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SONGS OF HISTORIC IMPORTANCE FOR THE MUSEUM

On Wednesday 19th November the Minehead Museum Committee hosted a Concert featuring The Acorn Shanty Crew, who performed a selection of Sea Shanties in the Maddison Suite at the Beach Hotel to raise funds for Minehead Museum, which has been established this year in that newly beautifully decorated building, along with the Tourist Office.

The Crew sang two three-quarter hour sets, to include working sea shanties, mostly collected by Cecil Sharp from John Short of Watchet, and some items from Captain Lewis and Captain Vickery of Minehead, all in the early 1900s.

There was a very good variety of 12 items in each set, which were led by different members of the Crew, with harmony singing on the choruses and encouragement for the 50 strong audience to participate, which they willingly did. Jenny Williams opened with "The Rosabella", the name of a genuine ship, followed by her husband Rob with "Eagle Alley". There followed "Noah's Ark" collected from Captain Hole of Watchet, and sung by Mike Dibble, with the introduction to the crew of "Bounce the old sea dog", as the shanty tells the story of the bull and the cow having a row, the side of the ship being holed, and the dog's nose being used to block the hole - hence "ever since then dog's nose has been cold"! Alan Jones gave a good performance of "The Watchet Sailor", which is very relevant to him as he lives in Watchet. Some of the material had been used the night before when the Acorn Shanty Crew was invited to sing for the Watchet Conservation Society's AGM, and the week before when they gave a live interview and performance on 10Radio, a local station based in Wiveliscombe serving ten villages.

Throughout the evening Eileen Ann Moore, founder of the Acorn Folk Club of which all the Crew are members, and also inspired to set up the Acorn Shanty Crew, gave informative introductions and snippets of information – for example Captain Lewis had a fine strong voice, Captain Vickery would sell the steamboat tickets opposite the Quay Inn after he had retired, and how the Captains would sing songs for leisure in the evenings, not the shanties that John Short would sing. The purpose of the shanties was to keep the men in good cheer and in perfect rhythm, so that the sailors' effort in heaving and hauling whether for capstan, anchor, halyards and foresheets, their work was co-ordinated and a good shanty man would be worth his weight in gold. Starting on the coastal vessels as a young man, John Short travelled all over the world, and came to be known as Yankee Jack when working as a shanty man on the American ships which carried a wide variety of goods from tea, spices, textiles and ceramics to name but a few. There were also treacherous journeys taking six weeks around Cape Horn sailing to South American ports like Valparaiso and Callao.

Eileen Ann led a short shanty "Cheerly Man", which was the first shanty Jack ever learned on his first voyage in 1857. Geoff Williams brought variety with his "Albert Ross, the Albatross" with voice and guitar solo. Jim Parham and Eileen Ann led everyone in "Sweet Nightingale", which was the only song of 57 items Sharp collected from Yankee Jack which was not a shanty.

After great humour, with "Plymouth Town" led by Mike with Jim Parham posing as his woman, Jim then sang "Farewell Ye Well" which is sung when the ship is leaving the land.

The second half again had a huge variety of items with Jenny telling us that a Kanaka was a Polynesian sailor prized for his sailing skills in "John Kanaka", Rob giving us "Bristol Channel Jamboree" and playing both the concertina and later the melodeon to accompany Jenny's moving "Mollymawk" – another name for the albatross. Jim's "Stormalong" with the words "I hear King Neptune calling me", was touching, and then back to the fun with Alan leading "Drunken Sailor", Mike's excellent versions of "Spanish Ladies" and "South Australia" – fitting as Jenny is Australian – and Eileen Ann leading the encore "Padstow Farewell".

The evening was a great success and with plenty of audience participation, and Dr John Godrich commented that there were times when he felt as though he was on board ship!

Over £175 was raised, which will help towards much needed equipment for the Museum and the fitting out of new displays for the coming year. The museum is open for its final weekend of the year on 29th/30th November. For further information contact mineheadmuseum@btconnect.com and www.acornfolkclub.co.uk as well as www.acornshantycrew.co.uk JL/AA/EAM