

## Benny Graham Citation

Let me introduce you to my friend and musical colleague, Benny Graham, a man of many parts. He's outgoing, friendly and willing to master any situation to further links between folk music and the general public. His particular passion is the rich heritage of the North East. He's the consummate professional, yet connects effortlessly with audiences. His voice is outstanding. He can deliver songs with clarity and style, power and emotion. Working with others he commands respect and loyalty, producing a great team spirit. He is the epitome of patience whatever the situation, from a puzzled looking dance set to the eager infant singing class or the reminiscences of residents in Care Homes. He has a phrase which perhaps encapsulates everything, "*Nowt's a bother!*"

Born in 1952, Benny grew up in the mining community of Stanley, County Durham. His father was a miner. At the local Methodist Chapel, the hymns gave Benny a taste for harmony singing. Solo singing at school and with a youth club music group continued the interest until 1965, when he heard the Topic LP 'Tommy Armstrong of Tyneside'. This was the start of his long career in folk music.

By 1967 numerous clubs on Tyneside had emerged. Newcastle's Bridge Hotel and the Elliotts' Club at Birtley became his favourites.

Inspired by Louis Killen, The High Level Ranters and Jack and Reece Elliott, Benny began singing. His fine tenor voice was quickly noticed, making him a popular performer.

He became a resident at the Gosforth club, amongst some talented performers such as Jim Mcgean, Alan Fitzsimmonds, and the Briggs Sisters, with the Knight Brothers providing some fine music. By 1970 he had formed a highly regarded harmony trio, '*Peg Leg Ferret*', securing bookings up and down the country, and a tour of France with Silly Wizard' in 1972.

An offer by Newcastle University Theatre to perform in their 1973 Pantomime, directed by Gareth Morgan and Michael Bogdanov, gave Benny a change of direction. I recall his excitement at this job, as though he had run away to join a circus!

At the same time, in the burgeoning ceilidh scene Benny's skills as a melodeon player were in demand. Prompted by a shortage of callers, he became one himself. Indeed, I often got the call to play with Benny's 'Pick up' groups, and fine times they were.

During the 80s and 90s, Benny made contacts across the country leading to appearances at festivals and repeat bookings. With the formation of Folkworks locally, new opportunities arose. Links with schools were extended Benny was a 'natural' for this kind of work:

songwriting, dancing, drama, informed by local history; concerts at the Sage, one unforgettable occasion with a thousand children singing together!

Benny has been involved in many, highly acclaimed collaborative projects over the years - working on canal based tours and waterways' festivals; forming and developing a choir, The Maritime Chorus; and touring with Bob Fox and The Pitmen Poets among them.

These are but a few highlights from his rich and varied career, leading to his well deserved Gold Badge.

I have known Benny for fifty years, and it has been a delight to watch him progress from a nervous floor singer to a top class performer. It has been a privilege to work with him on many occasions. He has done so much for the Folk Movement and brought such enjoyment to many people.