

Celebration of a Thankful Village

By Warwick Lane

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A TRAVELLING music enthusiast is to lead a celebration of villages where people fought in the first world war and all survived.

Mr Darren Hayman will perform music inspired by trips to Thankful Villages at Maplebeck Village Hall tomorrow, from 7.30pm.

Thankful Villages saw all of their men return alive from the 1914-18 war. Maplebeck is one of four such villages in Nottinghamshire.

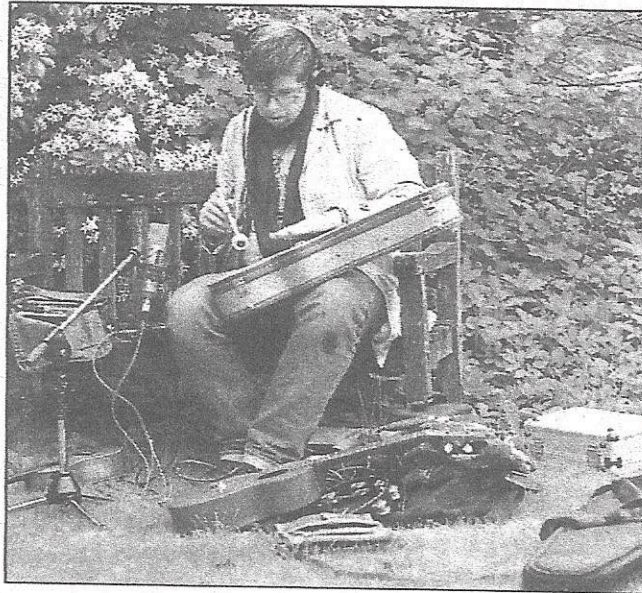
Mrs Rachel Gardner helped research the village's involvement in the war and found that Bill Henfry, Percy Whitworth and Jim Wombell all returned alive.

She was one of the residents interviewed by Mr Hayman for the project when he visited earlier this year.

He went to each of the 54 villages nationally and made a piece of music and a short film for each one, focusing on village life.

His pieces take on several forms, ranging from instrumentals inspired by the location, and interviews with residents put to music, to new songs with personalised lyrics.

"I was overwhelmed by the village when I first came," Mr Hayman said of Maplebeck.



MUSICIAN Mr Darren Hayman will perform his celebration of first world war Thankful Villages in Maplebeck tomorrow.

"It is the one now where I know the most people.

"Maplebeck was particularly friendly and when I returned there were a few people I knew and a lot of them care about their history.

"Personally I am not too interested in the war itself, but finding the stories and discovering life in villages as small as these particularly interests me."

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starts a conversation about them," he said.

"We have tried to get in touch with people from other Thankful Villages and it would be nice to see some of them represented.

"Darren came to the village and interviewed a few of us so it will be interesting to see what he has created from his visit."

Maplebeck is one of just a handful in the country classed as a doubly thankful village, after its men also got through the second world war without fatalities.

Cromwell and Wigsley are the other places in the Advertiser area classed as being thankful. The other in Nottinghamshire is Wysall.

Tickets for the Thankful Village event are £10 for adults and free for under-18s.

They can be bought at www.wegotickets.com/event/359947

Mr Hayman, who lives in London, chose Maplebeck for his opening show because it was one of the few he visited that had a village hall suitable for hosting such an event.

Organiser Mr Derek Sayer, of Maplebeck, said it promised to be an interesting evening to see what had been inspired by going to the villages.

"It is a great idea and is an event that gets people talking about thankful villages and

