

Pete Coe

Words and photos: Pete Heywood

THE LIVING TRADITION

Pete Coe, known affectionately by many as “a one-man folk industry”, has over 50 years’ experience playing music on the English folk scene. Back in the 70s he was among a relatively small band of professional and semi-professional folk musicians who formed the backbone of performers in folk clubs the length and breadth of the British Isles. Many of them were recorded by Bill Leader for his Trailer record label. When Bill and Helen Leader chose to move from London to West Yorkshire, several artists followed in their footsteps. Pete Coe was one of them.

The term ‘Creative Clusters’ is well known in research and industry – think of Silicon Valley in terms of modern computer technology, and further back the birth of heavy industry and manufacturing in the West Midlands, based on iron and coal. This migration of musicians to West Yorkshire led to a musical creative cluster.

Although the energy in such a cluster comes from group activity, key individuals tend to be essential catalysts. Pete Coe, the man with the red van, has had a huge impact, both in his adopted home in the Ryburn Valley and further afield. Ryburn 3 Step is the organisation that Pete started and has been associated with for many years now. In an interview in the Yarrow Valley, in the middle of yet another extensive tour, Pete Heywood asked a few questions about Ryburn 3 Step’s past, present and future.

Pete moved to the Ryburn Valley in 1975 along with Chris Coe, his wife and musical partner at that time. Pete explains further: “We moved up to West Yorkshire because that was where Bill and Helen Leader set up Leader Sound. We were often working in Yorkshire, West Yorkshire in particular, and we liked the area. As a result of Bill and Helen being there, other people started drifting into the area - John and Suzie Adams, Roger and Helen Watson and others. Over a good few years there was quite a community of musicians and we played in sessions up the pub on a Monday night.”

At that time Pete and Chris (along with John and Suzie Adams and Roger and Helen Watson) were playing in the New Victory Band and ran dances in Ripponden as a way of trying out new material before heading off on tour. Those village dances established music in the valley and were the bedrock of the more formal organisation which was to follow, Ryburn 3 Step.

“When New Victory Band packed up, Janet Kerr, a fine American style fiddler, joined us and we carried on running the dances, playing under various names - Union Of Halifax and then Hooke’s Law. Then Mike Hockenhull, who had been the sound guy for New Victory Band, joined the band. So there was me, Chris Coe, Janet Kerr, Mike Hockenhull and Chris Partington, who was also a fiddler. We were doing a mixture of English and American tunes. At that stage we hadn’t got a caller and I drew the short straw, so I started calling as well as playing.”

Pete and Chris gave up singing together around 1982 when they split up, although they remain good friends. Pete initially went back to teaching, a move which only lasted for one year before he decided that he would have a go working as a solo performer. Having spent years working as part of a duo, that thought was initially daunting. “We had a system, me and Chris. If I was doing the lead singing, she would do the complicated bits on dulcimer or concertina, and if she was doing the lead singing, I would do the complicated bits on melodeon or bouzouki or whatever. I was also worried that I couldn’t cope with my own company, alone on the road. But I organised a few gigs and I loved it. I didn’t have to make a set list and I loved it right from the start.”

“...Every time I come up with an idea the Ryburn committee groans! It’s just great fun, but my only regret is that I didn’t start all this when I was much younger...”

Pete first met Sue in South Wales around about 1985. Sue was teaching at that time and when she later moved to Yorkshire she got a job in the local school and very quickly rose to become the deputy head teacher. They then set about looking for a house in or around the Ryburn Valley. Eventually, they found a house that had a shop attached to it (which used to be the local hardware store) and, recognising its potential for doing something extra, they took the plunge. Gradually over the years from the early 90s, they started what was initially called The Ryburn Valley Community Music Project. They continued to run dances with a variety of bands before deciding that they wanted to also add a folk club to their activities. By this time Vic Gammon, who was teaching at Huddersfield University, had moved into the area. They cajoled Vic, John Adams, Chris and Steve Harrison and Annie Dearman to get behind the venture, deciding to run the club on a monthly basis. Their next development after that would be another dance strand, in the form of a Yorkshire Longsword team.

Somewhere along the way the name of the organisation changed to Ryburn 3 Step - ‘Three Step’ because it covers song, music and dance within the folk music tradition – and it now organises a wide variety of activities within the Ryburn area. Pete tells us more. “What we did with Ryburn 3 Step was to add the various interests as they developed. We got the dances going and that was the staple, then we got the folk club going, and then we started the Longsword team. I had danced Longsword when I was

in Birmingham with Green Man. I thought that if we were going to have a dance team it really ought to be Yorkshire Longsword. Sue got involved with that. My intention was that I would dance, but as the only musician in the team I found myself, as usual, playing for the dancing. These days they’ve got their own musicians - Steve Jones, Ruth Eccles, Andy Day and Miriam Asquith.”

