

Words by Debbie Koritsas

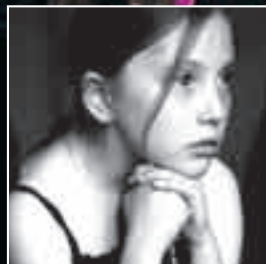
Big Whistle Weekend, The Met, Bury 10th – 12th May, 2007

Lancashire-based whistle player Phil Brown will need no introduction to many Living Tradition readers. A long-established figure on the English traditional scene, he presents folk show 'The Drift' on BBC Radio Lancashire, heads workshops, sells whistles, and performs in bands like Loose Chippings and Shake a Leg. And he's passionate about the whistle. From 10 – 12 May 2007, his love of music and his ability to make things happen conspired to create something special. Aided by the proactive support of the team at The Met in Bury (led by director David Agnew) and a few partner organisations, including The Living Tradition, he persuaded whistle players from England, Ireland and Scotland to come and participate in the first ever Big Whistle Weekend. And he persuaded them to bring guitarists, fiddle players, acoustic bassists, singer-

songwriters and pianists along with them. Phil's concept was quite simple: he wanted an occasion where the star was 'the humble tin whistle itself', but also one that allowed wider musical explorations, collaborations, educational opportunities and ideas to flourish.

What struck immediately was the relaxed, welcoming atmosphere around The Met; this was simply a great place to come and enjoy music. Phil had found the perfect recipe, the perfect venue for a superb weekend of gigs, sessions, workshops and conviviality. Throughout the event he was attentive to visitors, musicians and colleagues alike.

Phil was pleased with Vin Garbutt's Thursday evening Festival opener. Vin was supported by Calum Stewart and Andy May. The gig had set a warm, relaxed tone for the weekend to come: *cont. over*



All photographs by Lieve Boussauw



'Calum even played tunes on an alto whistle that Andy made for him from an aluminium tent pole! The audience loved him, and Andy's keyboard accompaniment underpinned his phrasing wonderfully well. Vin Garbutt's spots were laced with his customary comic observations, and you just felt that his natural affection for the whistle really set the tone for the whole event.' It was good to get this feedback (which was echoed by other attendees) because this was the one gig of the weekend that my colleague and I miss

Friday evening saw Manchester flute, whistle and uilleann pipe legend Mike McGoldrick take the stage with Celtic music legends John McCusker and John Doyle. They were supported by Fraser Fifield and Graeme Stephen, a groundbreaking jazz-Celtic crossover duo. It was a hugely improvisational set that saw Fraser alternating between low whistle and soprano sax, and Graeme accompanying him on hollow-bodied electric guitar. Fraser also played cajón, and the duo used digital samplers to intriguing effect, setting up loops and motifs as the backbone to a highly innovative set – if you've heard Fraser's *Slow Stream* album, you'll have a vivid idea of how the music sounded. The Mike McGoldrick Trio was on superb form. Mike, John McCusker and John Doyle were midway through a UK tour by the time they arrived at The Met, and were on tight, fluid form, their music bursting with life and energy. This gig drew the biggest audience of the weekend, and I enjoyed seeing local young whistle players Adele Farrell and Emma Sweeney invited up onto the stage to play a set with the Trio. John Doyle drew much post-gig praise for his outstandingly energetic guitar playing, but his vocal presence was equally commanding, one of his highlight songs being *The Apprentice Boy*. After the gig it was good to learn that Mike is not only working on a live Trio recording (Andy Seward was there recording the gig), but also on a solo CD and Capercaillie's new album, amongst others.

Saturday's ambitious programming amounted to some 13 hours of music and was a resounding success. Phil had organised a host of well-attended workshops and informal sessions (free to those who had tickets for the evening gigs; otherwise available for a small charge) led by Mike McGoldrick, Fraser Fifield, John McSherry and

Mat Walklate. Great teachers, with lots of advice and ideas to share with participants. It was fascinating to see Mike in *The Whistle and Me*, an informal question and answer session with Phil, talking about his early life and his progression towards a career in traditional music. You don't often get chance to see musicians like Mike on such relaxed form, and this was special. There was a wonderful moment at the end where Mike invited a couple of the audience members to play *The Butterfly* with him. Phil Reed was one of the volunteers: 'I've wanted to play with Mike for years and finally got my chance, though I played with my pulse racing!' Lovely to see amateur musicians being given the chance to play alongside their music 'heroes' in this way.

Fraser Fifield led a well-attended workshop, aimed at intermediate players, which focused on improvisational techniques for low whistle. The group improvised a slow air, starting with drones and then experimenting around a second note (those playing D moved up to E and so on). Fraser gave lots of useful advice on various playing techniques, correct use of lung capacity, and he covered harmonics too. He pitched his workshop exactly at the right level, and those participating clearly enjoyed it, asking for tips and advice and producing some quality playing too.

