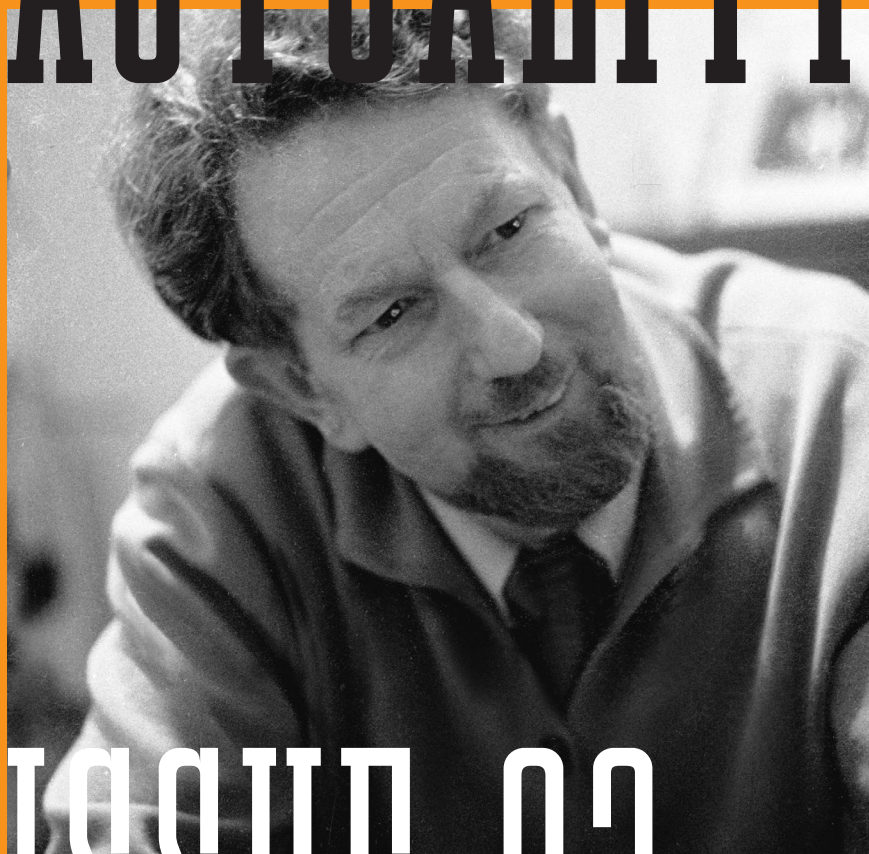


ACTUALITY



ISSUE 03

April 2019



The Magazine of
The Charles Parker
Archive Trust

ISSN 2516-1482

This is the third edition of *Actuality*. It comes out in time for the 16th annual Charles Parker Day in 2019, which marks his centenary. He was born on 5 April 1919, and our event in Bournemouth this year - the same venue as the first back in 2004 - falls felicitously on what would have been his 100th birthday.

INTRO

Charles had pioneered the manipulation of sound on radio, a painstaking craft which he practically invented, slicing magnetic tape to the precise millimetre, chiselling out slivers of sound to embellish programmes he made with the ear of a perfectionist. How he would relish today's world, when he would still be up late into the night, using today's computers to hone his radio features to the last millisecond.

How too Charles would have enjoyed listening to the entrants for the annual prize named after him, and how delighted he would have been to come back to his home town of Bournemouth. The bulk of this *Actuality* is devoted to him. His daughter Sara, now a distinguished radio producer in her own right, describes what an inspiration he was to her, and Peter Cox describes his furiously active life before, during and after his time at the BBC.

The centre spread of this issue of *Actuality* is devoted to the programme for the April 5th 2019 Parker Day, an exciting set of sessions compiled once more and compered by the tireless Andy Cartwright. This year we have two special extras. Peggy Seeger will not only kick us off in conversation with the radio engineer Gillian Ford,

describing how they made the *Radio Ballads*, but she will also, still singing over sixty years since she orchestrated the first *Radio Ballad* in 1957, be giving a concert in Bournemouth that evening. We're also lucky enough to have a preview from the makers of a film about that first programme, *The Ballad of John Axon*, which we hope will be shown soon on BBC Four.

