

# The source... Bob Roberts

Who was Alfred William 'Bob' Roberts? For the folk world, he was a proper sailing barge skipper, traditional singer and melodeon player. A charismatic performer, he appeared at EFDSS festivals at the Albert Hall in the 1950s, made a series of LPs, and sang at many folk clubs. His contracts to perform always specified he would appear 'winds and tides permitting' – and if that phrase seems familiar, it's likely because songwriter Enda McCabe used it as the chorus for his song 'Winds and Tides Permitting'.

Sailing enthusiasts will say Bob's claim to fame was that he was the last commercial barge skipper in Europe to make a living working an engine-less sailing barge on the Thames estuary, and that he wrote a series of popular books about his time barging, sailing square riggers and deep-water small boat voyages. Later, yachting writer Dick Durham wrote Roberts' biography (*The Last Sailor*, 1990). Durham was mate aboard Bob's famous barge, *Cambria*, during its last 14 months of sailing, and paints a riveting picture of both the barging trade and his complex and talented skipper.

It is less well known that Bob Roberts also had another career as a journalist: for some years he was a sports writer for the *Daily Mail*, night sub on *The Daily Telegraph* and later subeditor on the *East Anglian Daily Times*.

Bob's father was headmaster of the Hampreston village school in Dorset, and organist and choirmaster at the local church. According to family accounts, Roberts senior regularly took his choir to festivals and events along the south coast. Ralph Vaughan Williams once came to tea, which Bob said was in order to collect songs from his father.

Roberts junior went to Wimborne Grammar School with a chorister's scholarship, but while music was clearly a big part of his life, the sea soon became an even larger influence. His mother was descended from an East Anglian family, the Browns, one of whom, Louis Brown, had sailed around the world. Louis Brown's stories had a big effect on the young Bob, who soon had a story of his own.

It happened that, one day, Bob was standing on the quay at Poole watching the barquentine *Waterwitch* unloading coal and got talking to the mate – and found himself invited to join the crew as cabin lad for a trip to Fowey. The young man's parents agreed, and off he went. But



Bob Roberts, EFDSS Royal Albert Hall Festival, 1966

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somehow he failed to leave the ship before it left Fowey – and so young Bob ended up at Liverpool. His biography records that the 15-year old Bob sent his mum and dad a telegram: 'Ship didn't stop so am in Liverpool.'

As an adult, Bob Roberts never really settled into land-side occupations, despite his success in journalism – for him, such jobs were a way of supporting his family, and he kept a boat of his own, a fishing smack named *Stormy Petrel*, and sailed as often as possible. His trips included family holidays along the east coast and fishing expeditions.

Eventually Bob was invited to become a barge skipper carrying the usual cargoes including bricks, hay and animal feed from the Thames estuary to the Humber. It wasn't wildly profitable but Bob supplemented his income writing books and articles for the yachting press.

All this time, Roberts seems to have been learning songs and tunes from other people wherever he went, and was called on regularly to perform. Dick Durham recalls: 'Bob wrote himself into coastal

sailing tradition and that tradition included a lot of men who sang. He liked the whole barging thing, and knew what atmosphere playing a melodeon and singing in a pub could produce. That was his motive. I'd go ashore with him to a pub and he lit it up every time. Everyone liked it, from every age-group. Everyone really joined in.'

Bob's daughter, Anne, remembers her father singing deep sea sailors' shanties learned when he was a young man, and recalls how he later came to learn songs associated with inshore fishing and barge crews, and also rural songs from old boys in the pubs around the Essex coast and particularly Pin Mill, where he lived for many years with his first wife and young family.

Anne and her sister Jill, who today live in East Anglia and still play and sing traditional music, do not remember their father ever learning songs from printed music, and are very much of the opinion that that he learned his songs from other people. 'He had a very good ear,' says Anne.

A big change came in the early 1950s when Bob met folk song collector Peter Kennedy. This led to Bob becoming involved with Kennedy's BBC Archive recordings and the influential 1950s radio series *As I Roved Out*, and also with the American collector Alan Lomax. Part of Roberts' contribution was that he could persuade many singers, who were otherwise reluctant, to sing for strangers.

It was from this point also that he came to be in demand on the folk scene, which lapped up his authentic performances. He also continued to enjoy the company of other traditional singers: people like Bob Copper, Fred Jordan, Phoebe Smith, the lifeboat men at Cromer and the singers of Suffolk's famous pubs such as the Plough and Sail and the Blaxhall Ship.

Sadly, however, the world was changing. By the late 1960s the *Cambria* could no longer make a living, so Bob sold her (see [www.cambriatrust.org.uk](http://www.cambriatrust.org.uk) for details of the restored *Cambria*). He moved to the Isle of Wight, bought a motor vessel, the *Vectis Isle*, and for some years moved cargoes around the Solent, while continuing to perform regularly. Bob Roberts died of a heart attack in 1981 at the age of 74, shortly after he made his last appearance, which was at that year's English Country Music Weekend – it was held at Snape, a port he had visited as barge skipper many times in his career.

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