

## Report on the CVFolk 'Organisers' Moot'

Temperance Café, 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2023

Representatives from the following twelve guest-booking clubs took part in positive and constructive discussion:

**Atherstone FC, Bedworth FC, CVFolk 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday, Hinckley ACT, Leamington FC, Lighthorne Folk, Nuneaton FC, Sheep Dip Sessions, Stockton FC, Tump Folk, Warwick FC, Willow & Tool's Music Parlour, Wurzel Bush FC.**

Three session venues were also represented: **Abbey Theatre, Hairy Folkers, and The Rainbow Inn.** Apologies were received from **Banbury FC, The Folk Club (Stratford), and Harbury Folk Club.**

Local folk music photographer, **John B. Smith** also participated.

This report is organised under four headings:

- Club characteristics (location, finance policy, guest booking policy, promotion)
- Issues raised
- Advice offered
- Possible support by CVFolk

### 1. Club characteristics

- Location

A wide range of venue types and location were represented. Clubs located in villages had the potential benefit of local community involvement (e.g. **Lighthorne, Music Parlour**). Issues such as car parking and access had more impact on clubs located in urban areas and town centres (e.g. **CVFolk, Bedworth, Nuneaton, Leamington**).

Venue types included: pubs or hotels with landlord support (e.g. **Atherstone, Stockton, Tump**); large concert rooms with PA and lighting available (e.g. **CVFolk, Nuneaton, Stratford**); smaller purpose-built performance areas (e.g. **Hinckley ACT, Leamington**); small rooms with limited capacity for more intimate acoustic events (e.g. **Leamington, Music Parlour**). One club had started out as a house concert (**Sheep Dip**) but recently transferred to a village library using a room that is similar in atmosphere to a house concert. Another club (**Tump**) meets in different rooms of a pub for Singers Nights and Guest Nights. Venues with small performance areas are clearly more likely to fill up and hence provide a good, lively atmosphere. Larger venues usually depend on more widespread audiences to achieve this.

Venue facilities range from comfortable furniture to more spartan seating arrangements.

- Finance policy

Some venues charge admission for 'big name' events, usually ranging from £8 to £12. (**CVFolk, Leamington, Sheep Dip, Stratford**)

Others rely on jug collections (or 'banknote collections') with all or most of the amount raised paid as a fee to the guest artist. Some of these venues never agree a set guest fee in advance (e.g. **Bedworth, Nuneaton, Music Parlour, Wurzel Bush**) but offer whatever payment is available from collections. Partly for this reason, these venues would rather contact artists directly rather than approach them via agents.

Raffles are still used by two clubs (**Bedworth, Wurzel Bush**) to raise funding, but these are based on volunteer donations.

Some clubs (e.g. **Tump, Warwick**) use Singers Nights or Singarounds to subsidise main guest nights.

One club (**Stockton**) doesn't raise any funds but doesn't pay guests – all guests perform for pleasure rather than cash!

- Guest booking policy

There was much agreement on the approach that organisers book acts they like or know that their audiences will like. There is quite a lot of reliance on personal tastes of organisers and trust in their judgement. But other points raised on how guests are selected included seeking a variety of styles, and picking up on (sometimes overseas) acts trying to fill gaps in tours (e.g. **Sheep Dip**).

There was also some consensus on not using agents to ensure more flexible agreement on fees.

Some venues (e.g. **Harbury, Hinckley ACT**) simply don't book guests and rely on performers to turn up and participate in sessions or singers nights.

- Promotion

This seemed to be the area of most inconsistency between clubs. While most have aimed to build up a loyal following of regulars or potential regulars, some venues (e.g. **Stockton**) rely on email to contact a mailing list to promote events while others rely more on social media (especially Facebook) for gig announcements, post-event photos, or reviews. Some (e.g. **CVFolk**) rely equally on social media and emailing lists.

Some clubs (e.g. **Atherstone, CVFolk, Bedworth, Sheep Dip, Warwick, Wurzel Bush**) use their own websites. These range from the frequently updated and comprehensive (for example, **Atherstone** even includes information on arranged floor spots) to the more basic information on forthcoming events, how to contact and where to find the venue.

