

Out of the Archive and onto the Firth: Reanimating the Dreg Song

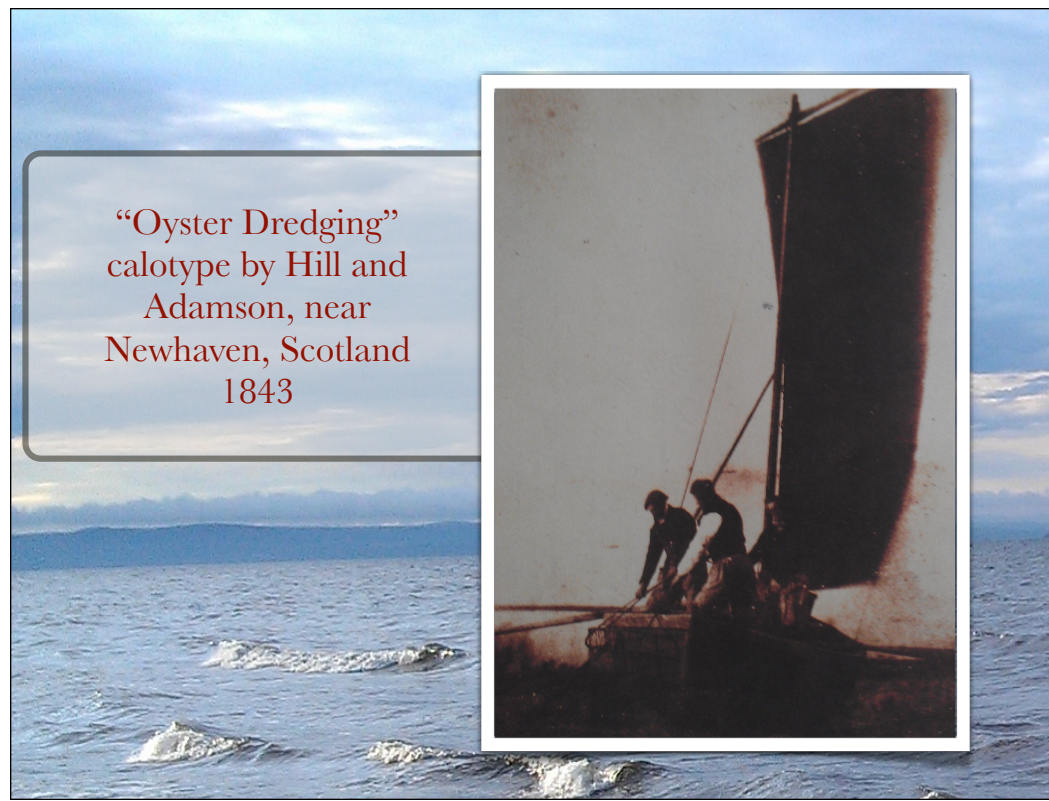




Just over 50 years ago, folklorist Francis Collinson set out to find a lost musical tradition: the Dreg Songs of the Firth of Forth.

For hundreds of years the the Firth had been home to a thriving oyster fishery which had given rise to a unique worksong tradition

"Dreg songs" were sung by oystermen as they rowed or sailed over the oyster beds towing dredges to harvest the tasty mollusks.



“Oyster Dredging”
calotype by Hill and
Adamson, near
Newhaven, Scotland
1843

"Dreg songs" were sung by oystermen as they rowed or sailed over the oyster beds towing dredges to harvest the tasty mollusks.

Not a single song, but a category like 'sea shanty' or 'ballad' Dreg Songs were ephemeral - improvised to fit the wind, tide and work.

They were vital to the trade as an old adage ran: "The Oysters are a gentle kin they will not tak unless ye sing."

But the oysters declined and the fishery ended around 1900 - sixty years before Collinson set to work.

Ultimately, he was frustrated.

He did find traces of the song, and a Newhaven choir singing something related.

OYSTER DREG SONG, THE - coll from Mrs Thorburn -- Radio progr about quest by Francis Collinson & Nigel Tranter of song formally sung by fishermen on Firth of Forth Southern shore 22/2/60: RPL LP 25800 -

From Peter Kennedy's Folktrax Website (Archive)
http://folktrax-archive.org/menus/search%20for%20titles_or_oz.htm
accessed 18 Sept. 2012

