

A Tuesday Evening Out in Dartford

There was the YMCA at the top of West Hill. There was the Granada cinema with just the one screen or maybe you could pop along for a thrilling night at the Scala Bingo (later to become Flicks disco). If money was no problem, perhaps hop on the 96 bus to Bexleyheath and have a game of bowling. These were the 'joys' of growing up in and around Dartford in the early seventies. There was little else for us to do, especially those of us who sometimes still wore their embroidered Afghan coat and wide patchwork jeans ... you know, the type that listened to records by Tom Paxton, Ralph McTell, Fairport Convention and the like. However, if you happened to be arriving on a Tuesday evening at Dartford station on the 19:35 from Charing Cross, just outside, there was a small room, padlocked almost prison-like behind black, iron gates. It was attached to a rather 'dodgy' looking pub. If you stood there and listened carefully, you could hear interesting melodies being played on acoustic guitars or banjos and voices happily singing in chorus. This place was the glamorously named, though far from glamorous, Railway Hotel. This was the place to listen to more of what we wanted to hear. Inside that small room at the side of the pub was found the Dartford Folk Club.

It was October 1973 and Alan and Pam Colls had moved a successful folk club, which they had started at the Running Horses in Erith, to a room in Dartford which years before had been used as a venue for folk music as well as jazz, blues and other genres. Apparently the Rolling Stones had played there in their infancy back in the early sixties. Anyway, nobody likes name-dropping but that is how DFC came to be.

The first 23 years of the DFC, beginning with an evening from Johnny Silvo and our resident group 'The Folkbunch', were spent at the Railway. Every Tuesday evening, without fail (Christmas and New Year's Day excepted) a high quality artist from either the U.K. or abroad was booked and the audience grew. As a group we have often chatted about why the club has been such a success for so many years. Certainly the club has always afforded its audience a warming welcome, whether that be to our regular members, to visitors who just happen to 'drop in' or to any new faces. Alan and Pam had a genuine passion for music and insisted on only booking a variety of artists with the simple rule that that they must be of the highest musical quality. Whether the artist was well established in the folk world or an 'up and coming' youngster, Pam ensured that she booked the very best. They made sure that, wherever possible, one of the team had seen the prospective guests playing live. Alan provided excellent sound using a PA which he would always tell you was not to make the music louder but simply to balance the instruments and voices in order to provide the best experience for the audience. They also believed that music should be available to as many people as possible and so kept the admission price down to a minimum. Since the very beginning, the club has always run as a non-profit making organisation and that is still the case today. The whole team were, and still are, volunteers. A real sense of community was formed, many club members would meet up at festivals and other events, lifetime friendships were formed, some even ending in marriage. Local musicians were encouraged as well as those from further afield. Much later, in 2013, Alan and Pam's dedication was recognised by Dartford Council and they were presented with The Dartfordian award for services to music in the local community.

So for 23 years the club had been a success. One particular highlight was the night that Tom Paxton popped in, he was due to be playing at The Orchard Theatre and had heard about DFC so he came down to do a floor spot. We managed to find room for him! All was well. Then the new landlords arrived. They decided that folk music was not the image they wished to be associated with, they felt

that a juke box would be more likely to increase their trade. They made it difficult for us to stay and eventually forced us to move on. Maybe they were right but the pub has since closed down and was demolished and DFC is still going strong!

If we couldn't find a new venue the club would have to close but thanks to one of our regular members, who 'sounded out' the Dartford Working Men's Club, we certainly 'fell on our feet'. A beautiful room, great acoustics, plenty of space and a real stage! Add to that, friendly bar staff and fifteen plus real ales at club prices, it would be fair to say that although we had fallen in the fertilizer we had certainly come up smelling of flowers. We may have moved but the club kept to the same ideals and format that had worked so well at the old venue. The resident act kicks off the evening to be followed by a floor singer or two. The main guest then plays a set followed by a quick break and an opportunity to sample more of those aforementioned ales. The resident guest then starts the second 'half' which is followed by the 'what's happening locally' notices and the world famous Dartford raffle. The main guest then finishes the evening with their second set and perhaps (well definitely) an encore. The only real change to the organisation of the club came when it was decided that, due to the fact so many people were going to festivals or going on holiday and in order to give local artists more of a showcase, we would not book guests during the month of August. Instead, we would have informal sing arounds with no entry fee. These have proved most popular and continue to this day. With Alan and Pam firmly at the helm the club continued to thrive and in 2008 at The Brewery, London it was awarded the BBC Radio 2 Folk Club of the Year, an honour of which we are really proud, particularly as this award was voted for by the artists themselves.

In 2015 sadly Pam Colls passed away. With her husband Alan they had now run the club for over forty years. In May 2019, due to his own health issues Alan decided to retire from the club (though he still came as an audience member whenever he felt well enough). In May 2020 Alan passed away. The Dartford Folk Club continued to run as usual, with a small team of original members and regular volunteers keeping alive the ideals and standards that were set nearly fifty years ago. There have now been well over two thousand guest nights at DFC featuring over 700 different main artists. Over the years the guests who have appeared most frequently have been the late and much missed Vin Garbutt, Wizz Jones, Martyn Wyndham-Read and of course Paul Downes and Phil Beer in many different guises. Once we have adapted to these unusual times and as soon as we are safely allowed to do so we will be back and look forward to welcoming both new faces and old. See you there!

To find out more about DFC, we have a wonderful web page full of information about the past, present and future of the club. This can be found at <http://www.dartfordfolk.org.uk/>. If you'd like to be kept informed of who will be appearing at DFC you can also subscribe to our newsletter at dartfordfolk@googlemail.com, simply write ADD in the subject line. Of course there will also be a full page advert in the excellent 'Around Kent Folk' ... how's that for creepy!