Although not mentioned at the meeting, it is worth noting that one club (**Nuneaton**) publishes a regular post-event blog which is announced on Facebook and accessible through their website. Other clubs (e.g. **Harbury, Warwick**) do provide fairly substantial post-event reviews on their websites. This indicates recognition by organisers that post-event review and photography can be just as effective in promoting the venue in general and hence encourage people to attend forthcoming events. One

venue (**Leamington**) even provides live-streaming of club nights via Facebook, with recordings that can be readily accessed post-event.

Comments were made on the need for a more central and regular information platform on what's happening on the local folk scene. This used to be provided by the local press and to some extent local radio, but these outlets seem less interested in folk club activity these days. **CVFolk** does provide a frequently updated events listing online, but this depends on people's awareness of this as a source of information, people's willingness to go online and, of course, organisers (and artists) making it known that events are happening.

## **2. Issues raised**

The following points emerged during the discussion and from the follow-up written contributions. Some were identified clearly by participants as problematic; others emerged as apparent or potential from the general discussion.

### **Clashes of events and the need for co-ordination**

This issue is apparent in three forms: **events held at the same time**; **duplication of guests** appearing locally; and general **over-exposure to folk events** in specific locations.

#### **Events held at the same time**

It's inevitable that different clubs and venues hold events on the same day of the week, although there has been some attention given to this, e.g. by **Nuneaton**, **Bedworth** and **Atherstone** which stage their guest events respectively on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month. Both **Lighthorne** and **Warwick** recognised clashing as a potential issue as they both meet on a Monday. This wasn't seen as a major worry, as both venues – while located near to each other – appear to have different 'fan bases'. Nevertheless, a substantial number of folk fans are willing to travel across the county to see particular acts, so it might be useful to develop some mechanism of co-ordination – and co-operation – in planning events.

It would also be of value to clubs booking guests in advance to have some prior knowledge of one-off events that might attract folk fans to arts centres and other venues in the area. **Leamington Folk Club** meets on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday but its venue, **The Temperance Café**, also books sometimes major folk names on whatever day they become available. These clashes cannot be avoided but being forewarned will help club and event organisers to be aware of what the 'competition' is likely to be and what date might be least harmful to the local folk scene in general – while increasing each venue's own potential audience!

#### **Duplication of guests**

Artists asking for, or accepting bookings are less likely than the venues themselves to be aware of potential local clashes. They are also less averse to accepting a series of bookings in the area on similar dates to create a convenient 'tour' for themselves. With payments often dependent on numbers turning up and contributing to jug collections, it would be in the interest of artists not to contribute to the clash issue, but in practical terms, it is probably the responsibility of organisers to

be aware and to point out to the artist that some dates may be problematic if they are too close to other local appearances.

### Over-exposure to folk events

In some areas there is a potential risk of too many folk events happening close together in a week, such as folk clubs, sessions and singarounds. The concern here is that local audiences will only want to attend one, or at most two, folk events in a given week, with each event losing potential audience numbers as a result. This may not be easily solvable, as venues that host events will take other factors into account, such as their own calendars, commitments and staffing arrangements. It is also possible that guest nights and sessions attract different crowds. Nevertheless this is worth noting as a potential issue and one that should be monitored.

### The 'North-South divide'

There does appear to be a perception that North and South Warwickshire folk communities are distinct and divided, partly for geographical and county boundary reasons. This may have a negative effect on co-ordination of events and general appreciation of what talent is available in the county. It was observed that clubs from both regions do draw on rich pools of local talent and enthusiasm and that past exchange nights – i.e. a club in one region presenting a night of music from performers in the other region – have proved popular and successful.

### Communication and promotion

With the decreasing level of mainstream media support for folk events, organisers have turned more to electronic media – social or email. One issue arising from this is that promotional communications tend to be restricted to existing followers of Facebook pages or people with email addresses included on existing mailing lists; as one delegate described it, 'venues operate within their own "silos" of support'. This not only restricts the ability of venues to advertise to new audiences but limits the demographic, making it harder to attract younger people to the club.

Venues that rely on one platform or channel of communication (e.g. email only, Facebook only) are at a further disadvantage by not always being aware of other events in the area, e.g. booking similar guests, targeting the same audience, etc. Club organisers visiting other clubs may mitigate this issue to some extent, especially if clubs print and distribute flyers that audience members can take with them, but this points to a rather haphazard and uncoordinated network of communication.

