

CHAPTER 10

The Big Catch

Singing the Fishing



I remember Charles looking down on the studio with Peggy in the middle on her podium and conducting and playing the banjo, and he said, ‘Look – Peggy Seeger and her Amazing Performing People’.

JOHN CLARKE, STUDIO MANAGER, *SINGING THE FISHING*,
INTERVIEWED IN 2007

Course it’s a wonder, too, you see, to pick one of these little fish up, the net’s vibrant with life, rrrrrrr, like that ... When you’re doing well and catching fish, they talk to them all the time: ‘Come on, spin up, my darlings, come on’, and they absolutely cajole them into the nets.

RONNIE BALLS, RETIRED FISHING BOAT CAPTAIN,
SINGING THE FISHING, 1960

THE BIG CATCH – SINGING THE FISHING

In November 1959, a fortnight after the broadcast of *Song of a Road*, Charles writes to Denis Morris and David Gretton suggesting they follow it up with a programme about East Coast herring fishermen, an idea he'd discussed with Ewan. It's a familiar theme, and although attracted to it Charles is worried that recently it had been heavily over-fished. In the past five years he had made *Harvest the Sea* with the playwright Willis Hall, and Philip Donnellan had discovered and used the old Norfolk herring fisherman and 'source' singer Sam Lerner in a series of 15-minute programmes. Ewan is enthusiastic, but would prefer to look at a fishing community rather than fishing per se: he has recently been working with Scottish fishermen for Tyne Tees Television. Charles warily sounds out Denis Morris:

I am sure a good programme could be done using Lowestoft and/or Yarmouth, and also possibly exploiting the songs and probably the voice of Sam Lerner, but I know that MacColl is anxious ... to treat a small fishing community which would give a necessary discipline and cohesion to the work ... He met some fishermen from Gardenstoun on the east coast of Scotland and was wildly enthusiastic about their speech and the attitude of the community in which they live. I am therefore wondering if it would be at all possible for Ewan MacColl and me to trespass so far upon Scotland as to visit Gardenstoun and investigate the possibilities there? If we handled the East Anglian story we would not be breaking new ground, whereas the sort of treatment Gardenstoun might stimulate could be original and exciting.

To those who know *Singing the Fishing*, clearly identified with the crusty voice and salty laugh of the 80-year-old Sam Lerner, it's a surprise to learn that at the outset East Anglia wasn't in the plans. But a visit to Gardenstoun revealed a problem. A Scottish features producer who knew the area had warned Charles that, while 'Gardenstoun is probably the most progressive small fishing community in the NE of Scotland ... like the others the people have strong religious views. I do not know the kind of treatment envisaged. What was done in *Song of a Road*, which to my mind was a fascinating, imaginative documentary, would probably give strong offence to the inhabitants.'

In mid-December Ewan writes a when-can-we-start letter: 'The storms last week and the [lifeboat] tragedy which they produced ... made me more convinced than ever that there is a great programme to be done on coastal seamen.' At the end of December Morris gives Charles the go-ahead (though he knows his man – he specifically bans him from making a detour to do a programme on the disaster) and Charles goes up with Ewan and Peggy in mid-January 1960. They find Gardenstoun fascinating but, as Charles writes to David Gretton: 'We didn't expect the village to be quite such a stronghold of Plymouth Brethren, and there may be problems with actuality recording. I think we should bring Yarmouth and Lowestoft in too.' Gretton's response