Salvage Club in Berkeley. Another memorable night, this time organised by Pam Swan, who with her husband Dave and the rest looked after us royally. The only night we were available was Sunday July 2nd which clashed with a group already booked, namely, Oak Ash and Thorn ... "That's OK," said Pam, "they'll stand down for you"!! Not until later did your correspondent realise that Pam's husband is none other than the aforementioned Dave, a member of said OA&T ... the power of one's spouse, eh. As good as their word, OA&T graciously stood down to allow us in their stead. We were greeted by Tom, Dave, Doug, Pam and others with a cooler full of (mainly) English beer and sat down to chat like long-lost friends, which I suppose is what we were. OA&T opened with a set of songs in their own inimitable style and were extraordinarily generous in their (Dave's to be precise) introduction to us. Suffice to say we had a great time aided by an audience more than a little familiar with The Copper Family repertoire; so much so that one was heard to mention that The Coppers were doing quite a few songs normally associated with OA&T!!! Fun with a capital 'F'.

We signed plenty of books and CDs during the interval which gave us all great deal of pleasure, especially Bob who is terribly heartened to know that people appreciate his writing since it is almost

thirty years since the publication of 'A Song for Every Season'. Imagine his joy therefore when people produce some of those original books to be dedicated! We'd already decided that OA&T would join us for the finale which they needed little persuasion in doing, in fact they knew the song we'd chosen with which to conclude :-) 'Thousands or More' ... by the looks on their faces they enjoyed this as much as we did.

So concluded an evening of great hospitality and mutual back-slapping, swearing of everlasting friendships and undying love as we emptied into the Econoline van.

Once again we felt the spirit of the past generations of the men and women who'd sung these songs stirring - not a few ghosts travelled back to Santa Cruz with us that night, as each lost in their own thoughts considered what a privilege it is to be custodians of a tradition that has the power to bring us so far and put us in touch with such fine people.

So thank you California - we loved it.

Jon Dudley, 18 July 2000

Zoe Healy meets the Coppers

A Christmas Encounter with the Coppers in Surrey

IMAGE REQ.



Western Australian Zoe Healey shares her experience of meeting for the first time with the Copper family. It was a strange experience for an Australian to see the Copper family in action. There sat a family who could trace their history back to the 1500s in the same town... whereas my family has only lived in my home town of Fremantle, Western Australia for three generations! Until I came to London, I had never seen a building or heard local history that was more than 150 years old... how could I possibly understand or empathize with the songs and stories of the Coppers?

Well, as they say, you are fascinated by what you haven't got, and this seems true of Australian interest in the Copper family. I noticed on my third (sorry Garry) visit to the Copper family web site that it was hosted at my old university in WA, by someone who has never seen the Coppers perform, and lives on truly the opposite side of the world to Rottingdean.

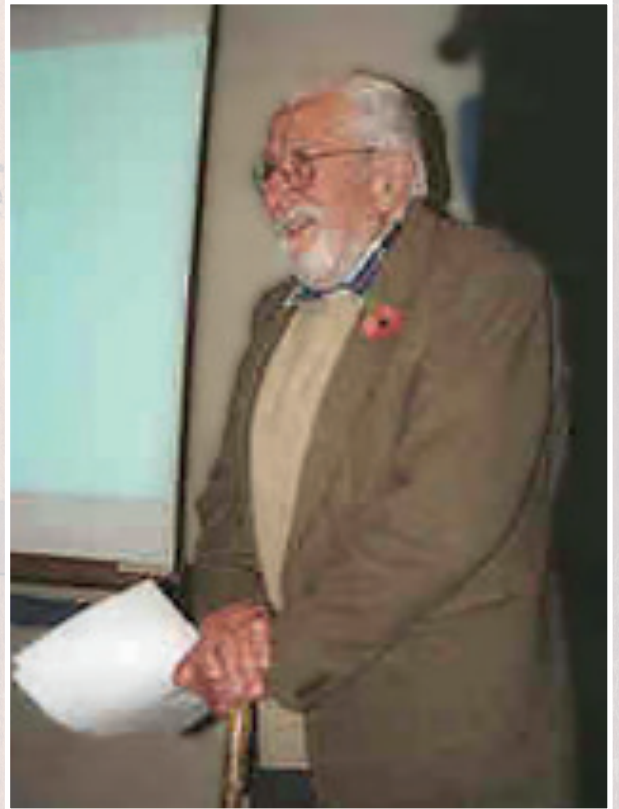
And despite my claims to have nothing in common with the Copper family history, as Bill Bryson pointed out in his book 'Mother Tongue', the colonies (USA and Australia) actually speak an older form of English and hold to older English customs than the Mother country. Bob notes in his book 'A Song for Every Season' that his dad Jim referred to the dreaded outdoor lavatory as the 'dunnick'... and