We end on a sad note by recording the death of one of the early Midlands folk pioneers, Eileen Whiting, who was one of the founding members of Birmingham's Grey Cock Folk Club and Banner Theatre. She had participated too in Charles's great work of 1962, writing and mounting pioneering actuality-based plays on behalf of Arnold Wesker's Centre 42 project. Eileen was for many years a Friend of the Charles Parker Archive, the Trust that puts together each year both this magazine and the Charles Parker Day.



Eileen Whiting

CHARLES THE INSPIRATION

By Sara Parker

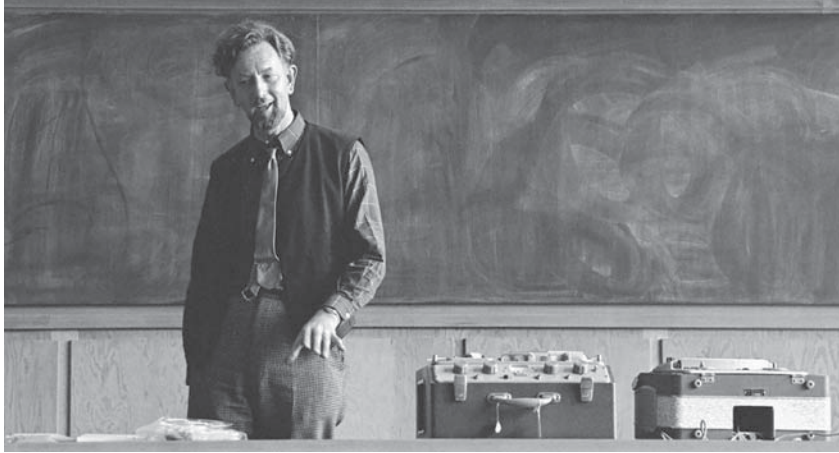


I was in Italy when my father died very suddenly in 1980 of a stroke - and he was such a powerful force in my life and those of many others that it was difficult to acknowledge such a burning light could be extinguished. Indeed it wasn't until nearly three decades later that I fully came to terms with the fact I would never see, hug or argue with him again.

It was 2008 and I was making a BBC Radio 4 programme to mark the 50th broadcast anniversary of the first Radio Ballad when in the Charles Parker Archive I came across recordings of his lectures and thoughts. For the first time, I realised he had left me a genetic gift - a passion for radio and the desire to make programmes.

My dad was born in Bournemouth. He expressed a certain shame at coming from such a genteel place of blue-rinse retirement, although he loved the sea and joined the sea cadets as a lad. His father, a merchant seaman, had died young and so he and his sister were brought up by his mum - my grandmother. They were not well off but he was a clever boy and gained a scholarship to grammar school, leaving to pursue a scientific career in metallurgy. Then the war intervened.

Charles rarely spoke about his World War II experiences, except to recount with a wry smile the story of nearly destroying King Farouk's pink summer palace during exercises in the Mediterranean, when a live rather than a blank shell was mistakenly loaded in the firing tube. Years later I learnt the type of bravery, particularly for a very tall man who was slightly claustrophobic, needed to be confined in a submarine in the line of enemy fire. As an officer, he secured a place at Cambridge after the war to read history where he spent a couple of terms in a whole body plaster cast after he broke his back. He had fallen from a roof after trying to impress his mother-in-law by fixing her guttering. But it didn't stop him from enjoying life in Cambridge, and my mother used to take him punting. She said later that if he had fallen in, he would have sunk like a stone.



During my childhood my dad always seemed to be working, painstakingly editing quarter inch tape in a tiny walled-off area next to my brother's bedroom, or reading and making notes in large blue files. To my chagrin, he was inevitably late for school events or productions, arriving with a large brown leather briefcase full of these files and papers. Tall, lanky and sometimes dishevelled, he had 101 other ways to embarrass me, including singing folk songs loudly on top of the bus or having a heated argument - usually political - with anyone who came to dinner.

We lived in a rented flat in a gracious Georgian house in Harborne most of my childhood, caught between a comfortable middle class existence and general shortage of money, even on his BBC producer's salary. Charles never tired of quoting the Bible and Marx in equal measure, telling me 'that property was theft' and giving me an Engels pamphlet to read on women's rights when I was 12. Whether as a reflection of

his politics or because they were cheap, we had a succession of clapped-out East German cars such as Wartburgs which were always breaking down and difficult to repair.