As stated earlier, some clubs have set up reasonably comprehensive websites, but again this may be a case of preaching to the converted if there is little mechanism in place to broaden the reach of the site.

The problems of promotion relate back to the lack of central mainstream sources of information such as a newspaper column, or widely distributed printed booklets (like the old '*Folk Diary*' published by the late Joe Smith). There are a number of electronic 'What's On' listings in place, e.g. **CVFolk**<sup>1</sup>, **Folk**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cvfalk.com/calendar/](http://www.cvfalk.com/calendar/) and <https://teamup.com/ks587swpght68os9whe>

**21 Midlands<sup>2</sup>**, and **Atherstone Folk Club**'s listing of event within 30 miles of the venue<sup>3</sup> but they still rely on the person producing the listing having access to other lists or sources of information.

### **Continuity**

This is an issue of succession – getting younger people involved as audience members, performers and ultimately organisers. This does not necessarily mean that clubs need remain stuck in their own routines and rituals, but it was accepted by delegates that clubs are largely organised by older people or members of the 'bus pass generation'. Younger people need to feel welcome, accepted and part of the social group that makes up a folk club. This is helped to a limited degree by family succession, i.e. sons and daughters of folk organisers following their parents' footsteps. But it is easy to see how a room full of older people singing folk songs could discourage younger people from walking in and taking part.

One specific aspect of this relates back to 'communication and promotion' discussed above: do younger people use the same social media platforms as their parents' generation? Is there scope to reach out more on unfamiliar platforms?

### **Suitability of venues – Access and safety**

Two specific sub-issues arose in discussion here: noise and car parking.

Noise is a potential problem in some venues, especially in smaller rooms that don't use a PA system. The problems with introducing a PA are: microphone stands can create a barrier between performer and audience which works against the intimacy of a small venue, and amplification results in people in the background talking even louder. On the positive side, people in adjacent bars, etc. do sometimes get curious about the lively singing, choruses or cheers and applause emanating from the folk club or session room and may well look in to see what's happening – the first steps perhaps for potential converts.

Car-parking and access to some venues was also raised as a significant problem, especially when attending the venue requires use of town- or city-centre car parks which can be viewed as disconcerting or even frightening places for folk club visitors at the end of the evening – and not just older visitors. This is one example of how folk venues might consider ways to become more 'enabling'. Other examples range from access to rooms via staircases, comfortable seating, legroom, ease of access to the bar, quality of toilets, etc. These are issues that clearly vary from venue to venue but could become significant factors in the overall image or impression people may have of visiting folk clubs in general.

### **Encouraging creativity**

Arguably, this could be viewed as an aspiration rather than an 'issue' but it does point to how content, repertoire and the pushing of boundaries can be important factors in continuity, promotion and overall appeal. For club organisers it is worth reflecting on how much their venue does

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<sup>2</sup> <https://teamup.com/ksb99ahbh3f8npaucr>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.atherstonefolkclub.org.uk/local-events/>

encourage creativity through variety of styles (for example, does 'folk' embrace blues, Americana, ethnic and world music, classical, pop, etc.), and through providing space where younger artists and/or innovators feel welcome and accepted.

One issue arising from this discussion was 'original material vs covers'. New material provides a lifeblood and direction for folk music, but covers are popular and involving, especially when they include strong choruses. The consensus appeared to be that both are vital in equal measure and that good performances of covers should not be discouraged.

### **3. Advice**

Although this wasn't a topic for specific discussion, one piece of advice regarding the promotion of events was offered by the organiser of **Nuneaton FC** who also presents a folk show on Anker Radio. Don't forget to send in CDs of artists performing at your venue but select tracks that are less than 4 minutes long. (Yes CDs are not obsolete technology yet – especially in folk clubs!)

### **4. What could CVFolk do to support?**

While set up initially to promote and celebrate local folk music and dance when Coventry was awarded the City of Culture accolade, CVFolk's long-term remit is also to provide support for the folk scene across the CV postcode district, especially at 'grass roots' level. Unlike the City of Culture team, CVFolk has not gone into administration, but neither does it have cash and resources to throw at the problems encountered by folk club organisers.

