

'Holding Things in Common' Symposium Keynote Address Review

## 'God save Mrs Mopp and good old Mother Riley':

*It's That Man Again, the Kinks and the English Speaking Vernacular*  
by Dr Matthew Sweet

John O'Brien



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FIRSTLY, A WORD ABOUT DR SWEET'S TITLE. The phrase 'God save Mrs Mopp and good old Mother Riley' is a line from the lyrics of a Kinks' song, 'The Village Green Preservation Society', and footage of a live 1973 performance with brass accompaniment was used in the presentation as the basis for an exploration of nostalgia<sup>1</sup> (there are details of the performance in the footnote, if you'd like to break off at this point and watch it for yourself on youtube - the song lyrics are printed towards the end of this piece). The characters mentioned in the quote from the song, Mrs Mopp and Mother Riley, are from the 'It's That Man Again' BBC show from the 1940s, and a series of vaudeville-inspired films, respectively, and Dr Sweet's address goes on to explore the idea of 'holding things in common' through the highs and lows of the BBC's relationship with its audience. Dr Sweet regularly presents *The Philosopher's Arms* on Radio 4, and *Night Waves* on Radio 3, and this address was his usual mix of entertaining thoughtfulness. Sweet presented a humorous series of seemingly disparate anecdotes threaded together around the central theme of nostalgia, but there emerged a unifying undercurrent, namely, the exploration of the importance for people to hold things in common, to identify our values collectively as a society, and Sweet thus raised larger issues about social cohesion and democracy.



The Kinks performing 'Village Preservation Society' live in 1973, with arrangement for guitars, drums, bass, backing vocals, piano, flute, saxophone, trumpets, trombone, and sousaphone. (image from youtube)

The keynote speech opened though, with a historical overview of nostalgia, presenting it not as a thing that we truly hold in common, but as a falsehood, a fiction. Nostalgia, Sweet also tells us, was cited as a cause of death on the death certificates of many soldiers in the American Civil War, and French doctors, in common with Charles Lamb, similarly considered it to be a pathological condition. The technological advances of the Industrial revolution, however, were on the one hand a break with, and hence a reason to pine for, the pre-industrial past. On the other hand, the new technologies were also a cure for nostalgia: mass communication was facilitated by telegrams and the railway age, and this immediacy of communication made pining short-lived and untroubling. Hence nostalgia became widespread, but in becoming so it became de-medicalised and, moreover, normalised; as Dr Sweet puts it 'we're all nostalgics now', citing 'TV shows on which comedians you've never heard of tell you what Spangles and Spacehoppers were'. But as he points out, this idea of a national or collective memory as being held in common is actually predicated on 'names or objects or phenomena that [...] most people don't hold in common'.

And this is where the Kinks song comes in. Dr Sweet's position was that there is no irony in the nostalgia of the song's lyrics, in the desire to preserve, among other things, the pre-industrial or pre-modern world of the village green, Tudor houses, little shops, antique tables and billiards, but I'll come back later to the ensuing debate at the symposium about the song's irony. Suffice it to say at this point that Dr Sweet felt that it was this nostalgia that was responsible for the lack of success of the song.

Also mentioned in the Kinks' preservation list is Mrs Mopp, one of the characters from *'It's That Man Again'*, with her famous catchphrase 'Can I do you now sir?' Sweet explored an exchange of letters between a member of the public in Bradford, and a BBC executive, with the member of the public insisting on, and the executive refuting the existence of a widely-known innuendo in the catchphrase, and here Sweet is critiquing the BBC's ability to hold things in common with its widening audience in its early decades.



Mrs Mopp (Dorothy Summers) in 'It's That Man Again'  
(image from youtube)

To emphasise the point, he cites a series of lewd jokes, from *The Goon Show* and Max Miller, broadcast on the BBC of which the producers were presumably unaware. Similarly, the BBC's 1949 Green Book with its list of proscribed topics for jokes, including 'immorality of any kind', is cited as evidence of the BBC's failure to succeed in its intent, namely to ensure that humour is appropriate for its 'diversified audience'. Listeners were conscious of the fact that what was being broadcast was not a reflection of their world. As Dr Sweet put it, the BBC 'wanted to be *for* the people, but it certainly wasn't *of* the people'. The BBC wanted to broadcast *for* the people according to what the BBC thought it best to broadcast, not what the majority of people thought it would be better to broadcast. Despite the fact that it was this majority who, as a listener writing to the *Radio Times* pointed out, 'provide the main bulk of (the BBC's) income', the BBC, and Lord Reith, Director-General of the BBC from its inception until 1938, held a wholly undemocratic attitude to public opinion. Dr Sweet commented on an extract in the *Radio Times* from a BBC executive's response to a listener's letter: "Every listener is invited to express his opinions freely and the comments are carefully collated." In a drawer maybe. And if Reith had his way he would have had them collated in the bin.'