people claim that 'dunny' is an Australian term! I saw in front of me a family that truly understood the 'mateship' that was essential for the survival of the Australian pioneers and is still a big part of the Australian nature... people who live of the land know the importance of family and friends. This kind of empathy is inherently taught to the next generation, I guess. And upon reading Bob's tales of the historic Copper schemes and the Rottingdean characters and pranks, I was reminded most of all of the Australian knack for entrepreneurial 'laziness' and practical jokes.

March 2001

Collecting for the BBC

Bob Copper: Collecting for the BBC



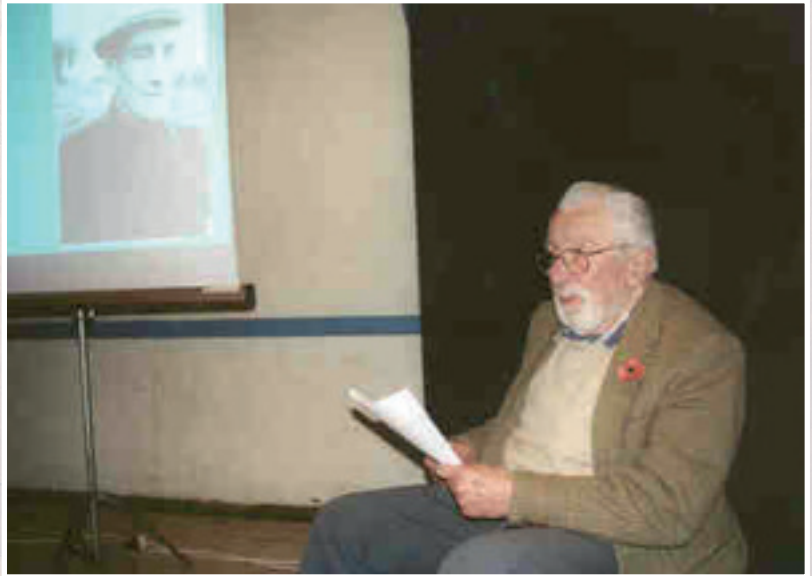
On Friday 9 November 2001, Bob Copper gave his talk on collecting with the BBC in the 1950s at Cecil Sharp House. The illustrated talk was entitled "Songs and Southern Breezes: collecting days with the BBC in the 1950s". Here is a short excerpt, not from Bob Copper's talk, but from his book with the same title, *Songs and Southern Breezes* (pp. 126-8). I spent many pleasant hours in the Fox [North Waltham] on subsequent occasions and one evening met Frank 'Mush' Bond. He was a local man but had spent a lot of his time travelling round the country with the fairground folk and also working as a casual farm-hand in various parts of southern England. This experience had spread a thin veneer of sophistication over his native clay and I found him slightly less easy to deal with than the men who had never left the district.

He seemed to think, for instance, that somebody, somewhere might be after his songs for pecuniary reasons and that any interest shown in them was bound to be prompted by money-making motives. He therefore felt that if any money was to be made he, at least, should have his share. A sentiment I would have shared wholeheartedly if the song-collecting scheme had stemmed from anything other than academic interest. Meeting Frank I was reminded of Steve Barrow, an old shepherd in my own village who, many years ago, declined to sing for Rudyard Kipling on the imagined grounds that

"he (Rudyard Kipling) would be sendin' 'em up to Lunnon an' making a 'mort' o' money out of 'em".

