

Interview with SCAN TESTER

by VIC SMITH



VIC SMITH spent the day and evening of 20 August 1971 in the company of the late Scan Tester of Horsted Keynes in Sussex. He recorded the interview which follows. Scan's comments appear as they were spoken but the questions have been abridged. Editorial notes appear in brackets.

(Scan started by playing a selection of dance tunes and songs he used to play at the sessions in the local pubs. He finished up with Haste to the Wedding.)

SCAN TESTER:

That's one you want to strike up when you get out somewhere and you get a nice lot. Then they want to know! Most people like them old jigs, you know. I used to know several Irish and Scotch jigs, but... they're all gone. I don't know why. Well for one thing, if I take this out (the concertina) I never play one of them. You see, they want you to play something you can sing. Well, it makes more in the evening. Well, you see, these instruments, they're all right with some people. Well, you see (plays a chord) that's in C. This is G. (Plays another chord.) Well, this row is all right for singing, but C is a bit too high. But you can nearly always get them in

G. That's why I play in G a lot, if I'm going to play for anyone to sing. This is an anglo; me and my brothers have always played anglos. We've never bothered with the English much. It's what you get used to. I've got a friend in Brighton and she plays an English, but, then again, she only plays single notes. I like to hear a concertina played, especially my younger brother. He used to play a lot. Especially if I was in another room listening. Well, I expect that was the only time I heard the concertina played.

VIC SMITH:

Are there any other musical families in the village?

ST:

No. Well, there is a fiddle player, a young chap, but he plays by music, and I don't think he plays out at all, not from his home. But I used to like to hear these old fiddlers, that used to come up round the Common. These old blokes up there, you know, they were blooming marvellous. Nutley, Fairwarp and around. There used to be one or two elderly blokes, jolly good. A lot of people didn't think much of them, but I knew... they were blooming good! I've said several times, if those blokes went up to London, they'd get their living anyhow. All they'd want was someone to show them round a bit.

ABOVE: Scan Tester with bandoneon

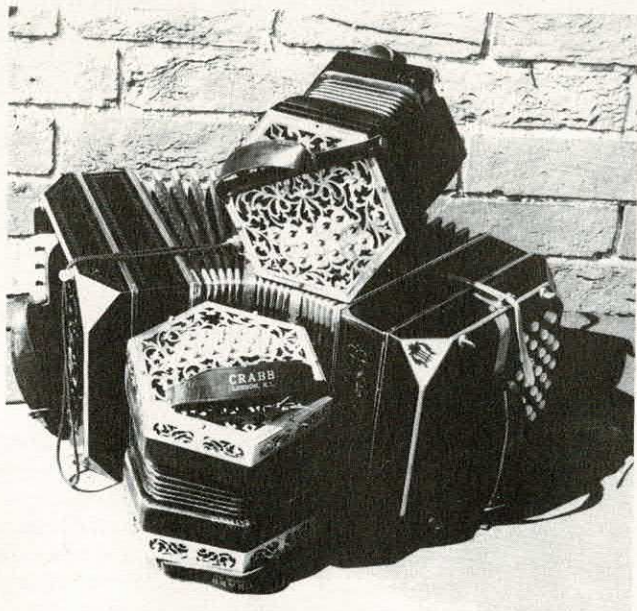
VS:
Are any of them still living?

ST:
Oh, I expect they are all dead and gone now. I don't get out that way much now.

VS:
How long have you had that concertina?

ST:
Oh, quite a few years now. I bet you'd never credit what I give for it. You'd never think I was telling the truth... I give the sum of four shillings for that! Harry Crabb told me once, when I was up there (at Crabb's concertina shop and factory in Liverpool Road, Islington). I'd broke a spring. Well, I'd been putting springs in there, but this one what I wanted was for the wind key and I hadn't one big enough, so I thought 'Well, I shall have to send it up to him.' So I sent it up to him, and I said, 'Keep it till I come for it in about a fortnight's time'. These springs, they just hook on. Well, I have made them out of a safety pin. I shouldn't be surprised but you'd find one or two in there now! But you've got to be careful, you see, you've only got a little bit. Well, an eighth of an inch before they stick in the finger board. Well, if you don't get it in there tight, they wiggle about, you see, and they are liable to come out. Well, you're beat, see, because that note keeps playing.