Sunday dinner was nearly always a memorable and sometimes difficult affair with a variety of guests from the Bishop of Birmingham one week, to a homeless man whom Charles had rescued off the street the next. A variety of people would turn up to stay, often at very little notice. I usually had to give up my bed to accommodate them and remember one occasion when playwright Arnold Wesker complained of a disturbed night, worried by the sound of my hamster on its wheel. I learnt a great deal from these visitors such as what 'living in sin' meant, how to play a few notes on the violin (from Dave Swarbrick), and that I could be a 'priggish' child from a rising theatre director.

My mother was very long-suffering even when family holidays were overtaken by Charles's work. On one

occasion he invited Norma, an interviewee from the radio ballad about the devastating effects of polio, to come with us to Wales. It was my mother however who had to help Norma from her wheelchair up the narrow winding B and B stairs to bed.

Charles had a great generosity of spirit but it didn't always extend to his family. Having spoken to my brother Matthew about his memories, I realise I had the golden years of his parenting. He even let me have a share in a pony called Rascal when I passed the 11 plus, arguing that it couldn't be that bourgeois as Engels rode to hounds and provided I expected nothing except a hundred bales of hay for my birthday and Christmas, we could just about afford it. What he had failed to realise was that I would insist on taking the pony on a family canal holiday (I think it was a freebie or at least at reduced rate). I argued I could

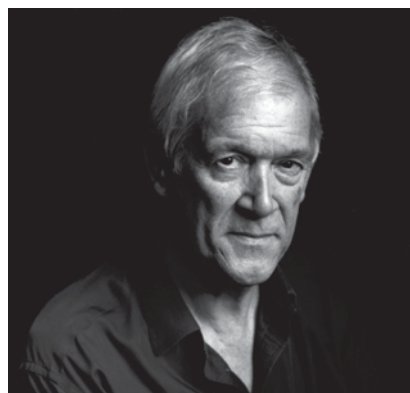
ride along the canal tow path while the rest of the family travelled in the barge. The inconvenience must have been considerable. Rascal and I had to be dragged out of the canal several times after we fell in and overnight stops were complicated by the need to find board and lodging for the pony.

Whether this level of indulgence was a good parental trait I am not sure but it is typical of my memory of him. Even when he lost his temper or was in misery from a debilitating migraine or depression, I loved and respected him for his inherent kindness and humanity. Even when I got older and he refused to let me listen to the latest pop music or have a television in the house because it was 'exploitation of the masses', I recognised he was an exceptional and very special person. Yet it wasn't until after his death when I started making radio programmes myself, that I fully realised why.

"I was brought up to believe that everywhere north of Winchester was an industrial wilderness of wife-beaters and insanitary slums, and my formal education did little to disabuse me of such an attitude to the true quality of my countrymen."

CHARLES PARKER

BEFORE DUNKIRK CHARLES PARKER



By Peter Cox

THE BATTLE OF DUNKIRK

To those who knew him at the BBC, Charles gave the impression of a classic privately-educated middle class upbringing. Not so. He was the son of a disabled railway clerk who tramped the streets of Bournemouth selling paraffin from a handcart. His mother had been in domestic service and kept a boarding house after Charles's father died when he was seven. But he won a scholarship to the local grammar school, and at 18, university out of the question, he got a job in a metallurgy lab and studied in the evening for an engineering degree. He was about to start his third year in September 1939 when everything changed.

As a boy he'd loved sailing, worked in a Solent boatyard in the holidays, and joined the RNVR, the naval reserve, so was called up immediately war was declared. He started as a signalman on a minesweeper, which saw action at Dunkirk - which left him with mid-life nightmares because the vessel couldn't pick up burned and drowning Indian soldiers from a ship alongside that had taken a direct hit. That year he was commissioned as a sub-lieutenant, and switched to submarines, an odd choice for a man well over six foot. Constantly bent double, he earned the nickname Dip-Rod.

He saw action in the Mediterranean in the notoriously dangerous 'Bomb Alley', keeping the crucial island of Malta supplied.

