



The Kings Pond Shanty

The Worms

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The Kings Pond Shanty, The Worms

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Key to Notation and References

Conventions

The following conventions are used throughout:

- Normal text is sung solo
- *Words in italics* are sung by all
- *Chorus* normally sung after each verse (exceptions as shown)
- *Chorus X2* means sing the chorus once softly and in unison, second chorus louder and with full harmony (exceptions as stated)
- [worms] means: words sung solo then repeated by all
- {text} alternative text - in some cases replaced to avoid giving offence - or to show verses which we currently omit, in a few cases the editor believes there should be curly brackets round the whole damn ditty!
- <instruction> means: do what it says
- Text followed by † means stop abruptly - ‘into the buffers’
- Punctuation: for a cleaner look there is no punctuation at end of line (with a couple of exceptions where it is useful).

References

Even though it is not completely reliable, one reference book is used as the primary authority:

Shanties from the Seven Seas by Stan Hugill, 2nd Edition (1984) first published in 1961.

Roud numbers. The Roud Folk Song Index is a database of ~250,000 references to ~25,000 songs collected from oral tradition in the English language from all over the world. It is compiled by Steve Roud. It is a portal to many other indexes, original transcripts, ancient books and sometimes includes field recordings as far back as 1900. It is online on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website:

<https://archives.vwml.org/search/roud>

Introduction

Sea shanties form a distinct musical genre: they are working songs of the sea. The heyday of shanties was from the end of the Napoleonic wars (1815) to the gradual end of the age of sail in the 1910s. Although steam power started to come in from 1860 for warships, large sailing ships (windjammers) remained viable for bulk cargo due to lower operating costs (no coal needed) then slowly faded as steam technology improved. The SS Great Britain is a classic example of a wind/steam hybrid - an iron hulled, steam powered ship with five enormous masts and a propellor that could be lifted out of the water when sailing. So the active period for shanties lasted about 100 years - which is arguably as long or longer than any other modern musical period.

Shanties were sung to accomplish heavy manual tasks such as hauling yardarms up masts; setting, trimming and furling sails; raising the anchor or pumping the bilges - the latter possibly for hours or even days. Shanties were rarely sung for fun, though a good shantyman would amuse the other hands by inserting improvised humour and crudity in the verses to lighten their burdensome labours. A good shantyman was an ordinary sailor but highly valued for maintaining the morale of the crew.

Every true shanty is characterised by a strong rhythm in a call and response structure designed to coordinate the muscular effort of dozens (or for capstan work hundreds²) of men for maximum effect. Shanties could be long or short and the pace of the rhythm varied depending on the task - for bracing yards it could be fast and short, for a capstan shanty slower and longer, for a pumping shanty medium pace and almost unending. The bunt shanty for furling sail has a long pause then a massive beat for the pull.

² Hugill p107 states, regarding "Goodbye Fare Thee Well", that in the saltpetre and nitrate ports of South America, crews of other ships would board a homeward-bounder to help raise the anchor.

In their time off, sailors would sing forebitters; so called because off-watch crew would socialise near the bitts around the foremast - out of earshot from the captain and ships officers. Forebitters tend to be less rhythmic than shanties but with a strong tune and longer verses which might tell an interesting tale. The content of forebitters would vary depending on the type of vessel: fishing, whaling, packet, cargo etc.



Shanties are not part of the Royal Navy tradition. On board English warships (and those of other nations) effortful work done by many hands was coordinated by the fife, drum or maybe a fiddle.



The Royal Navy has a tradition of songs sung for pleasure whilst at leisure - both for hands before the mast and in the officers' messes - in the same way as forebitters were sung on merchant ships.

It is important to understand that sailing was a diverse international activity. Consequently, in the shanty tunes, rhythms, and words there was extensive free interchange between different nations and oral traditions all worthy of the greatest respect. Those who might think there is cultural imperialism at work in our repertoire are mistaken. We do not erase material from our repertoire on

that spurious basis. Indeed it would be an insult to the many thousands gone to do so.

Bowdlerisation of shanties is to some extent necessary. Many original shanties were perfectly decent and dealt with refined subjects. However, there is no doubt that numerous shanties contained obscenity and ‘isms’. The inexorable rise of political correctness and cancel culture has to be considered carefully in maintaining our performing repertoire. Edwardian shanty collections (e.g. Runciman-Terry) published for performance in upper-class parlours removed sexual innuendo but contained racist and discriminatory language. Hugill states where he has ‘disguised’ many lines in his collection but makes the case to keep racist words (in the 1980s) that today are simply unacceptable.

The Worms have evolved over the years: bawdy language has been re-inserted, mock xenophobia remains and is greatly enjoyed by many of our audiences; whereas ethnic discrimination and misogyny have been largely removed or replaced with more acceptable words. As far as possible the earthy flavour of shanties has been retained whilst acknowledging contemporary sensibilities.

Variations in lyrics and tunes are entirely normal. Shanties are an oral tradition where aspects of the sailors’ lives would be recounted in the lines and verses. Those who think they keep the one true version are deluding themselves. Some lines would be deeply established and others would be improvised spontaneously by the shantyman to reflect the conditions on board. Changes and mis-hearings crept in over the decades. Differences exist between our lyrics and other well known recordings. It does not bother us greatly. Quite often there are nonsense lines or inconsistencies. This is all part of the genre, though in some cases words have been reverted where it is clear a blunder has been made during transcription.

Wherefore Art Thou Worms

The material contained in this collection has evolved over twenty years. The selection has been regularly added to and also pruned to meet the current performing requirements and preferences of the Kings Pond Shantymen (KPS). It is a *living document* revised on roughly a biennial basis and the main criteria for inclusion (or deletion) are as follows:

- Is it a true shanty? True shanties take priority.
- Is it traditional? Authentic maritime songs from before ca.1910 are prioritised above all; new ones are accepted if they sound authentic.
- Is it a drinking song? These are joyfully included not only because they are fun but because they are appropriate for many of the events at which the group is invited to perform.
- If not a true shanty is it sufficiently maritime in flavour? As KPS is a maritime music group the repertoire is not diluted with material from other genres - although there are a few honourable exceptions.
- Is it entertaining? Practical experience over many years has clearly shown audiences respond best to jolly or amusing material with a strong rhythm - slow ones entertain only if they are also beautiful. There is a total ban on wordy dirges with a dull tune - which rules out quite a few maudlin forebitters.
- Can audiences sing-along to the chorus? It is great to have sing-along material for some types of performance; a rousing sing-along always pleases the audience.
- Is it too folky in feel? KPS is not a sweet-toned folk singing choir. Our style is deliberately rough and ready so excessively folk oriented items - even if maritime in flavour - are not preferred. Folk singing mannerisms such as ear cupping are banned.
- Have we sung it out? Some items are introduced with enthusiasm by one and may be practised a few times but fail to capture the interest and commitment of the crew. Such items are destined for Davy Jones' locker.