The dance activities developed yet another strand when Pete and Sue met up with Ira Bernstein, a dancer and teacher from the United States who specialised in Appalachian flatfooting. Sue got interested in Appalachian step and drove Ira round on one of his tours and joined in all of his workshops. They brought Ira back to their home and he immediately identified it as an ideal venue for a teaching week. They quickly set that up, and people came from all over the country; people that Ira had made contact with at various festivals and who were interested in solo flatfooting rather than team dancing. Pete then went on to arrange further tours for Ira, initially with Trevor Stewart, a fiddler who sadly died recently.

“The thing about Ira,” says Pete, “was that not only was he a great dancer, but he was a very good teacher. Sue took all this on board and when Ira went back to the States, she carried on the teaching role with a small group of local people including our next-door neighbour Dan Eccles, who is a big six-footer, and his mate Jacob Jones. And, of course, they ended up stealing all of Ira’s teaching work because not only are they very good dancers – young big lads – but they are also very good teachers. They took on board Ira’s teaching techniques as well as learning a lot from Sue along the way. So gradually, mainly through dance, we have got people in the village and the immediate area interested in the work of Ryburn 3 Step.”

With these various activities all rolling along, Pete’s mind turned to yet another activity. “I’m the sort of person who likes to set things going and then, once things have a motion of their own, I like to focus my attention on something else.” That something else was the creation of a Mummers play. Pete enlisted the help of Mel Howley, who had performed with the Bradshaw Mummers. Pete originally came from Cheshire, not far from one of the old traditional Mumming sides, although they didn’t call

Rolling down the Ryburn



Sue Coe



themselves Mummers - they were known as Soul Cakers and only performed during the week of All Souls. Both Pete and Mel liked the idea of having a side which only performed during one specific period, rather than a side which might perform at festivals throughout the year. The obvious time to have chosen would have been Easter, as in Lancashire and Yorkshire that was the season for Pace Eggers, but they decided against doing something at Easter so as not to detract from an established local group, the Midgley Pace Eggers, who traditionally perform on Good Friday. They came up with the idea of doing something at New Year and started looking round for songs and ideas for costumes. The costume problem was solved by one of the Ryburn 3 Step team and a folk club regular, Annie Dearman, who had a degree in textile and design. Pete showed her photographs of Mummers teams from all over the country and she came up with the remarkable costumes that the side now wear. They settled on the 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th of January; the last performance is always on the Twelfth Night, outside The Bridge Inn in Ripponden, and that performance regularly attracts audiences of up to 200 people. "It is quite a spectacular play, and the result has been that even more people are being drawn in - the Longsword brought in one section, the Mummers another and the Appalachian dance another. So all the various dance activities were built up bit by bit."

"Chris Coe then started a singing group because the old shop is an ideal rehearsal room, a wood panelled room with wooden floors and panelled ceiling. The shop has also been used for various house concerts as it is capable of taking an audience of up to 30 people."

"It hasn't always been plain sailing. The dances which we run have had venue problems. We are now running in Brighouse, because Sue, when she was working in Community Education, found this wonderful venue - an old converted Chapel with a suspended wooden floor and with stage and lights, the whole lot. And it's a community organisation and that's where we have been for the last few years. We have tried to keep the folk club in venues round the Ryburn Valley though we have had to move two or three times, including recently when we moved back to one of our original

venues because the management has changed. That's a familiar story that folk club organisers are plagued with these days."

Ryburn 3 Step is also involved in promoting the folk arts in schools in the area. "One of the difficulties is that our area is well served as far as secondary schools go, with two or three comprehensives and two grammar schools within Calderdale itself. In the past we have had Junior Longsword teams which Sue has worked with in one particular school, they get really good and then they hit 11 and go off to different schools. And by definition they lose social contact because they are in different schools, and then, of course, they hate each other because of the rivalry! Over the years we have lost three or four complete teams. What we need to do is have school teams and Sue is working on that."

With so many different activities and a long-term commitment to teaching, it's reasonable to expect there to be some enduring outcomes to all the hard work, but given that much of Ryburn 3 Step's activity has focussed on development from primary schools onward, it really takes a generation or more to fully appreciate the legacy of the project.