*THE OYSTER DREDGING SONGS
OF THE FIRTH OF FORTH*

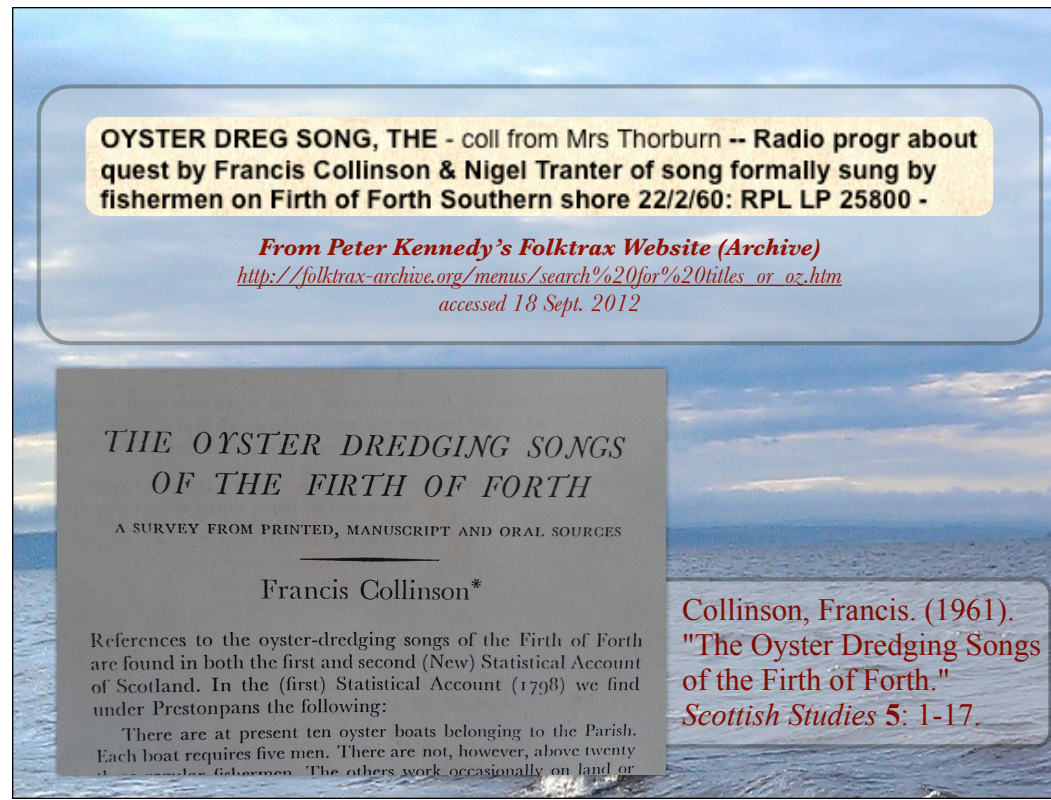
A SURVEY FROM PRINTED, MANUSCRIPT AND ORAL SOURCES

Francis Collinson*

References to the oyster-dredging songs of the Firth of Forth are found in both the first and second (New) Statistical Account of Scotland. In the (first) Statistical Account (1798) we find under Prestonpans the following:

There are at present ten oyster boats belonging to the Parish. Each boat requires five men. There are not, however, above twenty oyster fishermen. The others work occasionally on land or

Collinson, Francis. (1961).
"The Oyster Dredging Songs
of the Firth of Forth."
Scottish Studies 5: 1-17.