Anyway, when I went up there, Harry Crabb made me a present of these straps. Very nice of him! I told him, I said, 'You're a better pal than my brothers are!' And I told him, I said 'They'll get worn because I shall put them on, and I shall use them,' and it'll advertise his name, you see.



ABOVE:
Later instruments played by Scan: two Crabb concertinas and a bandoneon.

Well, that old bloke I bought this off, it was in Brighton, I asked him to let me look at it. Of course, it wasn't in such good condition as it is now. It stood up on the shelf. Well, I pulled it all out, and it squeaked, you know, and I said, 'Well, it's got some music in it!' (This was one of Scan's favourite tales. For a more complete and coherent version listen to the Folktracks cassette FSA085.)

But, it's been a good instrument, and, of course, it's had a lot of playing. Yes, it's a good old music, that is. I wouldn't sell that. I never wear the bellows out like some do, you know, they wear the corners. Now, I always rest them on my knees. Well, if I wear this one out, I shan't wear another one out. No, it'll live longer than what I shall. The way I like them is, they're not too heavy to carry about, and you can get all the music out of them what you want. Some people, if they have been taught, well, they can play in any scale. I can play in one or two. I should be able to play in any scale. You should get the chromatic scale on these. I don't know what became of my brother's. He had one the same pitch as that, and one in E flat. I never asked his wife about them because I don't want her to think that I want them ... I've got two... and that's enough for me.

VS:
Is your other one a Crabb?

ST:
Yes, both my concertinas are Crabb's, and there's this (shows his bandoneon).

VS:
How old is that, Scan?

ST:
Well, I don't rightly know. We didn't have it new, neither of us did. My brother brought it back from abroad. (He struggles across the room to his chair with it.) Yes, it's all right when you get it where you want to go, but it's when you've got to carry it a long way, you see. Well, he used to play this and I used to play the fiddle, you see. Only, you want to sit back so it's pitching this way, it's heavy you know, it'd slip off, you see. (Scan tries to play a couple of tunes with difficulty.) I'm afraid it's a long time since I played it. The trouble is, my wrists are getting weaker, it's a job to get it controlled. My brother brought it back from Germany. It's a good music. You won't wear it out. It's a lovely made instrument, no doubt. He bought it from a German that had his hand shot off, and it wasn't that old then. Well, it's not all that used now. (Scan demonstrates the length of the bellows, which were in fact longer than his reach.) You've always got room to play! But, I haven't played it for two or three years or more, but my brother used to play it a lot. It used to fill a big room. We used to play out in the pubs and we used to play for dancing. All those round dances, schottisches, waltzes, polkas, veletas and all that. We used to play them. My daughter used to play the piano, and my wife, when she was alive, she used to play the drums, and my brother used to play this, and my brother was a clarinet player as well. We'd got a very good variety, you see, there was a lot of dances around, miles out we used to travel, playing in the village halls and the like. There was a chap from Lewes, he'd come out on his motorbike, and he'd come out, scouting round to see if he could find where we were, and oh! he'd find us. (Scan tries to play the bandoneon again.) I used to be



able to play this as simple as could be. But it's no good trying to sell an instrument like this, people can't play them. Well, they would play them if they could.

Two of my brothers were concertina players, anglo players, and I always played an anglo as well, so there were three of us. This is the same action, you see, in and out, so that's how it came to us so easy. I've only seen one like this. I was in Brighton at a music shop, down Duke Street there, and one of these bandoneons was stood on the shelf. So I says to the man in there, I says, 'Could I just have a look at the bandoneon, mister?' and he says, 'What name did you call it?' I forget what name the bloke what sold him it had called it. But it wasn't, it was a bandoneon. I haven't been down there for a long time now, but the last time I was down there it was still stood upon the shelf, so I don't suppose he could sell it. But, I've never run up against anyone, not in the pubs or anywhere that was playing one of these. I've often thought I'd like to hear what they sound like, you know, at a distance.

Otherwise, my brothers and me, we went in for concertinas, because they was a very good music to play and they was small and light to carry about, not like these things. They're all right when you get them there. And you see that case. It's only got a small handle.

ABOVE:

Left to right: Mrs. Tester, Daisy Tester, Scan Tester c. 1935

VS:

I see there are numbers on all the keys.

ST:

Well, I think that's how they learned to play by music. My youngest brother, he knew music, he played with a band you see. I don't know a note of music.

VS:

Have you still got your fiddle?

