

# RALPH McTell

Autumn  
2009

## Newsletter





*Ralph's song "Easter Lillies" has been interpreted in many different ways. This one is an oil painting by the artist David Weston whose studio is in Mevagissey.*

[www.davidwestongallery.co.uk](http://www.davidwestongallery.co.uk)



# Hello friends,

Welcome to the 2009 newsletter - as well as letting you know what Ralph's been up to during the last year, we'll also be discussing Ralph's upcoming tour, some future plans and featuring a great story from Keith Littlechild, a long-time supporter of Ralph, detailing his own personal adventures around the wild Cape Horn ship...

Ralph has a great tour booked this autumn, with dates listed on the back page of this newsletter. These shows were booked by Ralph's new agent Harry Farmer from HFA. (tel no 020 7837 2517). Harry worked with Ralph at Tickety-Boo a few years ago and we have all enjoyed working together again.

Leola Music would like to thank Iconic Music for all their work with Ralph and to wish them good luck in their new venture as Iconic Media. Ralph met with Stevie and Andy at the Cropredy festival and had a good time catching up with their new work. More about Cropredy later.

## Holidays

After last year's tour Ralph and Nanna departed to South Africa to spend Christmas and New Year with youngest son Billy, his wife Lucy and their three

boys, Tyler, Danny and Kai. Ralph felt the trip was quite exceptional in many and diverse ways:

*"It was wonderful to spend time in Durban. It is a fascinating place and the children are living a lifestyle that would be impossible for them to manage in England. We miss them terribly but it is heart warming to see how happy they all are. All three boys are great swimmers and two of them already have life saving certificates, not bad for an nine and six year old. They are sport mad and play junior rugby and soccer too.*

*Christmas was strange, no turkey but a braai (barbecue) in the hot sun and bottles of cold beer whilst the kids were in and out of the swimming pool.*

*New Year's Eve was spent up country with lots more jollity and another braai or two.*

*Big thanks to Mike and Jackie for generous hospitality. We hope to be back in the new year."*

Ralph went on a tour of the Zulu War battlefields and was deeply moved by the stories of bravery and heroism by both sides in the conflicts. Particularly in the TRUE story of Rorke's Drift where the guide held Ralph spellbound as he graphically described the siege and its outcome.



*Rorke's Drift with Tour Guide Paul*

## Folk Awards

Once back in London Ralph attended the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards and again enjoyed every minute of the occasion. Ralph particularly appreciated catching up with James Taylor, reminding him of a festival they both played at Bardney in Lincolnshire back in 1972. The biggest surprise was to meet Harry Shearer (the voice of Ned Flanders, Principle Skinner and 19 other characters on The Simpsons, to say nothing of his role as bass player Derek Smalls in Spinal Tap) Harry and his wife Judith Owen are big McTell fans and talked for a long time about music.

The real high spot for Ralph was joining forces with his long time friend Bert Jansch. Together they played a sparkling version of Davy Graham's Anji. Davy sadly passed away in November 2008 and this performance was by way of a tribute to one of the great innovators of the acoustic guitar. Both Bert and Ralph revere Davy's contribution as a major influence in their guitar development. The BBC put this duet on their website so we hope some of you were able to catch it.

## Mascot

In February Ralph's grandson Louis became a Fulham F.C. Mascot and his dad Tom and Mum Anna invited Ralph & Nanna to the match. It was an away game at Wigan and in spite of a mediocre

performance from Fulham, the family had a wonderful time.

## The Wall

The picture on the front of the last newsletter has attracted some admiring comments along the lines of "We had no idea you knew how to make a Cornish dry stone wall" Well it can be revealed that Ralph did NOT build this wall, he only designed it as part of his Cornish country garden - it was built by local craftsmen and now looks as if it has always been there.