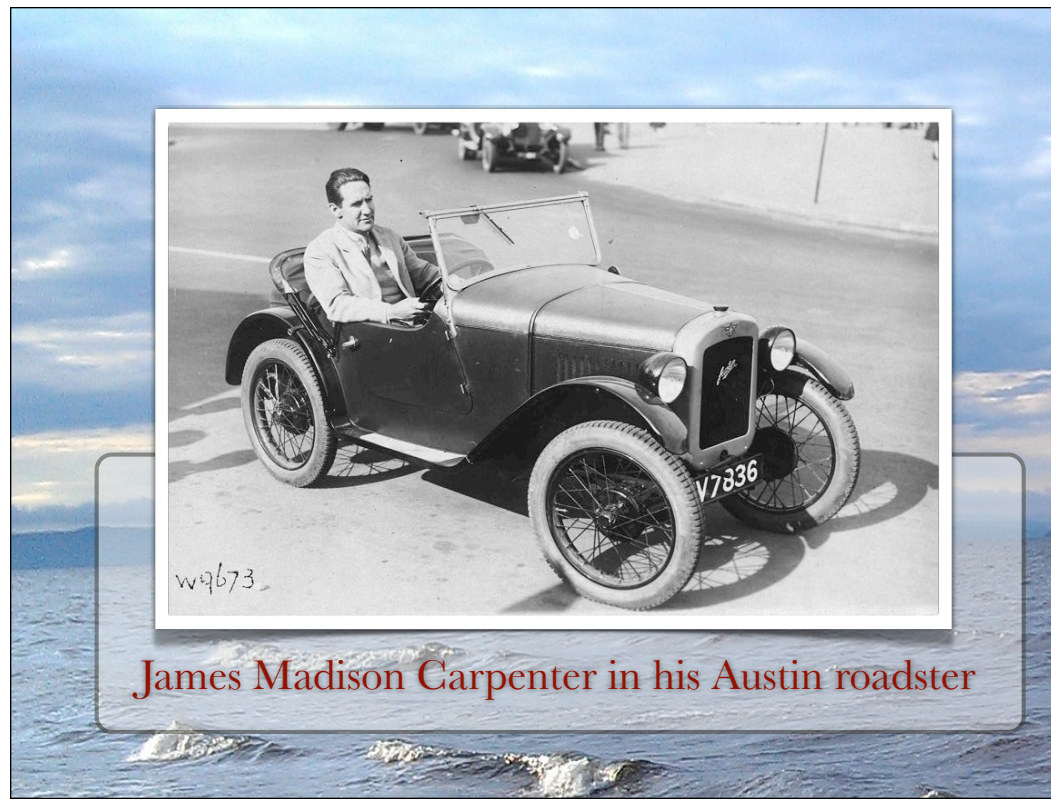


But the oysters declined and the fishery ended around 1900 - sixty years before Collinson set to work.

Ultimately, he was frustrated.

He did find traces of the song, and a Newhaven choir singing something related, but the fascinating rowing song eluded him.

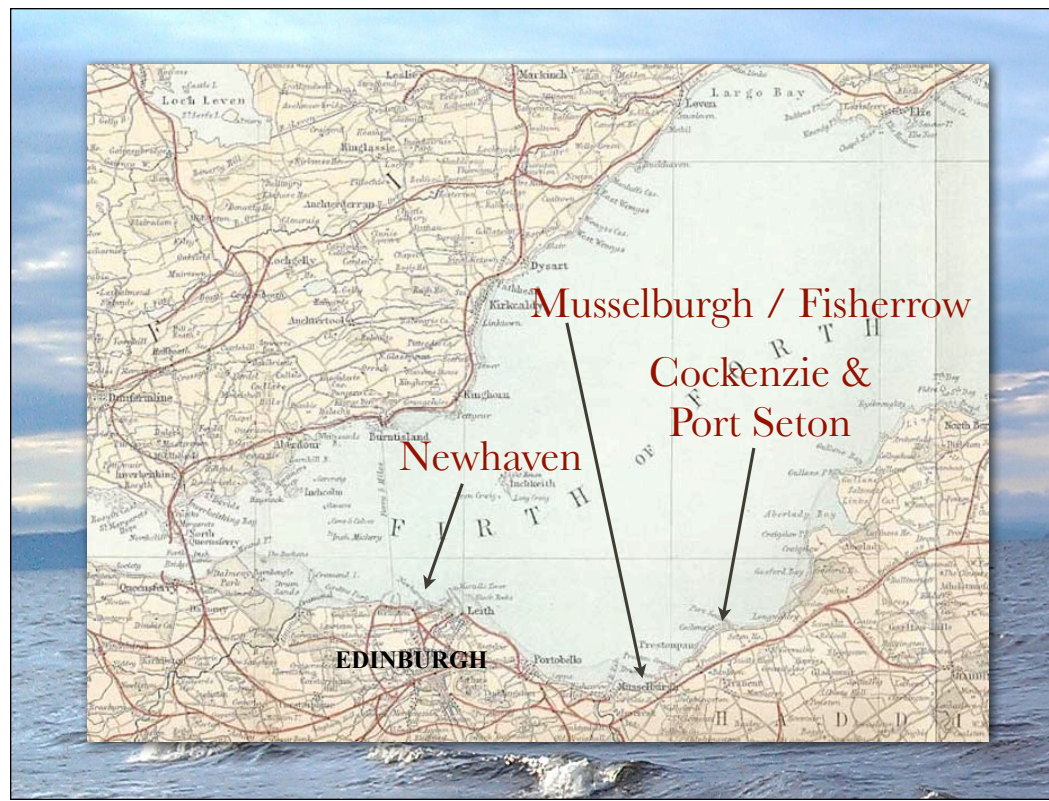
He did hear that “John Donaldson (late) of Cockenzie was said . . . to have recorded the Dreg song in the 1930s for an American folksong collector not identified.”