ST:

Cor! I haven't played the fiddle for years. No, I give both my fiddles away to Reg Hall. Well, that's one of my fiddles he plays now. Well, one that I had. Of course, Reg and me, we used to play together at the Fox, Islington Fox. We played there for a year or two together. We used to play there, and then I give him these two fiddles; one was a really old fiddle. Then I got like that, that the strings left marks on my fingers. I played hours with me hands all numb, for dancing. I got fed up with it, it made my fingers ache. (Reg Hall and others ran a club, now unfortunately many years defunct, at the Fox, Islington Green. Many notable traditional performers appeared there, and Scan was a frequent visitor.) But I played the concertina as well. I've played for singing and dancing. I don't know if you've been in the Fox, in that room overhead, but ooh, we used to get it crowded.

VS:

When was this?

ST:

Oh, several years back. I haven't played there for several years. Well, I don't play out now. Well, I play up the old Stone Quarry (at Chelwood Gate) sometimes. I might have a fad and go out some fresh place of a Saturday night, but there isn't many fresh places that I could go to! You see, they know me. But all the same, I enjoy going out, especially if I can get to play with someone, say an accordeon, that's all right.



VS:

How did you start playing?

ST:

Well, my eldest brother played the concertina. He was a man when I was a boy, and of course, I picked the tunes up from him, and we played all the round dances.

VS:

You used to play for step-dancing as well, didn't you?

ST:

Oh yes, I played for step-dancing, used to do it too, one time. I was known for years for it, in the hop-picking time. My eldest brother and me, we used to take our concertinas and go up the hop country, and we used to go in the pub with our concertinas of a night, and go hop picking during the day. Never used to draw no picking money, not before we came home. We used to earn our living in the pubs. Oh yes, that wasn't no bother at all, and especially with us, because we used to go to a little place called Iden Green, and it was close to Benenden. About a mile from there in a little place called The Oak. We used to go up there. They'd got a nice sized room, and the landlord wanted us to go there of a Saturday night, the weekends. We used to get the place full up with hoppers.

My brother was a step dancer and all and we would take turns. One would dance and the other would play. I've had some happy times up there. Yes, The Oak. We used to go there across the fields, well footpaths. Ten minutes or quarter of an hour's walk. We usually used to go there every Saturday night, whilst we were up there. We never picked up our hop picking money until the forenoon of the day we were away. Oh, we

had several pounds to bring home.

VS:

How long would you stay up there?

ST:

Oh, we used to sometimes have a month. Mostly it was between three weeks and a month. It all depends how the hops were. You see, if they had cogates (a short type of hop developed in the Horsham area, no longer commonly grown) - hops, well, they were small, but ordinary hops, as long as your finger. It didn't take you long to pick a bushel. But you had to pick six bushels for a shilling.

VS:

How long would that take?

ST:

Oh, not long. We used to sit on the edge of the bin, one sit there, facing me, and I used to sit facing him. We used to have the old bine there and all you had to do was snatch them off and let them fall in. You'd be surprised how quick we got a lot. Of course, we was used to it you see, but you know, little kiddies, they used to give them an umbrella and you'd be surprised how quick they'd get that full up. Of course, hops, as soon as you press them down, as soon as you've taken your hand off up they come. You could never tread them down.

VS:

Where did all the pickers come from?

ST:

Some of them from London. You used to have three different lots. One farm was for Londoners, and another was for home-dwellers, and another for all round Sussex. But my brother, he used to pull poles for the home-dwellers, always. So, of course, we used to pick in their set, and they used to pay him a guinea a week, for pole-pullers, so he always had his money coming in. I used to have half a bin and then I used to help him pick his hops up, because you had to pick them up clean, and then every chance he got he used to slip and help me pick in the bin, and then we used to share the money. Of course, he had his guinea, that was standing money, that kept us well away, that guinea did, both of us. Yes, you could buy a pound of cake, current cake, for fourpence. Of course, I was young and, well, I lived on cake nearly. And some of the ladies, they came from round our country, round Nutley and Chelwood Common, so we never had any bother to get anything cooked. We used to have a roly-poly, suet pudding of a Sunday, and a pound and a quarter of beef steak each, fried, then we used to put the pudding in this gravy, mix it all together. Lovely. You couldn't get a better meal.

VS:

Where were you sleeping up there?

ST:

Oh, huts. They had huts, you know. I used to have a straw bed. They used to put some faggots down, and then put a thick layer of straw on top of it. Oh, you could sleep all right. There was no song about going to sleep. And you didn't dare go to bed unless you'd been to the pub.