I did, however, manage to convince him of the purity of my purpose in collecting the songs and that it was for the sole purpose of keeping the songs - and in this case his particular versions - alive. I also pointed out that he should be proud to think that his name and songs would be added to the slender list of those that would go echoing down the corridors of time as a constant reminder to posterity of the sort of songs their agrarian forefathers used to sing. I found this argument most persuasive but Frank remained stubbornly unimpressed and it took several more meetings, and consequently several more pints of ale, before he somewhat reluctantly agreed to sing.

One of his songs was God Bless the Master of this House which was always sung by the mummers at Christmas time. It was sung outside the house that was being visited by way of introduction or as he said 'to open out'. When the song was over the players would be invited in to perform the play. George Gardiner collected this song in 1909 from Daniel Wigg at Preston Candover who was eighty-four years old at the time. Frank remembered old Dan'l Wigg singing it but he actually learnt it from his own father.



God Bless the Master of this House

God bless the master of this house with a gold
chain round his neck,
O, where his body sleeps or wakes, Lord send his
soul to rest,
And Lord send his soul to rest.

God bless the mistress of this house with a gold
chain round her neck,
O, where her body sleeps or wakes Lord Jesus be
her guide,
O, Lord Jesus be her guide.

O, mortal man remember thou when Christ the
Lord was born,
He was crucified betwixt two thieves and crowned
with a thorn,
And was crowned with a thorn.

O, mortal man remember thou when Christ laid on
the road,
It was for our sins and wickedness he shod his
precious blood,
And he shod his precious blood.

He also sang Sheener's song. 'Sheen' is a contraction
of 'machine' and is the local word referring to a
threshing machine. A sheener therefore is anyone
working in the threshing gang. The song describes
the different jobs that are carried out in the
operation of the 'sheen' and also introduces many
of the local men by name who used to do this work.
Frank wrote the words of this song himself in about
1906. It is based on a traditional tune.

But the gem of all his collection, if only he had
known the complete song, was Lord Bateman,

which he picked up from 'an old lady in Kent who
used to travel round with the fair'. That it was
incomplete was a tragedy for even the fragment
of two verses that he was able to recall brought
an unmistakable breath of medieval England, like
the tattered shreds of a regiment's battle honours
hanging in the cathedral nave remind us of the glory
of conquests long past. It was well worth collecting
for it must have been several hundred years older
than any other song I discovered during the whole
of my travels.

Lord Bateman was a rich noble lord
A rich noble lord of some high degree,
He travel-led east and he travel-led west
Until he come unto proud Turk-ee.

Thanks to Malcolm Taylor of the EFDSS for
information about the talk and for sending the
photos, and to Derek Schofield for kind permission
to reproduce them.

Bob's 85th Birthday Party

SUBTITLE

by Bob Copper



It is rare that Bob Copper's birthday coincides with club night in Lewes at the club run by Vic and Tina Smith, The Royal Oak. But this year was different. Rather like our own dear Queen, Bob Copper normally (at least since he reached 80 years) enjoys two birthdays, a 'Folk' birthday and a 'real' birthday. This year the two coincided. Accompanied by the massed bands of the family, his children and grandchildren, Bob was met by an audience of over 150 well-wishers in a room designed to hold about half that number. The atmosphere was simply full of fun and love as people jostled to try and actually observe the tonsils of our hero. Friends old and new sang or said their greetings - including Shirley Collins, who brought a tear to every eye, not only by delivering a memorable and heartfelt appreciation, but by proving (as if it were necessary) in song, that here was the Queen of English folk music returning to take up her crown once more. As I said, memorable and moving. The point was not lost on the audience, who rose to cheer and yet ponder how deprived our younger audiences have been of hearing such a talent.

Reintroduced by Vic Smith, who was valiantly battling against a failing voice and the dreaded 'flu, The Copper Family gathered around the Patriarch in numbers (both at the bar and in the clubroom) and performed all the favourites that would enable the audience to join in. And sing! That audience sung its

heart out. Their support for the younger generation of Coppers was impressive: they clearly saw, as do the rest of the older family members, that here is the future - a fact so gratifying to Bob that it was plain to see it written all over his beaming face.