*In Performance with Bert Jansch*



*DJ Liz Kershaw and Bert Jansch*



**Judy Collins**

Ralph's project landscaping his little bit of hill into terracing is nearing completion and he comments:

*"Just in time too as I definitely don't have the stamina I used to."*

Having said that Ralph still does a couple of miles jogging every other day.

Speaking of Cornish matters, check out our website to see a video where Ralph introduces some recently unearthed film of the place where he was first discovered: the Folk Cottage, in Cornwall in 1967. [www.ralphmctell.co.uk/cottage.php](http://www.ralphmctell.co.uk/cottage.php)

## Writing

Many of you have asked about a new album and Ralph says that writing has felt slower than usual, but on closer inspection he has found more than enough songs for a new CD. It is unlikely that anything will be out this year. However, there are plans for a new compilation early next year with a new studio album to follow. Meanwhile Ralph tells us inspiration has returned and at time of writing he is composing new material in between visits from family and friends.

## Streets of London

This song still has a life of its own. We have recently heard a Slovakian version of the song that was a hit in the seventies in the

former Yugoslavia and just a week ago a letter came from Uruguay to say how well the song is known there. We believe there is a Cantonese version of the song too. Has anyone out there heard this one?

## "IF A MAN KNOWS HOW MANY GUITARS HE HAS, HE HASN'T GOT ENOUGH..."

Ralph has acquired a couple more guitars. His latest one is an Epiphone copy of a Gibson J200. This is the type of guitar favoured by the Rev. Gary Davis who Ralph rates as one of the greatest of all time. The guitar was especially bought for Ralph's Cropredy appearance and for you techies out there it has two pick up systems installed. Inside there is his preferred K&K transducer system and it also has a Baggs acoustic pick-up in the sound hole. Acoustic guitars are notorious for feedback on the big stages but this guitar behaved impeccably for both the warm-up and Fairport's Cropredy Convention. Also Ralph had his new in ear monitor system from the States installed and reports that he has never felt more comfortable at a festival than he did that day. It appears from your comments to the office that many of you would agree with this summation.



**Harry Shearer**



**Chris While & (lurking) Lembit Opik**

Ralph's beloved Miss Gibson is having her third fretboard put on and is undergoing an extensive preparation for the upcoming dates, as we all agree nothing ever sounded better than that first Gibson that Ralph bought in 1965 - it has been his life long inspiration and musical companion ever since.

## England

On a whim Ralph found a young brass band arranger from St Keverne in Cornwall called Gareth Churcher\* and asked him to write an arrangement for one of his best loved songs "England" Ralph duly went down to the little village near the Lizard to hear the St Keverne band try out the arrangement for the first time.

Ralph:

*"We decided we would record it live in stereo and offer it to the BBC for St George's Day if it was any good. From the moment we got into the band room I knew it would be fine. The arrangement moved me almost to tears. I think it is because a brass band is*

*so quintessentially English and these lovely musicians played with respect and passion. We sent a limited number of CD's to the BBC but experienced a little problem getting plays. The record was never to be generally on sale but I am delighted to report that the band are including the tune in their repertoire for the coming season and I hope to work with them again. However due largely to the persistence of Dr Mike Cohen and others it was played on Aled Jones' show one Sunday morning. You may be able to hear a version on YouTube shortly - we will let you know*

We have just heard that Gareth Churcher and his wife Claire have become parents for the first time with the safe arrival of Maisie so many congratulations from all at Leola music.

## T.V.

Television seems to be as elusive as ever, but Ralph enjoyed an appearance on Songs of Praise. It actually has a bigger audience than Jools Holland's excellent program. Ralph was cautious about discussing his beliefs, but the wide ranging religiously tolerant producers were interested to hear Ralph's take on religion and loved Hands Of Joseph which they asked him to perform on the steps of St Martin In The Fields off Trafalgar Square. Hope some of you caught the spot.