ABOVE:

Scan and Reg Hall c. 1965

VS:
When was this, Scan?

ST:
This was years ago, before ever I was married. I was quite a young bloke then. Ah, that was the time to enjoy yourself! We used to get potatoes. We used to get out in the potato field and dig them up of a night. We'd always have plenty of potatoes.

You see, all the people that went hop picking then, they were used to it. On the farm they used to go, there was a married couple, come from Canterbury, and this lady, first time she come there, she was brought in long clothes. And she was a woman between thirty and forty, and she'd been there every year. The women used to cut a stocking off, get it up over their sleeve with a bit of elastic otherwise they would scratch their bare arms. Cor, you could see them sit there on the corner of the bin, and the old hops rolling over in. Some of them could pick hops, you know! They could get half a bin whilst I was looking at it. And we used to do pretty well because we went up there when we were pretty young. But it was more like a holiday. A lot of people went there for their holidays. There was no work attached to it, you was sitting down all day on the bin.

VS:
What was your other job at this time?

ST:
I used to work in the brickfields. My father was a brick merchant all his life. He'd got three brickfields, two at Horsted Keynes and one at Newick. He'd got two stockyards and a kilnyard, pipes, tiles and all like that. He used to serve J.J.Saunders and Sons at Brighton. One of the fields was just behind the Green Man there.

VS:
Was it a pub then?

ST:
Oh yes, he kept it.

VS:
He kept the pub and ran the brickfields?

ST:
Oh yes, that's how we first come here. And we had a fish hawking licence. We used to go out, to go to pubs and fairs with whelks and oysters. We were known by it all around Sussex.

VS:
Where did you get the fish, right out in the middle of the country like this?

ST:
Brighton. My father had forty years going back and forward to Brighton fish market, so he knew a bit about it. I used to know most of the fishermen in Brighton. There used to be an old chap there. He used to have a big box, ooh, about as long as that music (the piano), by a foot wide and he used to be what they call a picker-up. He used to pick up for these big fish buyers. They didn't pick the fish up. They just bought it and paid for it. He used to come along and put it in their places for them, but he used to fill his box up, and do you know, he had one of the finest fish-rounds in Brighton. He was quite an elderly man then, and I can see his old go-cart now, that he used to push his fish out on. It was just like a pair of old bike wheels on a frame, and a wire round to keep his baskets in there.

BELOW:
The Green Man, Horsted Keynes



ST:

You see, his fish was always fresh, and good, and cheap.

Well, we bought it and we didn't have to pay for it to come up by rail, because it came up with us, you see. There used to be a station here, well it used to be a junction and at that time of day it was very busy. We had a horse and cart come down to the station to meet us and we used to separate the stuff out into two or three carts and away we used to go. Oh, we were known for it for years, my father was, and we'd got gentleman's places. We had to get there for lunch and one of my brothers used to have to drive on in front and call at these places and get the stuff there ready for lunchtimes. Cor! I wonder what they'd think now. We used to have to go out all around, one, one way and one another, and sometimes, us boys, if we'd got a glut of herrings or anything like that, caught off Brighton anywhere. Well we'd got a herring deese (drying shed) across the Green man and we could keep them in there for very near a week, fresh. So we'd always got plenty of fresh herrings, and then we used to dry a lot for bloaters, make a penny each of them. Well, perhaps you'd get four or five for a penny, with buying a lot, like we used to buy. Well, you hang them up in the herring deese, and then sell 'em, penny a time. It don't sound a lot, but if you got half a cartload hanging up there, that's ever so many pennies. I don't know of anybody what dries their own stuff now, not country people, not round about here.

Yes, we used to do a good trade then. And now, well, you do see a fishmonger in the village, he comes from Haywards Heath, but I've told him. I says 'I don't know how you people make a living,' I says 'I've carried more stuff over one arm than you carry on your whole...pony cart!' I've carried that much over my arms in baskets that you had to stop and have a rest, you know, and have another go. Then if you went to two or three places and they didn't want none... Cor! But we used to travel all round the outskirts. We never used to go in the villages much. Well, round the outskirts, well, they don't go in a shop to buy their stuff. If they got some fish that they knew was all right come to the door, well, it saved them going out. We used to sell a lot of stuff like that. And now... I don't know...I suppose they don't get any.

VS:

Has Horsted Keynes changed much over the years?



ST:

No, well, down this way, what they call Ham's Land, there's been a bit of building, but not much, but otherwise the village is practically the same.