James Madison Carpenter in his Austin roadster

That collector was, of course, James Madison Carpenter who spent time near Edinburgh in the 1930s collecting in Cockenzie, Port Seton, Musselburgh and Newhaven – places with deep connections to the Oyster fishing and the Dreg Song.

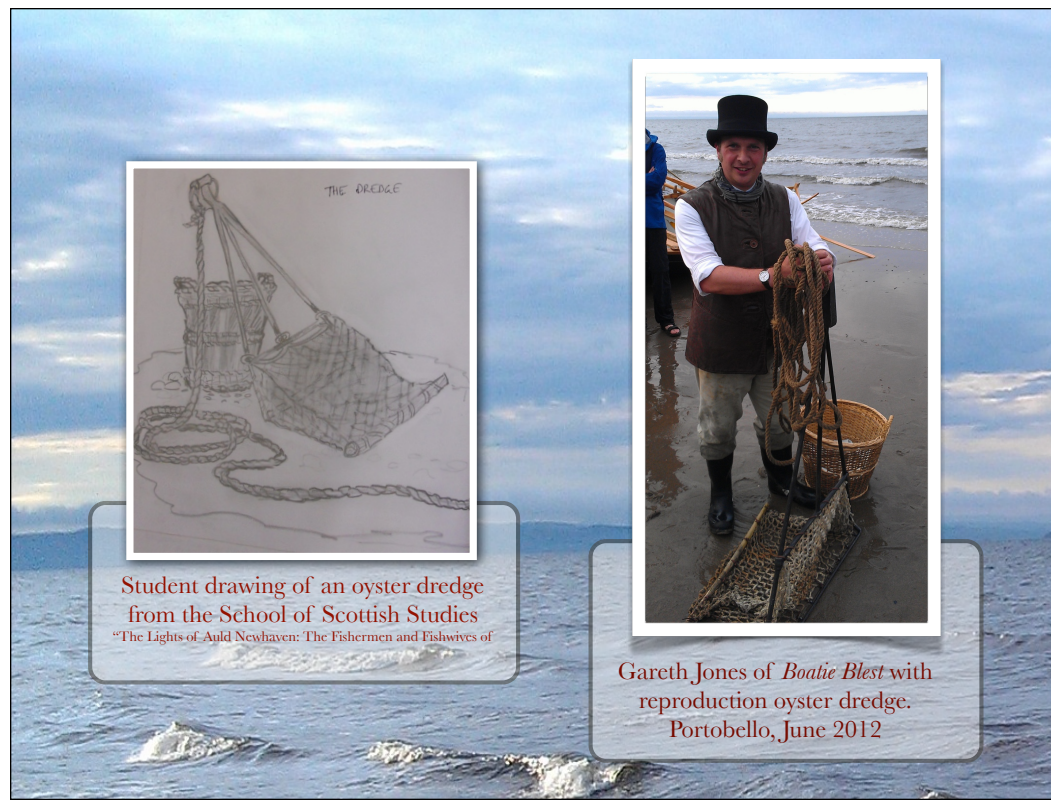
Altogether, Carpenter collected Dreg Songs from about a dozen singers including a cylinder recording of one performance of the rowing song extending to nearly 5 minutes.



It is only along the south shore of the Firth that the Dreg song was sung. The oyster beds were worked by sail – or if the wind was not fair – by oars.

The particular design of the Firth of Forth oyster dredge contributed to the nature of the song:

The angle of the dredge is controlled by a single rope running between the dredge and the boat.



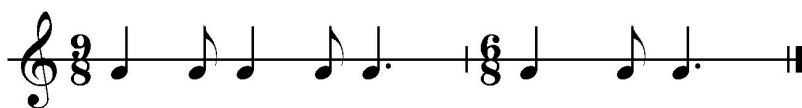
Student drawing of an oyster dredge
from the School of Scottish Studies
"The Lights of Auld Newhaven: The Fishermen and Fishwives of

Gareth Jones of *Boatie Blest* with
reproduction oyster dredge.
Portobello, June 2012

A steady pull is required lest the dredge dig too deeply and get stuck, or skip over the bottom leaving the oysters behind.
If the wind was fair, sails were used but rowing was often required.

A strong steady pull was facilitated by an improvised song that fits the rhythm of the rowing.

Dreg Song with Echo Rhythmic Patterns

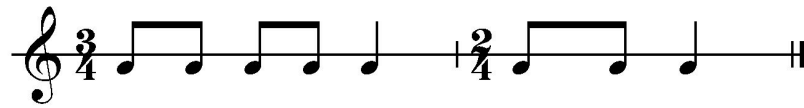


The rowing songs sung by several of Carpenter's singers feature an unusual, asymmetric call and response pattern: a three beat solo "Hey I see a ship" and a two beat response: See a ship.

