

Johnny Handle Gold Badge Citation

Johnny Handle's Gold Badge was presented at a concert at The Sage Gateshead on 20 November 2011. Pete Wood wrote the citation, and EFDSS board member, Tamsin Austin, made the presentation.

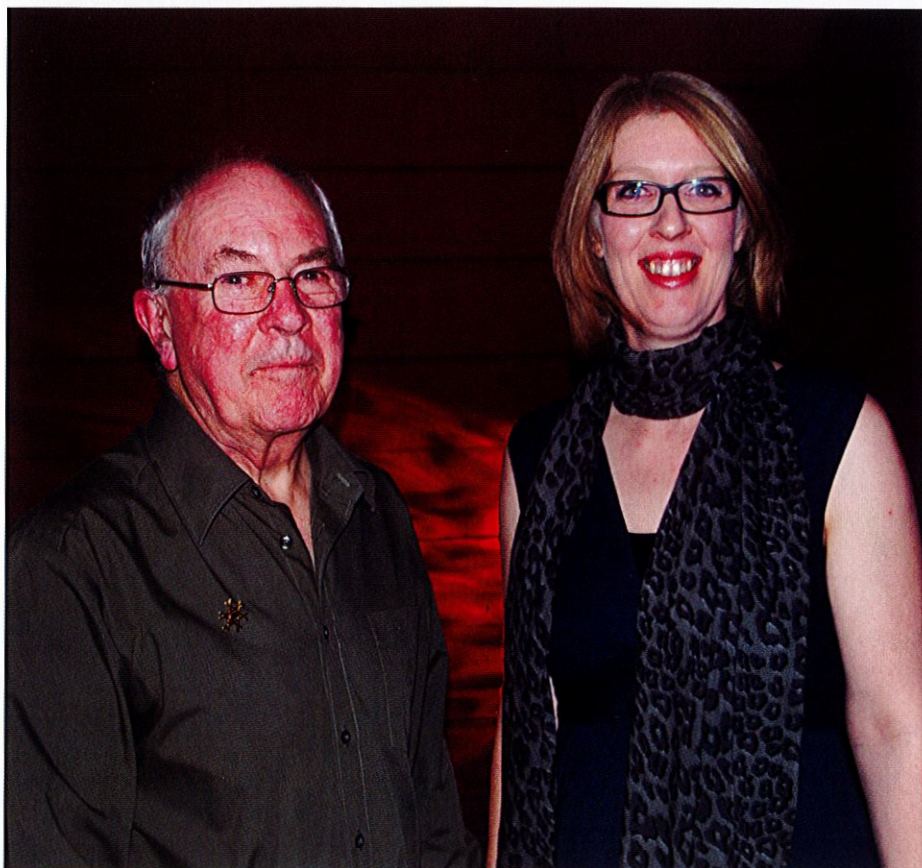


Photo: John Bibby

Johnny Handle with Tamsin Austin

Johnny was born Alan John Pandrich in Wallsend in 1935 with pits, shipyards and heavy industry as the backdrop to his early life. But at an early age, another great interest and a musical stimulus came his way, as Mr Hitler's ambitions forced his evacuation to a mansion overlooking the Tyne between Corbridge and Hexham. It was there he took his first piano lessons, and heard his aunties singing 'Keep Yer Feet Still' and 'Cushie Butterfield'. However, back in Newcastle after the war at Heaton Grammar School, it was the school traditional jazz band that he joined. On leaving school, the early interest in jazz blossomed as he played in various clubs with his own trio and the Clem Avery Band, and playing bass with the Vieux Carre Band at The New Orleans Club in Newcastle twice a week.

Probably the most significant event in terms of the north-east folk music revival was his meeting with Louis Killen in 1958. Although it was the jazz club which brought this about, with them at first competing to perform the interval blues spot, then agreeing to share it, they quickly went on to start the first folk club in the north east. Although both men loved the blues, the club policy would be British, with a strong local

emphasis. 'The Bridge', as the club became known, had the highest calibre of residents in the country, all of them involved in reviving song, music and dance particularly from the north east. By this time Johnny was a surveyor in the pits, had come across Bert Lloyd's book *Come all Ye Bold Miners*, and had met the Elliott family, so it was natural for him to research and perform pit songs. But this was a creative man who started adding to this tradition straightaway. His first song, 'Farewell to the Monty', was written the year the club started, 1958.

The club started running monthly ceilidhs quite early on, with an in-house band featuring Johnny mainly on accordion, a band which gave rise to the High Level Ranters, the seminal group in the burgeoning sixties folk revival. His comedic talents and infectious personality, added to his extraordinary musical talents, made him the natural leader of all these activities, and both he and the Ranters were in great demand nationally and abroad. By the late 1960s, he had already become a legend in the area, and it's worth quoting Dave Douglass, former miner, NUM official, and political writer who said this about Johnny: 'We were into heavy metal in my youth and Johnny Handle reconnected us to our roots,

always singing about the working class and the industrial heartland. It's why we didn't all turn into little American wannabes. We wanted to be Geordies.' Mike Harding put it a bit more pithily when he called him 'Missionary of the Geordie speaking peoples'.

His writing talents soon attracted the local media, in particular the early evening TV programme: someone there would phone him early afternoon with the request to illustrate some news item later in the day. He has continued to write fine songs reflecting every aspect of north-east life for about 50 years so far, with a total of 132 listed on his website. The gems among these include the early 'The Old Pubs', 'Farewell to the Monty' and 'The Collier Lad', through the later 'Guard yer Man Weel' and 'Going to the Mine', to the twenty-first century 'The Banner Song'. Clearly pit life has been much to the fore, but the list covers a lot of ground. 'Let Your Man Oot for a Pint', 'Get Yourselves to Danny's' about his local in Winlaton Mill, 'The Hexham Mart', 'The Roman Wall Show' and 'The Clocker' reflect his time 'living out bye' in the Tyne Valley. His relish of all these subjects, and his affection for working folk, show in the quality of the writing, and while he is not overtly bitter or political, he makes his point using insight and often humour.

His skills with writing tunes, though less widely known than his songs, are also legion. A glance at the titles will show them to stem mostly from the north-east tradition, with the occasional splendid rags from his 'jazzier days'. My favourites would include 'The Fiddler's Stepladder', 'The Difficult Fish', and 'The Blackberry Bank'. His knowledge of, and involvement in, 'Geordie Life' has not only been crucial to his creation and performance, but has led to him being regarded as the foremost scholar of the topic. He was therefore the obvious person to lead two major cultural projects in the 1990s, the *Northumbrian Anthology* series of CDs and the FARNE website.

Finally, this citation would not be complete without mention of his tireless efforts to help people and spread the music and the crack. Formal music teaching in schools, workshops at festival, and help for individuals in any aspect of his music are all taken on with relish and real skill. At his age, many would have hung up their clogs by now, but Johnny goes from strength to strength. He is foursquare in a tradition that goes back a very long way, the natural successor to the nineteenth century Tyneside bards Ned Corvan and Joe Wilson, and the later Tommy Armstrong. He has not only helped revive a tradition, but has added significantly to it. His decision to move from jazz to folk music in those early days has been a major influence on the revival, certainly locally, but also nationally, and I for one cannot think of anybody who deserves this award more than Johnny Handle.

Pete Wood is a Lancashire man, singer and musician, who has lived on Tyneside for 37 years. He has been a member of the High Level Ranters and is now in the Keelers. He has researched and written about folk music, notably the song 'John Barleycorn', and is the author of an acclaimed book on the Elliotts of Birtley.