

The UK Hurdy Gurdy Festival  
20-22 April 2007  
Lancaster

A bit less than a year ago, I received a request from someone calling himself HurdyGurdyBoy to be his friend on MySpace, and then, a few days later, another message to say that he was staying in Cambridge for a few days and suggesting that we meet up to talk gurdies. HurdyGurdyBoy, alias Scott Marshall turned out to be a very enthusiastic young man, totally besotted with hurdy gurdies, and we spent a very enjoyable lunchtime discussing the finer points of various aspects of the instruments and music. Within a month or so Scott had started the Hurdy Gurdy Forum (essentially, but not exclusively, for UK-based players and enthusiasts). There was already a similar forum based in the US, but Scott felt that there was a need for something a bit closer to home. Forum membership grew at an amazing rate with lots of lively discussions, photos appearing on the website, etc. and pretty soon there was talk of a UK Hurdy Gurdy Festival. It was fascinating to watch the plans develop, with plenty of ideas and suggestions being thrown into the melting pot by eager forum members. The plan was to hold it in Scott's home town, Lancaster. The date was set, the programme finalised and pretty soon it was festival time.

I opted to travel there by public transport, which worked extremely well, and arrived mid-afternoon on the Friday, which gave me some time to wander around the town and get a feel for the place. I caught up with Scott, who was being understandably jittery before the opening concert, not least because his band was to start the proceedings. The evening concert took place in the Gregson Community Centre, to the East of the town centre. This is a very useful venue, with small concert hall, a bar/pub and smaller rooms upstairs.

Gradually people started arriving, and the hall soon filled up. There was a real party atmosphere. Scott's band, The Maud, opened the evening with a lively set. If pressed I would probably describe their music as folk/rock, but with their feet firmly in the folk camp. The band are a four-piece, featuring Scott on hurdy gurdy, Lesley on viola, Dave on drums and with Becca providing the vocals. They started their set with a rocky version of Matty Groves, of which Fairport Convention would have been proud, and moved on to The Unquiet Grave and then one of Scott's songs. All played with conviction and style. Next up was Mike Eaton (not related to the other gurdy-associated Eatons). Mike is an excellent musician and master of the instrument, which he demonstrated admirably in his set. A complete contrast to The Maud's set, which worked very well indeed. The third act of the evening was Metheglin, a bagpipe and gurdy duo, Clare Hines and Pete Coleman who are regulars at the Blowout. Again a nice contrast in style and material from two musicians who are not afraid to include some serious electronic gadgetry in their set. After Metheglin's set, the chairs were moved to the sides of the hall to make room for those who wanted to dance to the final act of the evening, a band well-known to anyone who has been to Blowout over the past few years, Snaketown, featuring Dave Rowlands, George Stevens and Simon Raine. As usual, Snaketown played a superb set and the audience showed their appreciation in the extended applause at the end. What a great start to a weekend of music. Whilst the concert had been going on in the hall there were sessions happening upstairs, where a complimentary buffet was available, and downstairs in the bar.

Workshops started bright and early on Saturday morning, this time over the other side of town in the Friends' Meeting House. There were a good range of workshops on offer including a lecture by Michael Muskett, without whose enthusiasm back in the 70s and 80s the hurdy gurdy may never have become so popular in this country; a talk by maker Neil Brook on setting up and maintaining hurdy gurdies; a workshop on trompette technique with Mike Eaton; French dance with Cathy Goss; medieval music for the gurdy with Steve Tyler; an interactive talk on how to find and adapt tunes for playing on the pipes (or gurdy) with Dave Rowlands; Swedish tunes with Richard Robinson; and a beginners' gurdy workshop with Chris Allen and Mike Gilpin. There was ample time allowed between workshops to allow people to enjoy the excellent cups of tea, cakes and lunch which was provided by the PTA of a local Steiner school. Upstairs there was a fine display of instruments from a number of instrument makers - Chris Allen and Bi Kormylo, Neil Brook, George Stevens, Claire Dugué and Eric Beherell. Outside the weather was being very kind. Several people headed into town to busk in and around the market square, whilst others stayed in the garden where a lively session took place. In the midst of all this was a selection of activities for children - story-telling, music-making and a Punch and Judy show. We were all summoned into the garden for a group photograph. This must surely have been the largest gathering of hurdy gurdies ever to have happened in England!

The Saturday evening concert was back at the Gregson Centre. The hall was full to bursting point as the Steve Tyler band took to the stage. A delightful mix of medieval and not so medieval music demonstrating true virtuosity by the whole band - Steve, Andy Letcher, Katy Marchant and Dhevdhas Nair. Again the chairs were moved to the sides to make room for dancing when Cyser, (Trudi Bide, Giles Brown, Steve Day and Daniel Wolverson) took to the stage. The final act of the night were Primaeval, (Cliff Stapleton, Jonathan Shorland and Sonny Davidson), who played a blindingly good set. The dance floor was packed, and people

stood at the back of the hall, drinking the fine beers on offer, had little room to move. As on the previous evening, there were sessions going on in the bar and upstairs all evening and they were still going strong when I left the building at around 1:00am.

A slightly later start on Sunday morning, again in the Gregson Centre. There were two very contrasting workshops running concurrently in the upstairs rooms - a French tune workshop led by Chris Allen and one on Baroque hurdy gurdy techniques and decoration with Michael Musket. The final workshop of the weekend was a masterclass given by Cliff Stapleton which was very popular and had to be moved from the small room upstairs to the larger hall downstairs to accommodate all those who wanted to attend.

All too soon it was time for the final concert which started with a set from Philip Martin who played an eclectic mix of rather 'dark' songs and tunes, including the dramatic song Hailstones. Hungarian gurdy maker Balázs Nagy played a delightful set on an enormous Hungarian-style hurdy gurdy (tekerő) and even handed out the music and words for a Hungarian song for the audience to join in with...I don't think we did very well though. Fellow Hungarian, now resident in England, Cecilia Patko treated us to a couple more Hungarian songs and then Balázs returned to the stage for one last tune before the festival came to an end.

It's hard to believe that it is less than a year ago since I received that first message from Scott Marshall inviting me to be his MySpace friend! Much credit to him for having the courage of his convictions and not letting go of his dream to have a hurdy gurdy festival in England. Hopefully this great little festival will become an annual event.