**The St Keverne Brass Band**

## Aeronwy Thomas Ellis

We are sorry to learn of the death of Aeronwy Thomas Ellis on 27th June. Aeronwy was the daughter of Dylan Thomas and Ralph met her several times. She attended a performance of the "Boy with the Note" at the Dylan Thomas centre in Swansea and later invited Ralph to the fiftieth anniversary of Dylan's death and his induction to Poet's Corner in Westminster Abby. Her latest book about her father is called "My Father's Places" and is just out.

We at Leola Music send our sincere condolences to her husband Trefor and the whole family.

## Book

"As far As I Can Tell" continues to sell steadily and recently Ralph sent a copy to author hero Garrison Keillor. Luckily Ralph was in London when Keillor gave a show at the Cadogan Hall so Ralph went a long to see him read and sing and afterwards managed a few words with the great man. A few weeks later Ralph played there himself and describes the venue as "a hidden jewel in Chelsea". Ralph enjoyed the venue so much he has decided to perform his Christmas show there this year. Hope some of you can make it - it is right at the end of Kings Road, adjacent to Sloane Square so you might manage a spot of Christmas shopping beforehand.....!

## Festivals

This year's Coppedredy festival was blessed with glorious sunshine and Ralph had a marvellous time in Oxfordshire with many old friends, including Danny Thompson and of course Fairport Convention. After his sundown show on Saturday, Ralph joined Dave Mattacks, Dave Pegg and Richard Thompson for a one-night

resurrection of the GPs. They belted out a great version of Pretty Boy Floyd plus the Muddy Waters classic Can't Be Satisfied. We forgot to mention him buying a NEW white Fender Stratocaster for this occasion! Of course, Ralph also joined Fairport for the anthemic Meet on the Ledge, which featured a very moving tribute to Rob Bravner, a former sound engineer of Ralph's, who went on to work with Fairport Convention. Rob sadly passed away this year, adding a deeper resonance to the always moving Richard Thompson song which rounds-off the festival.

The day after Coppedredy, Ralph left for North Wales to record in Bethesda with new friend Jackie Levan. Ralph rates Jackie as a super songwriter and performer. They first met some years back in Glasgow at the Celtic Connections Festival. Jackie invited Ralph to sing and play on a beautiful song about the last survivor of the Jarrow Hunger march. The song is named after the man who rejoices in the appellation of Cornelius Whalen. At time of writing Ralph has not heard the finished item but assures us that it is up there with Jackie's best work.

In addition to Coppedredy, this summer included a return to Scotland and the wonderful Stonehaven festival, celebrating twenty-one years. A little closer to home, Ralph also appeared at the Port Eliot Literary Festival in St Germans. The festival is held in the beautiful grounds of the estate of Lord Eliot in a little known corner of south-east Cornwall. The weather was typical of this Cornwall's summer with a brilliant Saturday in full sunshine and a rainy Sunday, where Ralph entertained the bedraggled literary festival go-ers with a set based around his autobiography.

Ralph enjoyed catching up with Louis de Bernières who performed on the sunny

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## Around the Wild Cape Horn

*Many of you will have heard Ralph's song "Around the Wild Cape Horn" on recent tours, but perhaps you weren't aware that the song is based on a factual account from an American seaman recorded in 1929. Longtime friend Keith Littlechild recounts his own adventures visiting the real Peking earlier this year.*

### The 'Peking'

#### *My visit to the ship which sailed 'Around the Wild Cape Horn.'*

From the time I first heard it I've been captivated (and, on occasion hypnotised) by Ralph's stirring, poignant and life affirming song describing Irving Johnson's incredible 1920's voyage around Cape Horn. To be strictly accurate this was sometime before the end of the second verse; St Mary's Church in Banbury, just prior to Ralph's 60th Birthday Concert in 2004.

Some of you will understand why this is so and probably also know that Ralph's ingenious word arrangements don't just fall on to the page as he takes the cap off his pen. I know he works incredibly hard to arrive at the finished songs which have touched many of us personally in some way over the years and 'Around the Wild Cape Horn' is no exception.