Manchester multi-instrumentalist Mat Walklate is a gifted musician and a patient, natural teacher, and he led a high whistle workshop aimed at raw beginners. This was a very popular session, and what was really pleasing was to see so many young children and teenagers taking part. He spoke about the heavy ornamentation of Irish and Scottish traditional tunes and how he used to think: 'How the heck are these people doing this?' The main thrust of his session was that learners need to learn to walk before they can run. Practicing what he preached, he set about showing a roomful of absolute beginners how to hold the whistle, how to get their breathing right, how to blow. There was lots of opportunity to practice a simple tune, the class was soon well into it. It was nice to see the look of satisfaction on the younger participants' faces as they quickly 'got' the tune. Mat gave lots of advice on the various types of whistle available, and moved on to give some nice tips about rolling, cranning and vibrato techniques – attempted with immediate gusto; there were



lots of quick, keen learners at that workshop that day!

Wandering through town on Saturday lunchtime, I thought about the beautiful music being enjoyed and celebrated behind the Victorian façade of The Met, and how most of the locals seemed blissfully ignorant about it all.

The next session was *Whistle in Folkus*, which aimed to

highlight the very different yet very dynamic whistle-playing styles of Fraser Fifield and Belfast's John McSherry. It was a beautifully mixed hour where the musicians interacted well with the audience and united to play some outstanding tunes. Phil is highly knowledgeable and asked good questions, even trying to tease out John and Fraser's views on the English tradition! Steve Knightley's anthemic *Roots*, his passionate rallying

cry against cultural suicide was cited as saying much about the English tradition. Fraser felt that English folk music didn't really reach him that far up north, and felt that the two scenes were quite different. John and Fraser demonstrated their different whistle playing styles; Fraser's is hugely improvisational, John's notes flowed effortlessly; both players supremely lyrical. They began by playing without any embellishment, stripping the tunes back to their bare bones. Fraser commented: 'My playing seems to have gone a bit left-field', whilst John felt there were 'more similarities than differences'. The musicians were put on the spot at the end of the session, adding their individual stamp by improvising one of John's tunes, with fluid accompaniment from Tony Byrne on acoustic guitar and Graeme Stephen sounding mellow on hollow-bodied electric guitar. It all resulted in a beautiful jam session.

The next event was led by Manchester folk musicians Mat Walklate and Matt Fahey. Mat's whistle, flute and harmonica playing is as muscular as his arms; Matt provided solid accompaniment on acoustic guitar. Mat's style is articulate and expressive, both are great live singers, and the duo performed some wonderful songs including P Stands for Paddy. The best moments came when Glasgow-based alt-acoustic singer-songwriter Jimmy Docherty joined them, sporting beanie hat, to perform some of his own edgy, distinctive, excellent songs, demonstrating just how contemporary whistle, harmonica and two acoustic guitars can sound. A bluesy song from Virginia was a highlight number, played and sung with masses of attack, and Jimmy is definitely a name to watch out for - away from the trad scene!

By late afternoon festival-goers and musicians, including Mat Walklate and Gordon and Laurie Johnston and Mick Taylor of Lancashire-based Hard Times, had worked up a thirst and decamped to The Two Tubs pub across the square. An informal, relaxed session evolved there for the next few hours. Mat and Matt's services were soon required back at The Met, however, and they played in the main venue's foyer as visitors arrived for the final gigs of the weekend.

Hard Times provided support to the John McSherry Trio, and played a lively and enjoyable set

of trad tunes and songs, including Nancy Whisky and Crooked Jack. Laurie Johnston was on great form as he played the William Tell Overture on tin whistle. He very impressively took the humble whistle to a third octave by using a different fingering technique, drawing a great cheer from the audience. This was a great band to warm up the audience for John McSherry's gig.

John, Tony Byrne and Donal O'Connor thoroughly deserved their standing ovation. This was one of those gigs where you felt privileged to be part of a wholly engaged audience because something magical was happening on stage. John's decision to place the emphasis on his uilleann pipe playing was exactly the right one, he instantly engaged the audience, and Tony and Donal provided the sublimest accompaniment as the Trio worked through songs from At First Light and Tripswitch. Tony and Donal were particularly skilled at 'filling in the spaces' whenever John switched from whistle to pipes - this was a gig that didn't skimp on listening detail. Grace Kelly, John Joe's sister, joined them for one set on tin whistle. John has a modest, unassuming stage presence, but the notes flowed graciously, sweetly and lyrically from whistle and uilleann pipes that evening, and he's a brilliant ambassador for Northern Ireland's piping tradition. This gig was a genuine highlight, and the standing ovation that ensued was richly deserved. John is currently working on a solo project, which by all accounts will be as innovative as his previous albums, and he's looking forward to returning to England for a couple of summer festivals.

Throughout the weekend, Phil and his team at The Met were attentive and interacted really well with the audience - these are people who care about the tradition, they care about the people who come to enjoy it, they care about its future. The tradition was in safe hands, and the inaugural Big Whistle Weekend amply fulfilled its simple, honest aims. Any criticisms? Only perhaps that there weren't enough professional female whistle players participating, but this hadn't been for the want of trying on Phil's part, with contractual, cost and availability issues preventing bookings. Phil is a charismatic and ambitious man, and he has plans to invite players from further afield to next year's festival - perhaps from Galicia, Asturias, or Brittany - who knows? Here's to next year! ☐

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