In 1943 he was promoted onto one of the subs that towed the midget submarines that threaded through fiercely defended Norwegian fjords to cripple the great battleship Tirpitz. That won him the DSC, and he became the only ex-RNVR officer to command a sub. When the war ended he won a place to study History at Cambridge, and upon graduating 'with astonishment' he joined the BBC in November 1948.



“His story is that ‘of a genuinely honest man who, largely by accident found himself confronting Reality. All artists seek such a confrontation: in paint, in print, in film - but very few pursue it to the end with such unrelenting persistence or at such personal cost. He is indeed a man to be remembered.’”

PHILIP DONNELLAN

“More than anyone I’ve known in life, Charles turned himself around. He became one of the most generous people I’ve ever known, bending over backward to share himself, his time, his ideas, his skills.”

PEGGY SEEGER

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

The Centenary Charles Parker Day

Friday 5th April 2019

Executive Business Centre,
Bournemouth University,
89 Holdenhurst Road,
Bournemouth,
BH8 8EB

10:20

Registration and Coffee / Tea

10:40

Welcome from **Mary Kalemkerian**, Chair of the Charles Parker Archive Trust and introduction from **Seán Street** and **Andy Cartwright**, organisers of the Charles Parker Day 2019.

10:45

From Bournemouth to Birmingham and Back

Seán Street offers some personal reflections on Charles Parker and his day.

11:00

Stormy Weather - Singing the Fishing in the Studio

Peggy Seeger, one of the original creators of the Radio Ballads and studio manager **Gillian Ford** talk to **Peter Cox** about how they made the radio ballads in the studio 60 years ago.

11:45

The Charles Parker Prize Nominations

Chair of this year's judging panel, **Simon Elmes** and BBC Radio 4 Commissioning Editor **Mohit Bakaya** introduce the shortlisted nominees for this year's special Centenary Charles Parker Prize for the Best Student Audio Feature.

12:15

Audio Content Fund Launch

Sam Bailey (Managing Director - Audio Content Fund) and **Will Jackson** (Director - Audio Content Fund, and Managing Director - AudioUK) announce a new scheme supported by the UK Government to provide funding for original radio and audio production. The ACF is responsible for distributing a grant of up to £3 million, which will be used to produce distinctive, public service radio programming that is traditionally more difficult to support on a commercial basis (such as documentaries, comedy and drama).

12:45

LUNCH (sponsored by the Audio Content Fund)

13:45

Ballad of the Blade

Andrew Wilkie from the Prison Radio Association talks to BBC Three's **Andrew Ephah**, the composer / sound designer **Jon Nicholls** and Editor / Producer **Hugh Levinson** - from the production team behind this moving 'ballad' feature, broadcast last year on BBC Radio 4 and National Prison Radio.

14:30

Dad

Sara Parker and **Matthew Parker** reflect on growing up with a radio producer obsessed with actuality and editing.

14:50

New Listening

BBC Radio 4 Commissioning Editor **Mohit Bakaya** explores the ways in which a linear radio station like BBC Radio 4 is engaging with younger audiences.

15:20

TEA / COFFEE

15:35

It's all about the Folk

Why was Charles so keen on folk music? **Ken Hall** examines why so many of his programmes feature folk and explores the legacy of the original songs from the Radio Ballads written by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger.

16:05

The Charles Parker

Prize Winners

Simon Elmes and **Mohit Bakaya** announce the five winners of this year's special prize - a transmission on BBC Radio 4 and the winner of the overall Gold Charles Parker Prize.

16:25

The Runaway Train and the Radio Revolution

Andrew Johnston, **Martyn**

Ashworth and **Ian Stuart Lynn**

show their new film which explores both the railway accident that became the subject of the very first radio ballad and the significance of this new innovative radio form.