It was written after Ralph had seen the grainy B&W silent film footage, taken by Irving Johnson as a 20 year old on board the last of the big sailing ships. Johnson later added the commentary when in his 80's.

The opportunity of a short notice trip to Pennsylvania arose in August 2009; my first outside of Europe. I had little time to prepare or plan anything but getting to see the 'Peking' at the South St. Maritime Museum in New York was achievable and not least on my list.

Given the significance of the exhibit in their collection I imagined they would have somehow known about or heard the song. But what if they hadn't? It seemed important; so I went prepared.

Following a three hour Amtrak journey from Malvern PA I arrived at South St via the subway train from New York Central on Wednesday at



**'Peking' from the underpass**

about 1pm. It was hot, about 92 F, and very humid. The 'Peking' was along side the quay and could not be mistaken. She is huge, both in length and height and beyond anything I had imagined. The bowsprit was close to and on the same level as the adjacent overpass, so it was almost impossible to get far enough back to get all the ship in shot. I paid my \$8 and couldn't wait to get aboard and explore.

None of the staff I asked had heard about Ralph's song and the Museum are not currently running Irving Johnson's film, as they have in the past, although this is about to change.

The sole chap manning 'Peking', Steven, was extremely interested to learn that a song about the ship had been written and also was very familiar with the story, via the film, but couldn't desert his post. I continued my exploration of the ship, above and below decks and felt a sense of awe for the sailors who endured the cramped conditions for 3 month stretches. There were no 80 foot waves available on that Wednesday for me to gain a true appreciation of their experience and the deck remained firmly horizontal.

The sheer size of the complex rigging fixtures and myriad of ropes and cables to raise, lower and secure 32 enormous sheets of canvas, each weighing over a ton, was breathtaking.

Back at the Museum I learned that the Historian was on leave, Wednesday was the Curator's day off and there was nowhere to play

the single track CD I'd brought with me. I sensed something of how Brian Epstein might have felt at Decca Records.

Nevertheless the remaining staff were unfailingly helpful and with their promise to try to contact someone in a position to judge if the song might in some way add to the 'Peking' experience, I set out in the direction of the nearby Twin Towers site to pay my respects and to see what I could of New York before returning late afternoon in the hope that they had succeeded.

It wasn't to be and somewhat disappointed, I said my farewells to Steven and made my way



**Female crew listening to Ralph's song via iPod**

towards the exit. As I did so a young woman came out of the Marine Operations part of the museum. I explained about the song, she seemed keen to hear it and gave me her card. Still no access to CD player but I realised my iPod was in my rucksack, but minus the necessary headphones. I went in search of some about 25 minutes before closing. It was unlikely I'd find an audio shop nearby and get back in time but my luck continued and I was back in 15.

I hadn't had chance to read the card at the time so didn't fully appreciate she was probably the person most qualified, in both senses, for me to meet. I subsequently learned the true significance of her position; she's Master of a 60 ton, 125ft Schooner built in 1893, which is used as sail training for young people off the Northeast seaboard.

The picture gives some indication of how well Ralph's song was received by those who listened intently to the 6 minute saga and they all. It is un-posed and none of us knew they were going to be taken. I'm glad it occurred to my spare hand to get camera out of rucksack once it became obvious they were all well into it.

To find people with first hand experience of sailing ships of the same vintage as 'Peking' and all that entails, willing to listen was completely unexpected. The young woman on the right of picture is Denise, Master of the Schooner and the on the left, the Bosun. The song had, in a sense, found its way home and there is now the possibility that it will be heard in that setting.

The rest of my trip, including the Civil War site at Gettysburg, Martin Guitar factory at Nazareth PA and the Smithsonian Air & Space Institute near Washington, where a ship of a different century, the Space Shuttle, also greatly impressed with its physical size and significance of its voyage could not eclipse my experience at the South St. Seaport Maritime Museum.