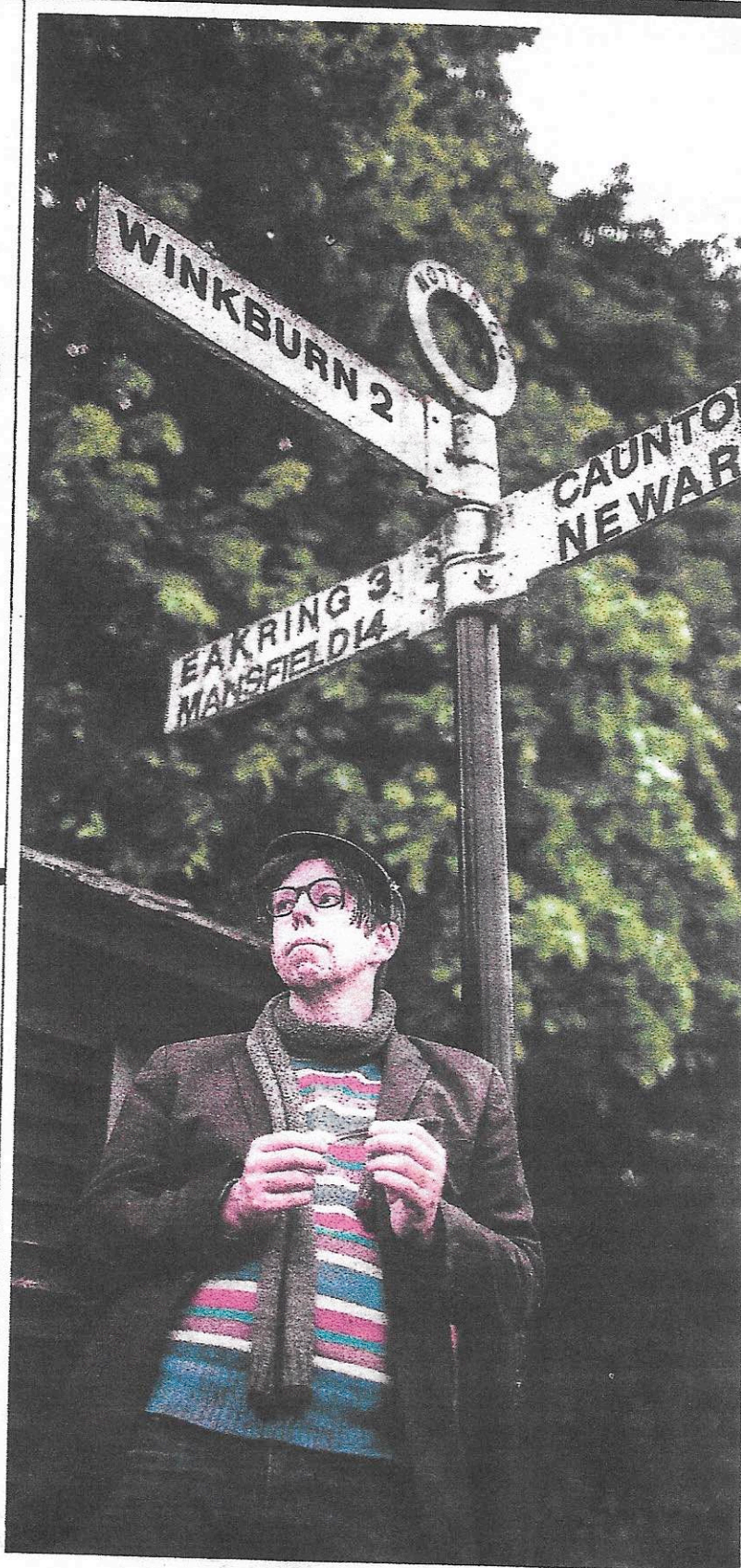
Next stop Culpho. Population: 40

Two years, three albums and 54 stops ... Darren Hayman's latest project takes him on a tour of the 'thankful villages' whose men all came back safely from the first world war. **Alexis Petridis** joins the musician in Maplebeck

The village hall in Maplebeck, Nottinghamshire, may be many things - its packed calendar of future events includes a yoga class, a book group, a wine tasting, and a day in which children can learn how to make poppies out of copper for Remembrance Sunday - but a regular stop on the nation's gig circuit it clearly isn't. You can tell by their notion of publicity. "Tickets are £10. Please will you start persuading people to come," concluded the post on the village website announcing tonight's show, perhaps a more plaintive approach to gig promotion than is usual.

Still, it seems to have worked. Inside, it's standing room only, although the assembled crowd doesn't seem much like the kind of audience that usually turn out for gigs by cult indie musicians once beloved of John Peel. A lot of them look around retirement age, and a few substantially older than that: a number have eschewed the beer and

'You occasionally get an over-protective vicar' ... Darren Hayman in Maplebeck



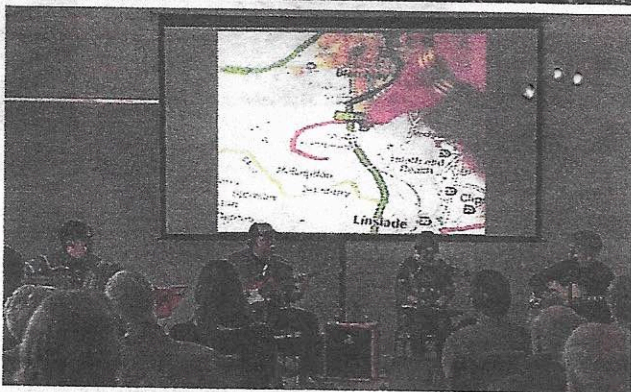
wine on offer in favour of cups of tea. Nevertheless, Darren Hayman, whose gig it is, seems unfazed. His current musical project is called Thankful Villages, its name and inspiration taken from the term coined by writer Arthur Mee for those villages in Britain where all those who served in the first world war returned home alive: one of them was Maplebeck, making it a fitting launch venue.

Besides, performing in a village hall in rural Nottinghamshire seems strangely in keeping with the slightly esoteric nature of Hayman's latterday career. In the 90s, he was the frontman of Hefner, a nervy-sounding, perpetually lovelorn indie band, but since the band's demise in 2002 his musical path has become ever more idiosyncratic, defined by a series of ambitious projects that blur music and research into odd, arcane corners of British history: albums based on 17th-century English civil war songs and on William Morris's 1899 book of verse Chants for Socialists, a beautiful collection of instrumentals inspired by the various fates of Britain's lidos, a trilogy of albums exploring different aspects of Essex's past - from the rise of Harlow new town to the 16th-century witch trials.

