



Mark Page (right), and three generations of his family

## Voices from the past

A BBC journalist organised an unusual family reunion, where guests listened to their ancestor sing traditional songs from beyond the grave

**DESCENDANTS OF** a sea captain from Sunderland have heard their ancestor singing sea shanties recorded in the 1920s.

This unlikely family reunion was the subject of an episode of BBC One's *Inside Out North-East*, in which presenter Chris Jackson tracked down the relatives of seamen whose songs were recorded by James Madison Carpenter, an American academic who toured Britain to document folk songs and traditions.

Madison visited ports along the North-east coast, where he asked retired mariners to recite their old working songs into his Ediphone recorder. Almost 90 years on, Jackson found these musical time capsules at the US Library of Congress and resolved to reunite the voices with their living descendants. After months of detective work and reverse genealogy, Jackson tracked down the great grandchildren of Mark Page, a mariner who featured on the recordings.

"It was an incredible journey tracking down Mark Page's family – not least asking them to come to a meeting

without divulging the secret I was about to reveal," said Jackson. "I did let them know there was no inheritance involved, so they didn't get their hopes up. But what they heard was priceless."

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Guests arrived from across Britain, even Australia, for the reunion in Sunderland. "It was like having a hand from history tapping you on the shoulder," said Cynthia Ellmore, the great great granddaughter of Mark Page.

Carpenter's collection is an amazing audio archive. But each recording is also a unique piece of family history. More than 800 people contributed to the collection, so others may find their ancestors' voices recorded on the Ediphone's wax cylinders. Thanks to Chris Jackson, a few lucky people have already been able to hear the voice of their seafaring forebear. ■



The Ediphone on which Carpenter recorded sea shanties in Sunderland



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