



The Three Idle Women

Bobby Cowling looks at the talented trio soon to be touring canalside venues with their own brand of waterways-inspired folk

In the November 2022 issue of WW we explored the rich history of folk music on the inland waterways, and celebrated a few of the contemporary artists who are continuing this tradition. Alas, at the time we were unaware of the musical exploits of Oxford-based trio, The Three Idle Women, who, as their name suggests, have a strong link with the heritage of the inland waterways.

Indeed, the group was forged through a shared love of the Oxford Canal, as well as a fondness for close harmony singing, folk music and, perhaps crucially, stories carried through song. It is the waterways narrative aspect of their material, as well as their musical prowess, that sets them apart in the contemporary folk music scene.

Introducing the band

Each member of The Three Idle Women not only has a strong connection with the canals, but a fascinating musical backstory. So, to better understand their collective ethos and musical talent, it's worth delving a little into their individual backgrounds.



JANE ROUSE - vocals, concertina, percussion

A liveaboard boater since 1995, Jane was for many years a solo performer, touring waterside pubs right around the network. She has recorded two albums – one, entitled 'A Life on the Water', is a collection of waterways-inspired songs. Certain tracks from this can be heard on the Songs of the Inland Waterways website, waterwaysongs.info.



STEPH PIRRIE - vocals, piano, ukulele, whistle, trumpet

Living close to the Oxford Canal in Jericho, when not leading the 140-strong local choir, Steph can be found playing trumpet in jazz clubs. She is also a trustee of the Jericho Wharf Trust (jerichowharf.com), which is seeking to resurrect a community interest boatyard and community centre in the heart of Oxford. Furthermore, she is a founder member of the Kilsby Theatre Boat (kilsbytheatreboat.com), a project to restore a historic narrowboat as a community craft.



The trio sing about the waterways of today and in times gone by.

“The whole purpose of what we’re doing is about the waterways”

Formation

The Three Idle Women formed in 2013, after they met through a Heritage Lottery-funded project to conserve the history of the Oxford Canal, part of which involved the creation of the website, oxfordcanalheritage.org. Another strand of the scheme was a live concert. “Because we are all singers in our own right, we thought, why don’t we do something together?” recalls Steph. “We performed three songs and it was so much fun and we loved it so much, that we just carried on doing it.”

The trio soon began regularly rehearsing on Charlie or Jane’s boat, and as their repertoire of songs expanded, so did the opportunities to perform at various venues on or around the Oxford Canal.

Storytelling

Of course, the trio takes its name from the female boating trainees of World War II, who, according to myth, were disparagingly referred to as ‘the Idle Women’ on account of the ‘IW’ motif of their ‘Inland Waterways’ badges. Yet, this title is just one aspect of the group’s immersion in canal and river heritage.

“I think the whole purpose of what we’re doing is about the waterways. The songs that we sing are all about that,” says Steph.

While the group’s emphasis on storytelling could be considered a continuation of the rich oral tradition of the boat people, I was interested to know where these narratives come from.

“All sorts of places,” says Steph. “Jane and Charlie have written and



CHARLIE HENRY - vocals, accordion, musical saw, ukulele, basic cello

For eight years, Charlie resided on a boat on the Oxford Canal and these experiences continue to inform the songs she writes.

A versatile performer who has worked a lot in devised theatre and on the London folk circuit, she continues to cite her love of the “transient nature of life along the canal, the proximity to nature, the seasons and the camaraderie and community of the boaters” in the lyrics to her music.



Performing on the Puppet Barge at Little Venice.



A band selfie.

“We are putting the finishing touches to our debut album”

collected lots of stories during their time on the cut. One of Jane’s songs is called ‘Green As’ and it’s about how naive she was when she first started living on the waterways. It has some funny lines in it.”

Another example is a song Steph has written called ‘The Shipman’s Chapel’, which is about a floating church that was once moored on the canal at Oxford.

While a lot of their material is original, they also perform traditional canal folk songs, such as ‘Poor Old Horse’ which tells the tragic tale of the fatal overworking of a boat horse. However, The Three Idle Women’s version incorporates a new verse that shifts the narration from the third-person to the horse itself. The group also covers the popular song ‘Old Father Thames’, which has been freshened up with a bit more of a swing feel.

Album and tour

At the time of writing, Jane, Steph and Charlie are putting the finishing touches to their debut album, much of which has



A moody shot beside the Oxford Canal.

been recorded in a converted barn in Wolvercote, close to the River Thames.

Comprising around 12 songs and co-produced by Ben Avison, a respected folk singer and songwriter in his own right, there will once again be plenty of accounts of boat life today and in times gone by.

Examples include ‘Roses and Castles’, which recounts the heroics of famous ‘Number One’ boaters Jack and Rose Skinner in saving the Oxford Canal. Another, ‘Turbulent Waterways’, written by Jane, describes the sometimes challenging nature of liveaboard life. “Sometimes when you’re on the waterways, you don’t know what you’re doing and things can get really bad. But the message of this song is to hang on in there,” she says.

With the album intended to be released before Christmas, the three members are busy planning a tour of countrywide waterside venues and folk clubs in 2024 to promote it.

“We’ve got to a point in our lives when we have a little more free time, so we’ll certainly be venturing out of Oxford,” says Steph.

Details of the album and tour dates will be published on The Three Idle Women’s website, threeidlewomen.com, and in the ‘On the Cut’ section of this magazine.

Take a listen

You can hear examples of The Three Idle Women’s work on Soundcloud, soundcloud.com/three-idle-women, including such boating tracks as ‘Poor Old Horse’ and ‘Boatie Boy’.



Close harmony singing is a key aspect of the group’s sound.