He says he prefers being thought of as "a kind of British eccentric" to the image he had in Hefner, which he smilingly characterises as "why doesn't that guy with the glasses get a girlfriend?"

Thankful Villages may well be Hayman's most ambitious project yet. After reading Mee's book series The King's England, he came up with the idea of visiting all 54 villages and writing a song or a piece of music, as well as making a short film and a watercolour painting in each. "I liked the sound of the phrase 'Thankful Villages' and it appealed to ideas I have about randomness in music, about setting myself tasks. I could have just said I'd gone to 54 villages and written a song. So, in the first few, there's quite a lot of footage of me with a guitar and a microphone."

The idea set him off on a curious journey, that's still ongoing: the 54 songs are to be split over three albums, the second due next year, the third in 2018. He's been received in the villages with varying degrees of warmth, from places where his explanation about what he was up to was met with a certain froideur - "You occasionally get a slightly over-protective vicar who goes, 'I don't think anyone here would want to talk to you'" - to places where the arrival of anyone, let alone a travelling musician, was greeted with excitement. In Culpho, Suffolk (population 40), Hayman was accosted by a woman who



wondered what was going on because she heard a car stopping.

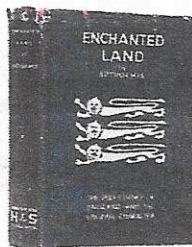
"One thing I've learned a lot about is the decline of the British village," he says. "I was in East Norton in Leicestershire, and walking down the high street. You could see all the things the buildings used to be: the police station, the school, the Methodist chapel. The arrival of cars really changed things, and maybe the Beeching cuts to railways in the 60s. And there's a shortage of young people."

Even the villages that ostensibly seem to be thriving have problems: one of the thankful villages is Upper Slaughter in the Cotswolds, well-heeled and home to a luxury hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant: "A lot of the villagers there were talking about the percentage of the houses that were non-residential, holiday homes."

Whether you view it as an unwitting eulogy for a way of life or not, the music Hayman has come up with is impressive, not least in its diversity. Some of the tracks are abstract and littered with field recordings - what Hayman calls "wordless music that describes a sense of place" - while others are raw and personal: "the mood of the first album goes up and down, because my marriage was breaking up while I was making it, and if you're travelling for four hours on your own to visit somewhere, it gives you a lot of time to think."

There are versions of local folk songs and instrumentals topped off with Hayman's readings of Mee's guidebooks and recordings of interviews with residents. In Stocklinch, Somerset, an 84-year-old

The returned ... from top, soldiers from the 'thankful village' of Herodsfoot, Cornwall; Hayman and his band perform in Maplebeck; Enchanted Land by Arthur Mee



i thankfulvillages.co.uk
Darren Hayman
tour details:
caughtbytheriver.net

called Ros talks about the "death" of one of the village's two churches, while a resident of Cromwell in Nottinghamshire recalls a plane crash in a nearby river that killed a group of young air cadets in the mid-70s.

The project resembles a fascinating occult history of the British countryside, filled with largely forgotten rural stories, not least the curious fact that many thankful villages initially chose to play down their good fortune. "So even put up war memorials for people who were born in the village but live somewhere else," says Hayman. "It's like they wanted to be part of the collective grief that was a stage of the war, they were worried about looking cowardly because no one died."

Some tales Hayman has dug up are haunting and bleak: the funeral of four young boys killed in a lime kiln in the Dorset village of Langton Herring "bourn to their graves by 18 children dressed in white" Others are comic, including the saga of Knowlton in Kent, which claimed to be "the brave village in England" after winning a 1919 newspaper competition to discover the village that had sent the greatest proportion of its inhabitants to enlist in the first world war. They won a 17ft stone monument, but were later accused of fiddling the figures by including men who worked at a nearby manor house.

The crowd in Maplebeck lap that one up. In fact, however unlikely a venue the village hall appears, they seem genuinely captivated by Hayman's performance: the hazily impressionistic films, his engaging introductions, the music. It's weird, says Hayman. He struggled to get a record company interested in the idea, and, in fairness you can picture the reaction of a label when Hayman bowed up, suggesting they release three albums of music about tiny villages linked by the fact that something *didn't* happen there.

Then again, his visits to thankful villages do keep unearthing fascinating stuff, even if it isn't always as it seems. He visited Colwinston in Wales, where every New Year's Day they play collyball, a sport that involves rolling swedes down a hill. "I'd researched it and there was all this stuff about the ancient sport of collyball, how it had started with cauliflowers, but they disintegrated, so they used swedes. I thought: this is perfect. I was talking a guy there and said, 'How long have you been doing this?' He said, 'Oh, it started about four years ago'. But it's on the website that it was ancient. And he goes, 'Oh, yeah, we just put that on the website. We thought that might get people in.' Which I suppose it has."