Sailing on the sea - on the sea

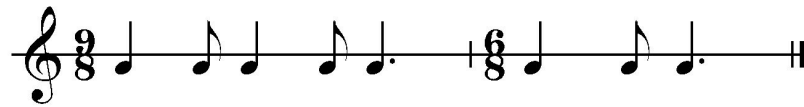
This pattern appears with various melodies and in both duple and compound meters - and an enormous variety of texts.

Dreg Song with Echo Rhythmic Patterns



Solo: _____

Chorus: _____



Solo: _____

Chorus: _____



These songs consistently use this asymmetric pattern – unlike any shanty or other maritime worksong.

These songs' freewheeling, improvised nature was noted by several nineteenth century observers, including at least one frustrated, windswept and soaked would be transcriber.



Dreg song 'sea trial'
Mystic Seaport Museum, June 2011

Working from Carpenter's collectanea and the nineteenth century accounts, a test of the songs with a real oyster dredge was attempted at Mystic Seaport Museum in June of 2011.

The success of that 'sea trial' coincided with a remarkable maritime project: Scottish Coastal Rowing.



In May of 2010 the Scottish Coastal Rowing project was launched by the Scottish Fisheries Museum in Anstruther.

A new design, the Saint Ayles skiff, was commissioned by the museum as a kit that could be built – and rowed competitively – by communities along the Scottish coast.

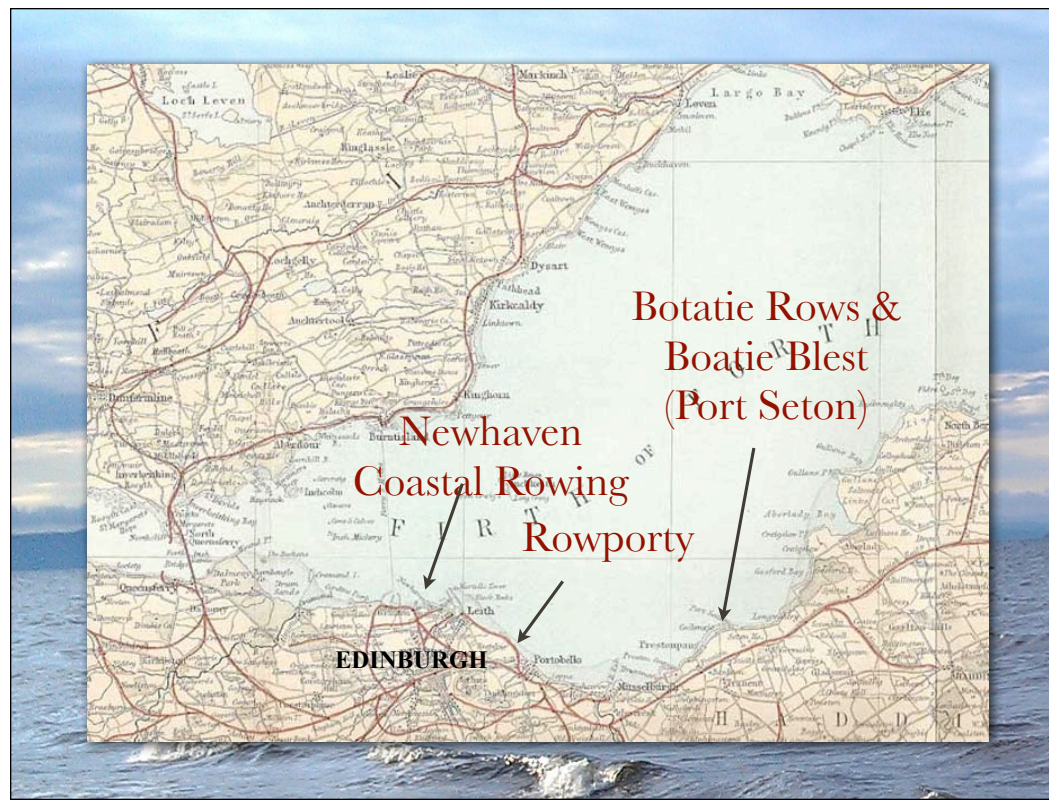
In the first year more than two score boats were built and by now nearly 100 have been begun or completed.



Rowporty's *Jenny Skylark* shortly before her launch.

One of the first clubs was Rowporty in Portobello beach halfway between Newhaven and Musselburgh who launched their first boat, Ice Breaker, in May of 2010.

Just over a year later, a member of the group wrote, "I'd like to find out about rowing songs, especially Scottish ones."
The seed was planted.