The evening was divided into 'three halves', the second of which caused a minor sensation when, joined by 'the well known publisher of a popular folk/world music journal' and the 'well known wearer of the Fez and able assistant to one William Bragg', Peg Leg Barbeque Bob Copper slipped easily into his other persona ... that of country bluesman and King of the Cuckmere Delta. What a treat! If only Peter Bellamy had been there: of all the folkies, he knew best of Bob's 60 year love affair with The Blues. 'Divin' Duck Blues' and 'Goin' down to Brownsville' were fantastically accompanied and hauntingly sung by this impromptu trio, and the look on Andrew Cronshaw's face said it all - this one's filed in the 'never to be forgotten' section of the memory banks. Modestly, Bob concluded this set with: "I've always said it takes a black man to really sing the blues ... and tonight I've proved it." Somehow I don't think his friend, the bluesman Jerry Ricks, would necessarily agree: anyway we eagerly await his version of Spencer the Rover!

By this time in the evening your correspondent admits to being a little 'tired and emotional' but

more was yet to come. Previously John Copper had made two important announcements. One was that Bob was, on 27th January, to receive an honorary degree from Sussex University in recognition of both his contribution to the traditional music of his native home and for his writing. The other was that on 22nd January, Bob's first grandson, Jill's boy Mark, was to be married to Meriem - the first of the grandchildren to embark on this risky venture.

The third 'half' started with the aforementioned Meriem delivering a powerful a cappella version of 'Je ne regrette rien' - knockout, but then she's a sort of female Swiss/French Bob Davenport and quite used to singing in English pubs! From then on it was various combinations of Coppers, and a spine tingling version of 'The Bold Princess Royal' from Bob, culminating with the ubiquitous 'O Good Ale'. Long past parliament time the audience fell out into the quiet streets of Lewes pinching themselves to see if it really had all happened.

The family continued their personal celebrations long into the small hours, and our octogenarian star was despatched to his bed at 3.45am in order that younger members of the Family could get some sleep!

As they say, it doesn't get any better than this.
Jon Dudley

Many thanks to Vic and Tina Smith, of The Royal Oak, Lewes, for the photos:—

Top: John, Bob and Jill with some of the grandchildren behind them, all singing.

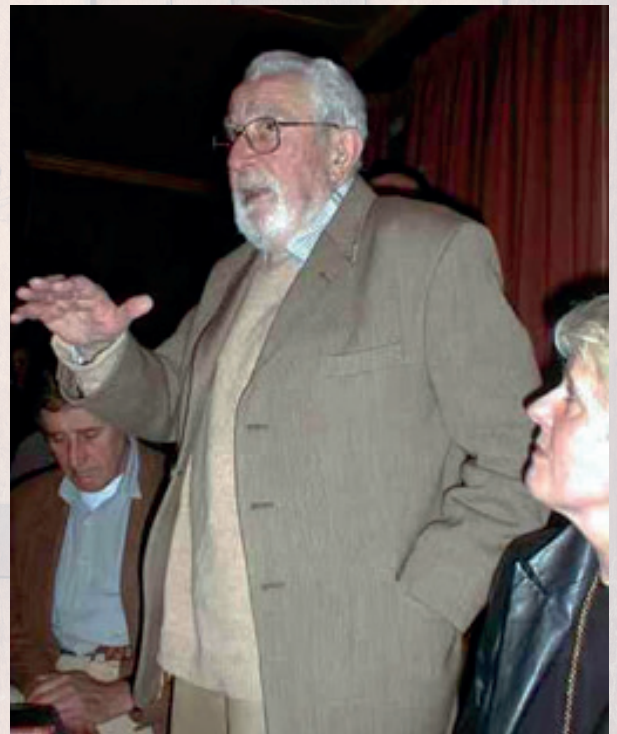
Middle: John, Bob and Jill right at the end of a song, quite a happy one.

Bottom: John, Bob, Jill and Jon in full song.
And finally - Vic Smith with Bob Copper.



Bob's 86th Birthday Party

Bob Copper's 86th birthday party at The Royal Oak, Lewes



"What a wonderful night it was and despite our levity, extremely moving. There can be few occasions like that in the folk world anywhere ... He's such a social animal and a real old trouser ..."

Jon Dudley (on the right in the photograph above)

Shirley Collins making her presentation to Bob.

Bob thanks the large assembled crowd.

