

CLECKHEATON FOLK FESTIVAL – JULY 2009

The weekend began with the Town Hall Concert, with Tom Bliss's stunning farewell to Yorkshire leaving a lasting impression before the calculated lunacy of Mrs Ackroyd. At the same time, local heroes Blackstone Edge gave a storming performance in St Paul's Church Hall.

On Saturday visitors were spoilt for choice. With the Grand Parade, "Meet The Artists", sessions, workshops, specials and two concerts. Stars of the afternoon were undoubtedly the young and talented Manchester quartet 4Square, whose hi-energy chillout music proved full of invention and presence and contrasted with the seriously gorgeous voices and harmonies from Liz and Sue aka Scolds Bridle.

The Church Hall hosted two Special Events: Jeff Parton's "Going For A Soldier" and Tom Lewis's fascinating "Songs Of The Sea". Another local hero, Duncan McFarlane, excelled himself with two sparkling Saturday appearances, while Stoke-on-Trent worthies His Worship & The Pig delighted us with their mix of hilarious yet thoughtful offerings on many issues. The manic duo Belshazzar's Feast was a big success at the Aakash, providing a massive menu of riotous humour allied to dazzling musicianship. The charismatic seadog Tom Lewis held us all in thrall with his powerful voice and persuasive repertoire of sea songs, folk balladry and tall stories.

Another success on Saturday was the enigmatically named five-piece Something Nasty In The Woodshed, who achieved an audience reaction louder than their own act (even in the Town Hall!), rocking the foundations with their gut-punching, electrifying blend of instruments. Saturday also saw the welcome return of old favourites with a Ceilidh and a Hiring Fair, whilst in the Church Hall, more of Clecky's local heroes appeared in an evening concert, where Russ Hughes stole the show with a well-coordinated and melodious set.

The day's highlight was the magnificent Eric Bogle, on his "final farewell tour". Together with John Munro he turned in a splendid finale to the evening's concert, playing many great songs including Singing The Spirit Home, Leaving Nancy and, of course, And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda.

Sunday was equally full of goodies, including a rousing Sunday Sing and two marvellous concert performances by celebrated harmony trio Cockersdale. Sadly, due to a family bereavement, Ruth Notman could not appear, but Oldham duo BetterLate did a grand job deputising, with a finely judged set of contemporary and traditional folk material. The multi-skilled Battlefield Band effortlessly radiated warmth and commitment and their virtuosity and versatility rounded off the concert with the very best of Scottish songs and tunes. Lastly, Sunday's evening concert at The Marsh, with Russ Hughes ably reintroducing a varied selection of the many fine artistes who had worked so well over the week-end, proved a fitting finale to a fabulous festival.

(Abridged from review by David Kidman, full text may be viewed at www.folkandroots.co.uk.)