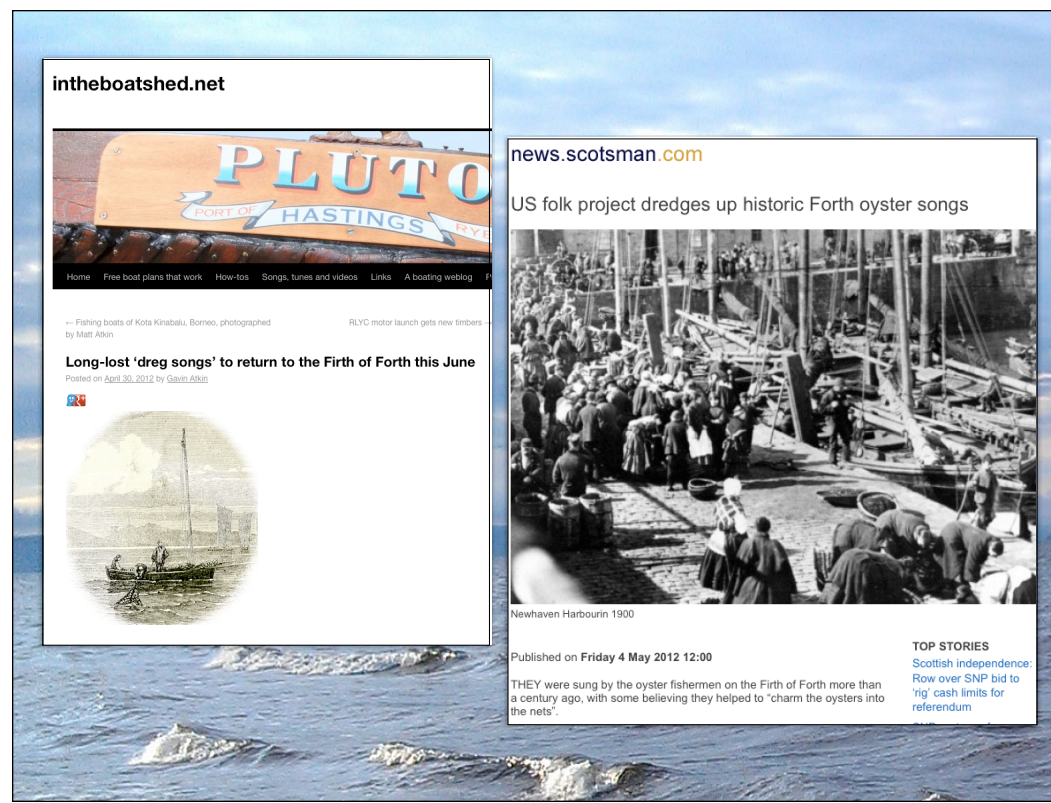


In time, three clubs along the south shore of the Firth joined the project.

Last April they linked via the internet to hear Carpenter's recordings and learn of the research to that point.

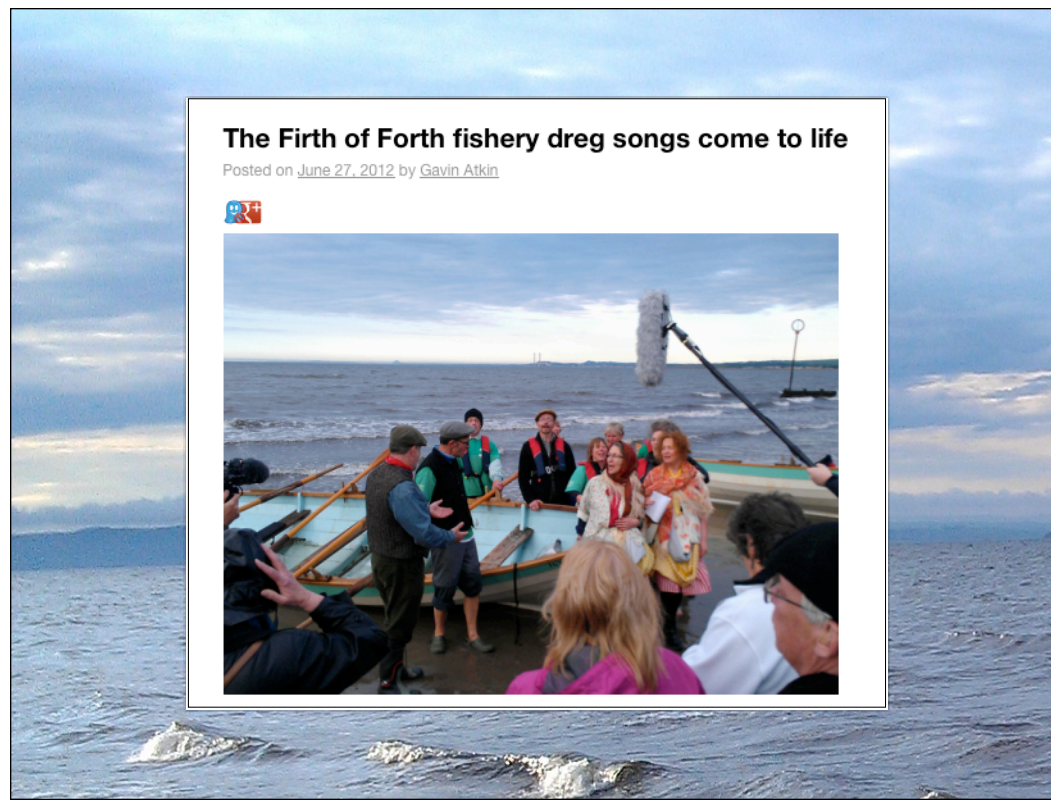
As it happened, one group brought a descendant of one of Carpenter's singers who, for the first time, heard his great-grandfather sing.