Reflecting on the points and issues raised during the 'moot', four main areas emerged on which CVFolk could usefully focus: **promotion, advocacy, providing a forum, and co-ordinating channels of communication.**

#### **Promotion**

We already 'promote' by organising events that showcase the wide range of local folk artists, mainly at the Albany Theatre but also in partnership with Coventry MotoFest, Warwick Folk Festival and, more recently, the Temperance Bar. Although we have now become 'absorbed' by the Albany Theatre Trust, we are still able to maintain these links and our overall brand autonomy. And we can capitalise on the refurbishments taking place at the Albany Theatre in a number of ways, including:

- The organisation of workshops and masterclasses in addition to our 'Second Sunday' programme of events, hopefully to nurture new talent and reach out to local communities through music
- Working towards establishing the Albany Theatre as a 'go to' venue for tour organisers of national and international folk acts, addressing the concern that Coventry and most of Warwickshire often misses out when major tours are announced.

CVFolk does try to be active and up-to-date online through a comprehensive website, Facebook, Twitter, an emailing list and events listings. This will continue to be the case but it is time-consuming work and, as indicated at the 'moot', there are ways in which volunteers<sup>4</sup> could help with the workload, such as:

- Monitoring Facebook events to ensure that all events are included in the listings
- Monitoring websites of clubs, arts centres and other folk venues to ensure that their events are also included
- Exploring potential of other social media to reach a wider audience and possibly managing the platform on behalf of CVFolk
- Writing news items about their own clubs (or any folk-related topic for that matter) which could be used on the website
- Writing press releases on behalf of CVFolk

Club organisers, artists, etc. are also invited to contact CVFolk whenever they set up new events. The website includes a virtual noticeboard to pin up posters promoting events<sup>5</sup> and a 'folk links' page which aims to keep website visitors up-to-date on who's playing, who's hosting events, and what resources, initiatives or facilities are available to the local folk circuit.<sup>6</sup>

### **Advocacy**

CVFolk does try to act as a voice for the CV folk music community and could develop this further by addressing shared issues and contacting relevant parties on behalf of the folk club circuit. CVFolk would be willing to look into building up a network of media contacts and using them, or encouraging more co-ordination by lobbying useful organisations (such as Warwick Folk Festival or local colleges, schools, arts organisations, etc.).

### **Providing a forum**

The 'moot' proved that constructive discussion and building up good contacts is both valuable and enjoyable. The CVFolk website has potential to provide an online forum for discussion and exchange of news and ideas. It already provides a reasonably comprehensive range of information of what's happening, and delegates were encouraged to check the site frequently or sign up to the mailing list.

### **Co-ordinating channels of communication**

It would prove easier in the running of events listings if they could be set up so that one event added to any specific list would automatically appear on other lists.

There was a broader point raised about different online channels and platforms being outside comfort zones for different organisers and CVFolk may consider providing a more effective – and readily accessible - 'marshalling yard' or 'hub' for information that is submitted and distributed.

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<sup>4</sup> One person has already come forward to offer practical support following the 'moot' – many thanks! More volunteers are welcome.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cvffolk.com/notice-board/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cvffolk.com/folk-links/>

Meanwhile, venues whose websites have a links page are encouraged to include a line to the CVFolk website.

## **Final points**

Many thanks to all those who took part in the 'Moot' and follow-up concert at the Temperance, and special thanks to The Temperance itself for providing the venue and hospitality. Thanks also for all the positive post-event feedback from delegates.

The 'Moot' proved to be enjoyable as a social event and a good and rare opportunity for folk club organisers to share ideas. CVFolk would be happy to stage similar events in the future either for general discussion or to address specific issues. Larger scale events (e.g. day-long conferences) are not out of the question although these would involve a lot of organisation and access to resources.

Meanwhile, anyone involved in local folk who has news or wishes to promote an event, can contact CVFolk's Co-ordinator, **Pete Willow** via email [culture@cvfolk.com](mailto:culture@cvfolk.com), or send messages direct to his Messenger page (if you use Facebook), or WhatsApp/text (07887 552896). Some organisers are already doing this and their contributions are most welcome.

CVFolk  
16<sup>th</sup> April 2023.