Bob drinks a toast to his many friends in the large audience, surrounded by his family
Many thanks to Vic and Tina Smith, of The Royal Oak, Lewes, for the photos.



Bob at the...

Sussex Singers Weekend
March 2001



The Sussex Singers Weekend in Seaford in early March 2001 included a great contribution from Bob Copper. He gave an illustrated talk on the Saturday afternoon on his song collecting days for the BBC. The photo shows Bob ending the final concert of the weekend.

Bob receiving his ...

Good Tradition lifetime award



At the BBC Radio2 Annual Folk Awards at The Cumberland Hotel on London's Park Lane on 5 February 2001, Bob Copper received the Good Tradition award, a lifetime achievement award, presented by Billy Bragg, with the citation read by Shirley Collins. Bob was accompanied by his children, John and Jill, and Jon Dudley, Jill's husband. The whole world of folk music seemed to be there - with the Minister for Culture, Chris Smith, representing the government.

Bob Copper with Billy Bragg



Bob's honorary degree

Subtitle

MID SUSSEX LEADER, Thursday, February 3rd, 2000

News

Singing the praises of a true folk hero

Honorary degree for remarkable 85-year-old who has helped keep Sussex's musical tradition alive and thriving

REPORT by PAT MOORMAN
pat.moorman@sussex.ac.uk

FOLK singer Bob Copper was "chuffed to bits" last week when he received an honorary degree of Master of Arts at a graduation ceremony at the University of Sussex on Thursday.

"When they asked me before the ceremony what my hat size was, I said seven and a quarter, but it's more likely to be 17 and a quarter by the time I get my degree," he said.

Bob, 85, received the honorary degree from Lord Attenborough, Chancellor of the University, for services to country life, including the collection and singing of old farming songs handed down from father to son through the centuries.

He's on record as saying that they "seemed to get into the very marrow of the bone".

The Copper family can trace their roots back to 1593, with over four centuries anchored in and around Rottingdean.

The award also took account of his writings, which include *Across Sussex with Belloc* and *Bob Copper's Sussex*.

Bob now lives in Peacehaven, close to his family, son John and daughter-in-law Lynne, daughter Jill and son-in-law Jonathan, plus five grandsons and one grand-daughter.

Together they are fondly known as England's First Family of Folk and have been invited for a two-week tour of America, taking in performances in Chicago, Michigan and a five-day festival in Cleveland, with another tour of the West Coast and New Mexico planned for June.

After the graduation ceremony, by special request, Bob and his family gave a rendition of the folk song *Claudy Banks*.

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SHAKE ON IT: Bob (left) receives his honorary degree from Lord Attenborough (Photo: Stephen Lawrence)

ACCLAIM: musician and writer Bob Copper pictured after the graduation ceremony at the University of Sussex (Photo: Stephen Lawrence)

The text of the above newspaper report from the Mid Sussex Leader, Thursday, February 3rd, 2000: Singing the praises of a true folk hero.

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[photo caption] SHAKE ON IT: Bob (left) receives his honorary degree from Lord Attenborough (Photo: Stephen Lawrence)

[photo caption] ACCLAIM: musician and writer Bob Copper pictured after the graduation ceremony at the University of Sussex (Photo: Stephen Lawrence) And here is Sussex University's press release on the occasion - scroll down for the biographical notes.

Bob's Memorial Service

Subtitle



There were so many days that I was given.
But whether of this spring or that? They merge
As travelling clouds across my permanent heaven.
My life was rich; I took a swarm of bees
And found a crumpled snake-skin on the road,
All in one day, and was increased by these.
I have not understood humanity.
But those plain things, that gospel of each year,
Made me the scholar of simplicity.
Vita Sackville-West, "The Land". 1926

Bob Copper's memorial service was held at St. Margaret's Parish Church, Rottingdean, on Saturday 17th April 2004. The funeral was private, but the memorial was open to all, and many came. Bob's ashes were conveyed by farm wagon, followed by a long procession, from the seafront, up Rottingdean High Street, around the village pond and thence to the church. The wagon, drawn by two glossy black horses, was brightly decked with daffodils and primroses, and Bob's ashes, in a red velvet bag, rested on an upturned flower-pot in the middle. The memorial service was necessarily a long one, as there was so much to say about Bob and his life, and the church was filled with laughter and song. Piers Bishop acted as Master of Ceremonies, and the order of service was as follows:

- Welcome Address by Father Martin Morgan
- "An Audio Sketchbook" by Angela Hird (selected recordings of Bob talking about old times)
- Reminiscences by Shirley Collins
- A recorded message by Martin Muncaster
- "Shepherd of the Downs" sung by the Copper Family
- Reminiscences by Patrick Garland
- Medley: "Foul Weather Call", "Come Write Me Down", "Dame Durden" and "Bonny Dundee" played by Will Duke and Dan Quinn
- Reminiscences by Michael Smith of the Kipling Society
- A recording of "Death Letter Blues" by Son House
- Reminiscences by Dr Graham Clough of the Hilaire Belloc Society
- A reading of Belloc's "Duncton Hill" by Piers Bishop
- John Copper expressed the family's gratitude for the sympathy received, and read out letters from Billy Bragg and H.R.H. Prince Charles
- "The Bold Fisherman" sung by the younger generation of the Copper Family
- Reminiscences by Phyllis Barnes of the Folk Alliance of North America
- Reminiscences, and the playing of "Blackbird", by Jeff Davis

- The Eulogy by Dave Arthur
- The Blessing of the Ashes by Father Martin
- (Bob's ashes were then carried out of the church, so that he left us rather than us leaving him)
- "What Wond'rous Love is This" sung by Michael and Sharon Wildermuth
- Reminiscences by Ian Anderson of fRoots Magazine
- A recording of Bob singing "Going Down to Brownsville"
- "Where the Sun Don't Never Go Down" sung by Jeff Davis and Gerret Warner
- Reminiscences by Malcolm Taylor, Librarian of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (the chosen charity for In Memoriam donations)
- A recording of Bob singing "Thousands or More"
- "Thousands or More" sung by the Copper Family

Folk archivist Doc Rowe took a large number of photographs, a selection of which appear here. Other photographs can be found at Tim Kent's web site.

And another generation. Bob with great-granddaughter Ruby Daisy.
Bob Copper MBE: Born 6th January 1915, died 29th March 2004.



Bob Copper's Obituaries

Sussex Singers Weekend

March 2001



There were many heartfelt obituaries produced world-wide. Some of these are reproduced on this site, and some are links to external sites. The latter will, in most browsers, open in a new browser window so that you do not “lose” this site.

[Mojo Magazine \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[Living Tradition Magazine \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[Surrey Folk News \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[Across Kent Folk \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[Dirty Linen \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[The Independent \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[Folk on Tap \(obituary reproduced\)](#)

[The Daily Telegraph \(external link\)](#)

[The Guardian \(external link\)](#)

[The Times \(external link\)](#)

[Utusan Online, Malaysia \(external link\)](#) (OK, it's the Associated Press report, but it's the most geographically distant one we've found)

[World Socialist Web Site \(external link\)](#)

[Stirrings Magazine \(external link\)](#)

[Solent Waves \(external link\)](#) - A tribute in Hampshire dialect by Rob Mills

Bob Copper's Obituaries

Sussex Singers Weekend

March 2001



This is one of the many poems written by Bob Copper throughout his lifetime. He wrote it six months after his wife, Joan, had died prematurely of cancer aged only 62 years. It goes some way to describe the family's own emotions now, just six months after Bob, himself, died.

Spring, 1984

Oh, I can laugh and jest and even sing,
And wear the outward trappings of a clown;
Can meet my friends and pass the time of day
("Oh hullo, Kitty, how's your father's foot?")
But sometimes in the early days of Spring
When Arcturus comes peeping o'er the down,
The fire is lit and tea-things put away,
Your blackbird, like an errant speck of soot,
Comes hopping across the lawn towards the door
Hoping to hear you call and take the crumbs
Of your largesse, and as he turns to go
Something of me goes with him and the Spring
Is robbed of sweetness - and for evermore
The daffodils, it seems, when April comes,
Will not dance quite so gladly when they know
You can no longer share the joy they bring.
Something that should bestir, declines and sleeps;
And the willow, like a frozen fountain, weeps.
Bob Copper, 1984

1970 interview with Bob by Vic Smith
[Link](#)