However, unsurprisingly for someone who has dedicated years of their life to the BBC as their employer, Dr Sweet doesn't think the Corporation is all bad. Much was made of the unique role of the BBC in creating the sense of a common culture, and the power that radio had to use this collective culture to replace the regionalism of popular entertainment, and to counter the domestic isolation of the pre-radio home.

It was during the Second World War that the role of the BBC as state broadcaster meant that it was responsible for morale, and the imperative to achieve this made meaningful audience research necessary. Hence the war was 'the moment at which the sense of a mass audience, mass listenership coalesced', and the moment at which there seemed to be the possibility of agreeing what we held in common. It is possibly for this reason, Sweet muses, that 'contemporary culture reaches back so desperately to this moment', and he goes on to cite a list, perhaps in a pastiche of the list in the Kinks song referenced in the title, of examples of this pathological nostalgia; Keep Calm and Carry On mugs, postcards, mouse mats, coasters, tea towels, duffle bags, deck-chairs, notebooks, cufflinks and hoodies, Peyton and Byrne, *The Great British Bake Off*, *The Great British Sewing Bee*, anything on BBC Four called *Something Britannia*, Britain's Tastiest Village, Kath Kidston aprons, bunting in

the streets, bunting in houses, Minor Britpop bassists who make cheese, and the Boden bag with reclaimed union jack. The address ended with Dr Sweet's exhortation for nostalgia to 're-pathologise nostalgia' and the nostalgia for keeping calm and carrying on comes in for particular criticism, as a 'mantra of middle-class self-pity'. He refers to a tabloid newspaper giving away free mugs with the phrase printed on them, 'as if it believed that the final months of Gordon Brown's government were an equivalent experience to being firebombed by the Luftwaffe.' Among other things that prompted Dr Sweet to inveigh against nostalgia was the way in which the nation created its self-image at the 2012 Olympics, including a gigantic union jack, 'a superfluity of roller skating nuns', and the lead singer of the Kinks arriving in a black cab.



Ray Davies enters the stadium in a black cab  
Olympic Closing Ceremony, London 12/08/12  
(image from youtube)

Ray Davies' entrance brings us to the end of the address and to the post-presentation discussion with the audience, primarily regarding Dr Sweet's reading of the Kinks' song. Granted, he referred in his address to the 'ambiguity' of the song, and the fact that 'there were moments when it all seems like a wind-up', but there was a difficulty on the part of the majority of the audience in believing that much of the song could be sincere. Here are the lyrics in full:

'The Village Green Preservation Society' by The Kinks

We are the Village Green Preservation Society.  
God save Donald Duck, vaudeville and variety.  
We are the Desperate Dan Appreciation Society.  
God save strawberry jam and all the different varieties.

Preserving the old ways from being abused,  
Protecting the new ways, for me and for you.  
What more can we do?

We are the Draught Beer Preservation Society.  
God save Mrs. Mopp and good old Mother Riley.  
We are the Custard Pie Appreciation Consortium.  
God save the George Cross,  
and all those who were awarded them.

We are the Sherlock Holmes English-speaking Vernacular.

God save Fu Manchu, Moriarty and Dracula.

We are the Office Block Persecution Affinity.  
God save little shops, china cups, and virginity.  
We are the Skyscraper Condemnation Affiliates.  
God save Tudor houses, antique tables, and billiards.

God save the village green!  
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In addition to the past worlds of vaudeville and variety and the Mrs. Mopp and Good old Mother Riley mentioned in the title of the keynote speech, there are other elements lauded in the song, which the Kinks ask God to save, or ask to be preserved by unspecified secular agencies, including strawberry jam, custard pies and draught beer, and china cups, all still widely commercially available. With forty-one years' hindsight, none of these ever seem to have been in any real danger of disappearing entirely. Neither have Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Moriarty and the English Vernacular, and it seemed difficult for the audience to believe that the Kinks thought that they were so endangered as to warrant divine intervention.

Ultimately, then, the audience did not hold in common the same interpretation of the Kinks song as Dr Sweet, and this is part of the point. The important thing is that both BBC broadcasting and Dr Sweet's academic address, and indeed in any medium of dissemination of information or knowledge, in what Karl Popper termed 'an open society', must offer themselves up for refutation, whether it be the BBC's idea of what should be broadcast being questioned by public opinion, or Dr Sweet's reading of the Kinks' song being debated by the audience. The important thing is to encourage alternate positions and to enter into dialogue with them, and valuing the freedom, and the opportunity, to do this was what everyone at the symposium held in common.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'The Village Green Preservation Society' performed by The Kinks live at the BBC TV Centre, 24 January 1973.