Each group was encouraged to learn the structure then to recreate the song in their boats with their voices and ideas.



Using blogs, internet radio and traditional print media the project was promoted.

Local government, museums, universities and businesses joined in the effort.



Finally, on the 20th of June with reasonably cooperative weather, the project reached it's objective: the return of the Dreg Song to it's home waters – most likely for the first time in over a century.



Port Seton boats arriving Portobello Beach, 20 June 2012

Boats were launched from Fisherrow and Portobello and converged on Portobello Beach opposite the Dalriada Bar which helped facilitate the event. Museum folk in historic costumes, rowing club members and a fascinated crowd watched the boats arrive.



A crowd greets the boats, Portobello Beach, 20 June, 2012

With students from two universities recording the event, plus local TV and BBC Radio Scotland, the various interpretations of the tradition were sung. Then the rowers retired to the Pub for some well-earned refreshment.

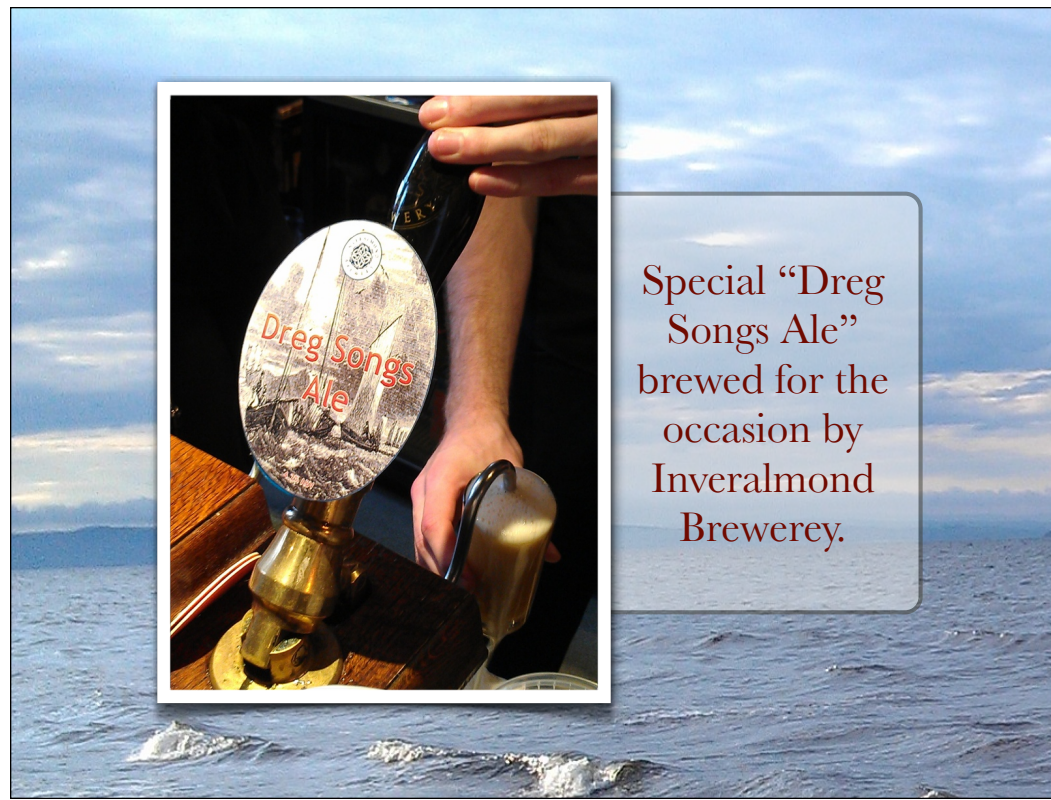
In the following days and weeks local media, the BBC and Scotland's major newspaper all celebrated the event.