Since my return I've seen Irving Johnson's film, courtesy Mystic Seaport's excellent service. I'm glad to have done so in reverse of what is probably the usual sequence as it brought home the true enormity of the voyage and undoubted courage having seen first hand the most rudimentary equipment at their disposal. It also confirmed the authenticity with which Ralph conveyed the dramatic content and spirit of a 35 minute visual documentary in words and music lasting a sixth of that time and, for me, this is a real testament to his ability as a songwriter.

*Keith Littlechild. August 2009*



## Donard

Donard is still working with Ralph as tour manager and adviser. It is now more than ten years since their first tour together and Ralph is delighted that Donard's undoubted talents are being recognised by the music industry. Donard is in constant demand when not working with Ralph and amongst others this year he has tour managed fellow 60's Les Cousins and Bunjies folk performer and writer Al (*Year of the Cat*) Stewart. Donard's awaited excursion onto the recording studio is still on hold but he is writing and it is only a matter of time before we will be able to report more.

Donard will of course be with Ralph this Autumn and both are looking forward to seeing you all again. Please remember to get any requests to this office well before the tour starts.

*Best Wishes and see you somewhere down the road!*

### continued from p.5

Saturday in the beautiful Port Eliot estate's church. Louis read from his book 'The Partisan's Daughter' and played Serbian/Greek tunes, during a wonderful and humorous performance.

# Special Offers for Christmas

Available using order form or at the website shop

Times poems has been reduced from £29 to £22 for newsletter subscribers. Order using the order form overleaf.

To take advantage of this offer online then you will need to enter the special discount code during the checkout process: **XQ9UM**

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Offers close 14/12/09

[www.ralphmctell.co.uk](http://www.ralphmctell.co.uk)



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# Ralph McTell

## Autumn Tour

### 2009

Visit the Ralph McTell website for the latest tour news.  
[www.ralphmctell.co.uk/tour.php](http://www.ralphmctell.co.uk/tour.php)

Fri 9 Oct	Canterbury Guilbenkian .....	01227 769075
Say 10 Oct	Winchester Theatre Royal .....	01962 840440
Fri 16 Oct	Swindon Arts Centre .....	01793 614837
Sat 17 Oct	Pontardawe Arts Centre .....	01792 863722
Thu 22 Oct	Aldershot Princes Theatre .....	01252 329155
Sat 24 Oct	Woodbridge (nr. Ipswich) Seckford Theatre .....	01394 615015
Mon 26 Oct	Norwich Playhouse .....	01603 598 598
Tue 27 Oct	Banbury St Marys Church .....	01295 253329
Fri 30 Oct	Brighton Corn Exchange .....	01273 709709
Sat 31 Oct	Wimborne The Tivoli Theatre .....	01202 885566
Tue 3 Nov	Newark Palace Theatre .....	01636 655755
Sat 7 Nov	Hailsham Hailsham Theatre .....	01323 841414
Sun 8 Nov	Portsmouth The New Theatre Royal .....	023 9264 9000
Wed 11 Nov	Maidenhead Norden Arts Centre .....	01628 788997
Fri 13 Nov	Birkenhead Pacific Road .....	0151 666 0000
Sat 14 Nov	Salford The Lowry .....	0870 787 5780
Sun 15 Nov	Bromsgrove Artrix .....	01527 577330
Mon 16 Nov	Cambridge Emmanuel Utd Reformed Church .....	01223 304447
Tue 24 Nov	Milton Keynes The Stables .....	01908 280800
Wed 25 Nov	Sevenoaks Stag Theatre .....	01732 450175
Fri 27 Nov	Bedworth Civic Hall .....	024 7637 6707
Sat 28 Nov	Camden Cecil Sharpe House .....	020 7837 2517
Thu 10 Dec	London Cadogan Hall .....	020 7730 4500