VS:

Have there always been just the two pubs?

ST:

Yes, just the two, but now there's the British Legion, just here, that's extra from what there used to be. I use that more than anywhere when I want to get a drink.

VS:

Do you ever play in there?

ST:

I have done, but it isn't very often. Really, I expect to play in this village less than anywhere. They very often want me to come and get my music. I don't like to disappoint them or anything like that, but I like to get out somewhere. As a rule of a Saturday night I go up the Stone Quarry. I always get a good crowd up there, and I don't mind as long as I get a good crowd to play to. I don't like sitting playing to myself. But I like to get out.

VS:

Did you play anywhere else in London apart from The Fox?

ST:

Yes, there's a pub across the street, I forget the name of it. It used to be kept by a lady and her son. Old Reg Hall and me played there for some time, till one night there was a row in there, and the pots and glasses flew...and so did we! And we never went there no more. We went to the old Fox. There was one pub I used to go to of a Sunday dinner-time with old Reg. It's a mile or two out from Islington. Reg used to go there Sunday dinnertimes. There was Irish fiddlers. They'd got a little stage there. Of course we got to know these blokes and we used to go there. Cor....what was their names?

VS:

Michael Gorman?

ST:

Gorman! yes that's the name. And...oh, some chap got an accordeon. He was a well known chap.

Old Reg comes down here to me sometimes. I like him to come along. We played together for so long. We knew every note, note for note. He used to play the accordeon, well, a lot of people calls it an accordeon, but actually it's a melodeon.

VS:

And what did I hear about your jazz band?

ST:

Oh yes, I had a jazz band, what was it called now?... Tester's Imperial! That's right. And it was all my own family. Well, me and my brothers, we always been used to playing for dances. We used to play all the old set dances, Lancers, quadrilles and The Albert. Oh, we

LEFT: Scan's last residence, 1 Victoria Cottages, Horsted Keynes

used to play the whole issue. And at that time of day, there was always certain ones in the room were real set dancers, and you had to play a certain amount to keep them coming. Cor, I used to like playing that time of day because nearly everybody was a round dancer, and as soon as ever you started you'd get a floor full up. I used to like playing them better than I did any. But a lot of round dancers didn't know the sets, so you used to have to be careful or you could make it bad that way.

VS:

How many would there be in the band?

ST:

Oh, only about two or three of us. Well, when my wife was alive, she was our drummer, and she was pretty good too, because she'd done a lot of it. Then two of my brothers, myself and Daisy. Daisy always thumping the old piano. That's a good old piano there when it was bought. That was thirty-eight guineas, pre-war days. But I didn't pay that for it. I bought it second-hand off a young lady that was going abroad. She come up to me one night when I was living in Chelwood, and asked me if I would buy it. I says 'I'll buy it if the price is right', and I gave her £11 for it. It's a good instrument, but I expect it wants toning up a bit. I used to have it toned up three times a year, when we used to do a lot of playing. I haven't had it done now for, oh, a twelvemonth, I expect. Well, it don't get played often enough, now and again when Daisy gets the fad, but by the time she's been going all day, she don't want much of it. Sometimes she'll say 'Going to have a tune, Dad?' I never refuse her, I like it myself.

VS:

What do you do with yourself during the day these days?

ST:

Well, I've got a bit of an allotment up the village, and I go up there and spar about. That's all I do. I don't work for nobody, I don't want the money. I go up there. There's plenty wants doing, but I don't do it all in one day. I've got a chair up there, and I just have a go, and then I think to myself 'Well, I'm going to have a smoke now.' I sit down in the sun. Yes, I never worry. I think 'Well, there's another day left, and if I don't finish it, someone else will'. I never worry about it. It's surprising what you can grow. But I want manure now, and that's expensive stuff. I wouldn't mind buying a couple of loads, if it was any good. But that last load I had, I didn't know I had it. Well, it's only wet hay. You can't farm like that. If you go on taking stuff out of the ground, you want to put something back, whatever gardening it is. What I do, I've got an old bin, made of eight foot lengths of galvanised, and I chuck everything in there. Every little while I get my fork out and turn one end in, and, do you know, that's damn good stuff when you get it out and dig it in.



BEAT
INFLATION!
Subscribe to
TRADITIONAL
MUSIC

ABOVE: Scan's daughter Daisy with her husband Archie Sherlock at the door of 1 Victoria Cottages