Port Seton rowers sing the Dreg Song
Portobello Beach, 20 June, 2012

We'll probably never know what James Madison Carpenter hoped to accomplish by recording Dreg Songs, but his chance encounter with this fascinating tradition made this celebration possible.

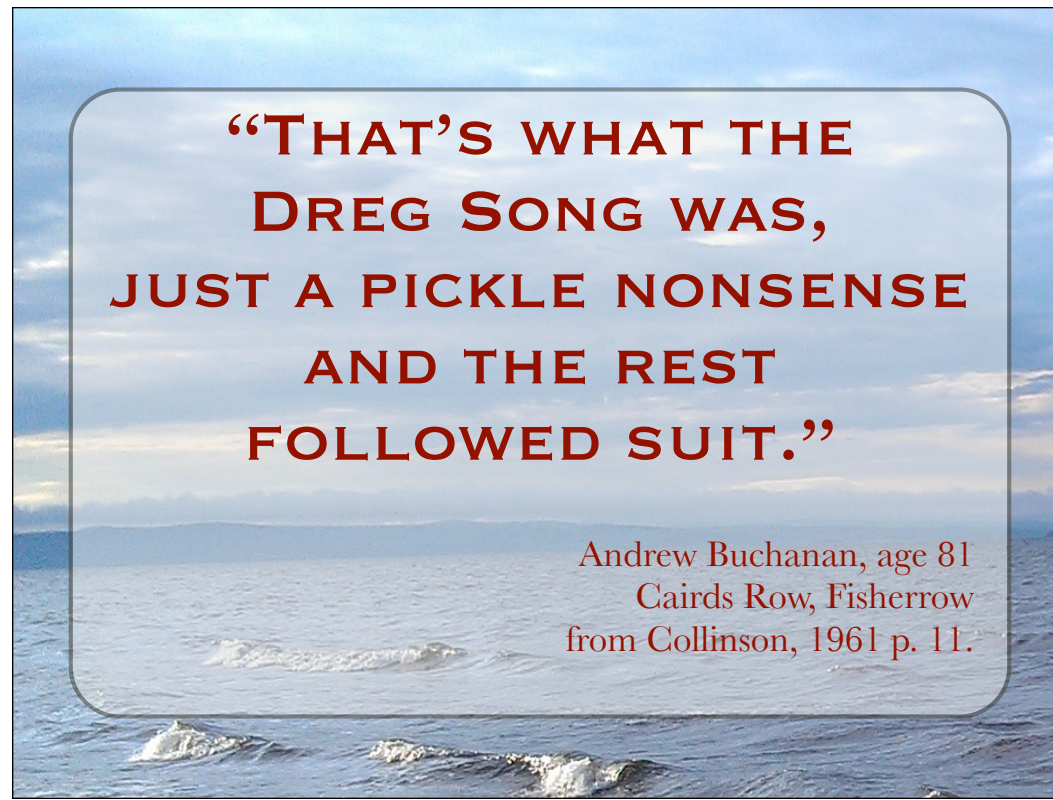
Francis Collinson's efforts may never have achieved his desired goal, but his scholarship contributed enormously to this project.



Special “Dreg Songs Ale” brewed for the occasion by Inveralmond Brewery.

Boatbuilders, community members, business folk and even politicians from communities along the Firth contributed to and were touched by the project.

But none of this would have been possible without the careful conservation and preservation of these songs by the Archive of Folk Culture. Thanks to Michael Taft and his staff whose essential contribution made it possible for so many to share in a unique celebration of a very local, but very special tradition.

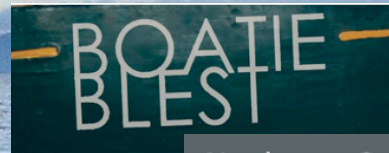


**“THAT’S WHAT THE
DREG SONG WAS,
JUST A PICKLE NONSENSE
AND THE REST
FOLLOWED SUIT.”**

Andrew Buchanan, age 81
Cairds Row, Fisherrow
from Collinson, 1961 p. 11.

Huge thanks are due to the many, many people who made this event possible and brought the Dreg Songs back to life!

THANK YOU



Newhaven Coastal Rowing
Be part of our venture and have an adventure!

