

National

What can you do with the drunken sailors? Get them singing

Falmouth festival attracts fleets of sea shanty fans

Cornish 'shouts' build on folk music revival

Steven Morris

They have braved the storms to reach the weather-battered port of Falmouth from France, Holland, Norway and all over the British Isles. Over the weekend they will be belting out songs about wild seas, nights of excessive drinking and the loneliness of life on the ocean wave - and knocking back more than a few pints of local ale and downing countless pasties.

About 30 groups made up of 350 singers have gathered in the far south-west of Britain for one of the country's more curious musical gatherings, the Falmouth international sea shanty festival.

"We do it because we want to keep a

great tradition going," said John Warren, of the local shanty crew Falmouth Shout. "There was a danger a few years ago that the custom of singing shanties in pubs was vanishing. That would have been a great shame. A group of us liked a bit of a shout [a raucous singsong] after a pint or two, so we set up our crew. In the last few years I think there's been a revival in interest."

The sea shanty does appear to be undergoing something of a renaissance. Younger people are getting involved and, to the surprise of some purists, it is no longer an all-male world. Falmouth Shout comprises 11 men and nine women.

"A few people do think it's odd," said Jilly Slater, one of the crew's female stars. "But we add an extra dimension and we don't want to be left out. I think the shanty is becoming more popular partly because it is easy and accessible. You don't need to be able to play an instrument, you don't even need to be able to sing that well."

Sea shanties - the word probably comes from the French word *chanter* - were originally sung as sailors carried out onerous



Falmouth Shout in full voice at the town's sea shanty festival Photograph: Apex

The unexpected success of the Cornish group Fisherman's Friends, who have performed at Glastonbury and the Royal Festival Hall in London, has helped the revival, as has a growing interest in Cornish identity, language and traditional arts and crafts. The popularity of pilot gig racing - pilot gigs are six-oared rowing boats - may also be a factor, as a means to relax after a gruelling training session.

Alan Ramsden, the secretary of the Cornish group Rum and Shrub (shrub is an alcoholic cordial that takes the edge off tainted rum) said: "There is a resurgence in interest in live singing of all sorts. You do see youngsters getting involved, not just hoary old-timers like us, who've been doing this for more than 20 years." The popularity of folk music has also helped, he said, and some singer-songwriters are giving the form a modern twist.

Neither do singers need salty air to form a decent shanty group. One of the groups taking part this weekend, Hobson's Choice, hails from landlocked Herefordshire.

The foreign crews were welcomed with open arms. The Breton (don't call them French) and Dutch crews headed into Cornwall on overnight ferries. The Shanty Singers flew in from Bergen. Their group was established 40 years ago and was originally made up of master mariners who had rounded Cape Horn. The membership criteria are more relaxed now.

The Falmouth gathering must also be one of the least commercial of summer music festivals. Profits go to the lifeboat charity the RNLI. Groups are paid modest expenses but singers are entitled to a daily ration of four pints of Skinner's ale - and one Cornish pasty.

tasks on board merchant ships. Different songs with different rhythms were used to accompany the various tasks - hauling the anchor, pulling on a rope and so on. A lead singer generally hollered out a short verse and the rest joined in the chorus, heaving or pulling in time with the song.

Some popular shanties such as Drunken Sailor and Donkey Riding are still taught to children, but enthusiasts felt there was a danger that the customs of getting together in a harbour-side pub for a shout was dying out.

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