"Some of the youngsters like Dan and Jake are now doing workshops at major festivals themselves, particularly Shrewsbury, but also Towersey and Sidmouth. But they are not living locally now. Jake lives in the North East - he was dancing with Newcastle Kingsmen and has learned the rapper dance. Dan is living in Leeds. He also danced with Newcastle Kingsmen for a while. Their main focus has been Appalachian but they have gone on to other dance forms. Sue taught them, Ira taught them and now they are teaching others."

"Rosie Allport is one of our Longsword dancers and taught Longsword to a group of Venture Scouts for a visit to Japan for the World Jamboree. The Scouts present were asked to do something cultural that represented their own countries. Rosie suggested that they did Longsword, thinking that of the 32 Scouts who went over maybe she would find eight who would get together as a team. All 32 volunteered! We sent out 42 wooden longswords to Japan and had to describe them, not

as longswords, because that was asking for trouble, so we described them as 'dancing wands'. We're now encouraging the next generation of our younger dancers - Jenny, Rosie and Ellie - to take over much of the teaching."

"Sue was asked by a teacher at Ravenscliffe Special School if she could do some wheelchair dancing with a group of students with whom communication was difficult - pre-verbal was the phrase. She said yes! The teacher wanted the students to do proper dances and none of them could operate the wheelchairs themselves, so they needed teaching assistants to push them into place. We worked out that where you have a 32 bar dance and four figures, that's the complete dance, but with wheelchairs the dance takes twice as long and needs twice as much music. Sue taught them easy dances. Initially it was the teaching assistants who were doing the pushing, but then some of the more mobile children asked if they could help. Now the classes have extended to two periods and nearly all the pushers are sixth form students. It has had an amazing effect in the school as the more mobile students were not having much to do with the children in wheelchairs, but now out of that wheelchair session they also come down and communicate at other times. So it has had an interesting knock on effect."

"I have another project which I plan to start in September, hopefully with primary and secondary school children - making instruments." Pete's enthusiasm for this project came about after hearing a Radio 4 programme about The Landfill Harmonic, a Paraguayan musical group that plays instruments made entirely out of garbage. The basic story was about children living in the shadow of the tip that serves Paraguay's capital city, Asunción. Favio Chávez, an environmentalist and violinist, got to know these kids while working on a waste recycling project at the landfill. He decided to give them music lessons, simply to keep them from playing in the landfill. But instruments were scarce so Chávez experimented with making some out of materials found in the landfill - tin cans, forks, bottle caps etc. Since then, they have toured in Brazil, Italy, China, Norway and America. Any money that they have accumulated they have taken

back into the community to build houses outside of the flood plain.

This story immediately resonated with Pete's thoughts on music in the community and some previous experience. "I had done a little project years ago making some instruments with year five kids. I got them all to make a percussion instrument out of stuff that I took in and stuff that they brought in. I had also got some tuning pegs from a piano factory in Lewes. They were just chucking them out and I said, 'I'll have them, I'm sure they will come in handy sometime', not having a clue what I could do with them. So we were able to make some stringed instruments that were tuneable. So I wondered if I could do that type of thing again."

"What I'm interested in is what the kids know, and what original music they can create with the instruments which they have also created. So that's my next project! Every time I come up with an idea the Ryburn committee groans! It's just great fun, but my only regret is that I didn't start all this when I was much younger. Still, I've learned a lot from teaching and organising over the years, passing the songs, music and dances on to students at Huddersfield and Leeds Universities and the local community in between doing the day job (touring professionally)."

In November 2016, Pete and Sue were awarded Gold Badges by English Folk Dance and Song Society for their "outstanding work in promoting English folk music and dance". When you see the catalogue of their achievements over the years, of which only a few have been covered in this article, it is plain to see that the award is thoroughly deserved.

To round off, I'll finish with a few words which Pete used at various times during our interview, words which go a long way to explaining why, at the age of 71, Pete is still relishing new challenges. The words: "I love the variety. It's great!"

www.ryburn3step.org.uk
www.petecoe.co.uk
www.landfillharmonicmovie.com

Pete Coe's latest CD, *The Man In The Red Van*, was released in May and is available from his website.

"...Our house, to be honest, is a bit like Fawlty Towers because there is always something going on! We have turned the house over to whatever and whoever. We have people staying with us from the folk club or the various dances, and it has also been a temporary home for Phoebe, another one of Sue's dance students."



Chris Coe's singing group in the old shop - photo courtesy of Pete Coe

As far as we are both concerned, and me particularly, it's a way of returning the hospitality that I have had from countless club organisers over the years..."