17:30

Conference Ends

CHARLES AT THE BBC (1948-1972)

By Peter Cox

Before the Radio Ballads (1948-53)

After Cambridge Charles joined the BBC in November 1948, and the following March started as a jobbing producer, creating talks that would appeal to North American audiences. He was one of an eclectic mix of graduates who'd come through World War II, such as Tony Benn, under the engaging Australian broadcaster Peggy Broadhead, who gave them all free rein: 'They'd come through their own doors'. Charles was obsessive about his ideas, about sound, about

chasing perfection. As soon as he could, he wangled one of the new mobile tape recorders from a friend at CBS, clunky but liberating: he could now go solo. Broadhead soon got his number. Literally - she'd phone him at work late in the evening, certain he'd still be there: 'Go home Charles, you'll ruin it, GO HOME.' She indulged him, mostly, although sadly that didn't extend to allow him to make *Revolt of the Machine*, about an army of Hoovers advancing on New York City. Every week during 1951 he was producing a 15-minute feature

that would go out live, and so committed was he that in a single fortnight he clocked up 120 hours' unpaid overtime. His release from this treadmill was his promotion to become a senior features producer in Birmingham in January 1954, working for the supportive Denis Morris and David Gretton. This brought about the most liberating and fertile period of his career.

Birmingham and the Radio Ballads (1954-64)

During his first four years in Birmingham he made 42 major radio features, nearly one a month. Among them were programmes that sowed seeds for the Radio Ballads: a miner going to work, Lowestoft trawler men, a gipsy from Wisbech where his own father had been brought up. It was while researching a programme on experimental theatre that he first met Ewan MacColl, who had first worked for the BBC in Manchester in 1934, despite (or because) Ewan was on an unofficial BBC blacklist for his communist sympathies. Despite the gulf between their views on politics and the Almighty, which would narrow rapidly in future years, they hit it off because they both wanted to make more imaginative radio. Ewan was still with the travelling Theatre Workshop, which he'd founded with his first wife Joan Littlewood, but was starting to branch out, initially into the Folk Revival he helped nurture. It was in July 1957 that Charles wrote to Ewan a letter that began 'Dear Ewan, I have an idea for a 'Radio Ballad' that is right up your street...'

It was. Late that October the two go up to the Edgeley

railway yards in Stockport to make recordings of steam trains and the men who'd worked with John Axon, a train driver killed when he refused to leave the cab of a goods train whose antiquated brakes had failed. Two planned days turned into a fortnight because they were besotted with sounds and voices. Back home in Beckenham Ewan worked on creating a script, but soon realised that so rich was the 'actuality', the spoken words of real railwaymen, that he made the radical decision to let them do the talking, folding their voices in with songs he would write that reflected their experience, using old folk tunes he'd absorbed as a boy. At first Charles was perplexed and doubtful, but he was soon won over, and once Ewan's young lover Peggy Seeger arrived back from Europe they had someone who quickly learnt to assemble and orchestrate the music for a miscellaneous group of jazz and folk musicians and singers, conducted by Peggy with the long neck of the 12-string banjo that would set the piece's driving rhythm. That Peggy at 22 had never done anything like it did not daunt her in the slightest, an attribute she shared with Charles and Ewan.

Despite the terrible problems Charles had with the archaic studio equipment, notably potentially crippling variations in recording speed, which required him to illicitly work six weeks of nights in his office, and the initial disapproval of BBC colleagues (it's a mess, Charles) and the misgivings of his bosses, he had *The Ballad of John Axon* ready to go out by July 1958. The critics were captivated.

Over the next six years they made seven more programmes. Although the next, *Song of a Road*, about the building of the first stretch of the M1, led to arguments about method - Ewan wanted sole control of the script, which Charles had altered because he feared his bosses' reaction to its total dependence on working-class voices - they were eventually resolved in time for *Singing the Fishing*. It was awash with the sound of seagulls and spray, evoking the fast-disappearing era of the great herring fleets of the North Sea. Ewan's songs reached a new level of skill and imagination, Charles's painstaking brilliance in his weaving of sounds and voices, retrofitting not just a half-second of silence but the right silence, and a new more streamlined studio recording method. *Singing the Fishing* won the prestigious Italia Prize for Radio Features in 1960.

Charles after the Radio Ballads (1964-72)

The five remaining programmes, ending in 1964 with the emotionally gripping *Travelling People*, were made against the background of a plummeting BBC Radio budget, sucked away to ensure BBC TV's survival in the face of the shockingly successful populism of the new advert-funded ITV. The effect of the series' enforced end on Charles was severe. He had so committed himself to the Radio Ballad format and method that he wanted to go on making them for ever. But they were very expensive by Radio standards, and his bosses were

right at the cost end of the quality:cost spectrum. Charles had become less 'productive', and was moreover determined to tackle subjects that made the BBC hierarchy uneasy: such as revealing the grim treatment of the institutionalised blind; views of Londonderry Catholics and Protestants before the violence erupted; ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka; and the treatment of the so-called Soledad Brother George Jackson in San Quentin prison.

These deliberately rebelled against a new radio features orthodoxy which disliked intrusive music and particularly demanded an expert narrator to give an authority to the piece. This was anathema to Charles, who wanted the listener to make up their own minds. Increasing tensions over his refusal to compromise led to his being effectively demoted, reduced to touring the country finding 'ordinary' voices to read the documents and letters that made up the compelling 26-week *Long March of Everyman*, made, gallingly, by other BBC producers. Charles and his television alter-ego and friend Philip Donnellan had led a strike against a *Broadcasting in the Seventies* document which signalled that imaginative producers in both Radio and TV would be brought to heel, a roll-call of talent headed by Ken Loach. His card had been marked, and Charles was sacked on 31 December 1972. Jobless at 52: the voices raised in the Press complaining about his dismissal might mollify him, but they would not feed his family.



MP Phillip Whitehead suggested that Parker's main fault seems to be that he wishes to go on producing creative programmes rather than being a cog in a machine creating mass-produced ones.

HANSARD 1972, WHEN HIS SACKING IS DISCUSSED IN PARLIAMENT.

CHARLES AFTER TH

By Peter Cox



Towards the end of his working life Charles began to achieve more outside the BBC than he did within it. From 1963-71 Ewan and Peggy's weekly 'Critics Group' in Beckenham inspired him to set up the Birmingham and Midlands Folk Centre and the Grey Cock Folk Club, begun at the Roebuck in 1967. According to Dave Rogers, founder of Banner Theatre, Charles's lectures there blew his mind, among a 'ragbag of anarchists, leftists and liberals'. They took two coachloads each year to the Critics' Group annual Festival of Fools, which led them to try their own productions. A 19th century strike of Kidderminster carpet weavers, a powerful piece about racism, and in 1973 a staged version of Big Hewer, Collier Laddie. The Radio Ballad style was emulated in their live performances, semi-staged, using actuality, original and re-imagined folk song, and audience participation. It toured South Wales miners' welfare clubs, a successful echo of the pioneering work

E BBC (1972-1980)

of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl's Theatre Workshop post-war productions there. They followed that with Saltley Gate, a piece about the defiance of the 'flying pickets' that closed a crucial gas and coke plant during the 1972 miners' strike. Charles was the elder statesman in a group of twenty-somethings, pitching in with just as much eagerness, though his voice and gravitas restricted him, chafing, to playing authority figures.

Charles's only regular income after the BBC came from a weekly lecture series he gave on Actuality at the Polytechnic of Central London, in the media department run by an admirer, Tony Schooling. His students tended to split into those bowled over by him, and those alienated by his vehement disdain for pop music. As Schooling said: 'I like teaching ... it's even better if you can get a genius to do it for you.' Once Parker was challenged on his assertion that everyone

has a worthwhile story inside them, so he told a student to go outside and 'bring in the first person you meet'. He then interviewed in front of them all an unremarkable middle-aged lady who did indeed have a remarkable life story to tell.

His pace never let up. On 7 December 1980 he was up before 5 as usual to drive to London to give his class. Back after lunch he had a Banner meeting with Dave Rogers, then onto an evening rehearsal of a new Banner production Steel. Afterwards he was coming back from a pub meeting nearby when he cried out that he couldn't see. An ambulance took him to hospital where he died of an aneurysm the next day. When Melvyn Bragg was asked a few weeks later which figure most important to him had died that year - the year John Lennon died - he said: Charles Parker, a brilliant innovator who had died unheeded. We at the Charles Parker Archive Trust are making up for that lack of heed.

The Charles Parker Trust was founded in 1982. This is what we do:

The Charles Parker Day celebrates the radio feature, past present and future, and was initiated in 2004 by Professor Seán Street, at Bournemouth University.

The Charles Parker Prize for Radio Features is an annual award, open to UK students studying creative audio feature-making offering opportunities to the next generation of programme makers.

Digitisation of the Parker Archive, in partnership with the Library of Birmingham, safeguarding over 5000 original recordings, production files and letters.

Availability: advising and encouraging the use of the archive material in projects with companies such as Falling Tree, Cast Iron Radio and Rural Media.

Friends of the CPA are tremendously important and valuable to the Trust.

Becoming a member entitles you to a free copy of the new magazine and back copies of the Annual Report, a special concessionary rate for Charles Parker Day, plus the opportunity to have a say in the future of the Charles Parker Archive.

You can become a Friend by completing the form on the opposite page, which is also available on the Charles Parker website: www.cpatrust.org.uk

The Trustees - We are fortunate to have Trustees with a wide range of experience and skills in radio and elsewhere. They are:

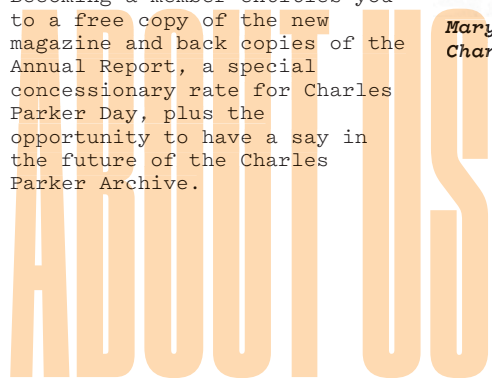
Mary Kalemkerian (Chair), Ian M Parr (Hon. Sec.), Andy Cartwright, Helen Lloyd, Jimmy Ewing, Mark Newman, Pam Bishop, Peter Cox, Phil Maguire.

Actualty Magazine is edited by Peter Cox, assisted by Sheelagh Neuling and Phil Maguire. Design and art direction by Jamie Ellul's Supple Studio.

Our heartfelt thanks to the **Library of Birmingham** for providing the CPA with a home, and to all of you Friends, Trustees, and Archive users for your continuing support.

We look forward to hearing from any of you who have questions about, or suggestions for, the future development of the CPA.

Mary Kalemkerian
Mary Kalemkerian, Chair of The Charles Parker Archive Trust



Friends of the Charles Parker Archive Membership subscriptions

We invite you to join the Friends or to renew your subscription. Membership entitles you to an Annual Report, to concessionary prices for publications in print or sound, and to be actively involved in the future of the Archive.

The subscription rates are:

Organisations and families £15.00

Individuals £10.00

Unwaged £5.00

Additional donations are much appreciated, and there is added benefit if UK taxpayers contribute under the Gift Aid system.

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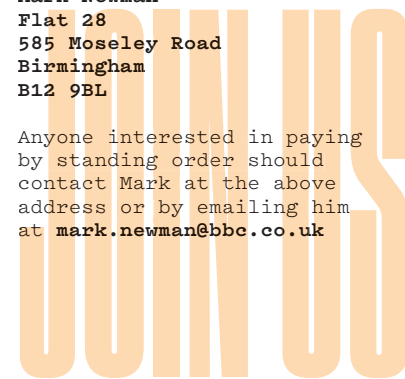
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*“Like so many before him then,
Parker ventured into the
wilderness and encountered a
genuine humanity where he had
thought there was none, reacting
with humility and often guilt
about his social prejudice and
what he felt to be his own middle-
class inadequacies.”*

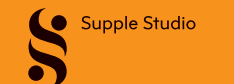
EWAN MACCOLL

*“I’ve never met anyone with an
ear like his. The way he made the
programmes, every sentence was
put together like a piece of Art...
He taught me the soft interview,
simple questions, waiting,
panning for that speck of gold
among the dross.”*

DILIP HIRO

THANKS

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The Charles Parker
Archive Trust

Visit cpatrust.org.uk



“Speakers themselves experience a kind of reverie when turning to contemplate anew the routine of their lives - a miner collecting his lamp and docket as he goes down the pit, for Instance. They take off into moments of extraordinary almost oral exaltation, in which the language really becomes incandescent, and you are sort of washed away.”

Charles Parker