



John North

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GOING WITH THE BLOW: Keith and Gavin Belton, right, and The Tees Valley Jazzmen during the anniversary gig
Pictures: STUART BOULTON

All that jazz

Tees Valley jazz was born in a former maternity home 40 years ago, but the band still has plenty of puff in it

BLOWING hot, rarely cold, the Tees Valley Jazzmen celebrated their 40th anniversary last Sunday. Traditionally, they're terrific.

The wages of syncopation, when they began, were two free pints and a plate of pie and peas. Now they earn a few bob more, have travelled the world, love it.

"There are nights when you just don't feel like turning out but once the band's playing and the room's with you, there's still nothing like it in the world," says Keith Belton, 71, one of two original members.

The other's his 62-year-old brother, Gavin. "I think the first time we were paid I got 1/6d," he recalls. "When we had a fiver between us, we thought we were well away."

The anniversary gig's at the Bowburn Hall Hotel, near Durham, where Sunday dinner's served from

noon to 9pm and thus gives new meaning to the phrase "late lunch".

The audience is mostly getting on a bit, grown-up groupies, some of them not so much in at the birth of the blues as probably the midwife's grandma.

It may also be the only music venue where a tin of sweets is passed around: Quality Street-cred.

Keith introduces the big night, recalls the early days – "I was very young" – tells them he can hardly believe that 40 years have passed.

"All this time," he adds, self-effacingly, "and we're still struggling to play the tunes."

THEY were Witton Park lads, moved to Newton Aycliffe, formed a "New Orleans-style" band that played, under a different name, at the Gretna Green Wedding Inn alongside the old A1.

Keith, piano player and a jazz fan

since grammar school days, had particularly been fond of Bad Penny Blues, a Humphrey Lyttleton number. Gavin had played the workmen's clubs in a pop band called the Rebel Rousers, had bought a banjo just for one song.

Then Keith called with news that he and Mad Mick the trumpeter were playing at the Moore Lane sports club in Newton Aycliffe and could use a banjo man. "It was the free pie and peas that swayed it," says Gavin, no less instrumental in their success.

They advertised in a local paper, found four new members within a week, were invited to play at the Hardwick Hall Hotel – new-born, former maternity home – in Sedgfield. They called that the birth of Tees Valley jazz.

Mike Adamson, the marvellous Hardwick manager who died last month, would not only dance on the tables but on the bar top, too. They'd to put a canopy up to stop him, Keith recalls.

"The band may not have been up to much but that room at the hotel was the best jazz venue the North-East has ever had. It was more like a singles club, not the old fogies we are now."

For the younger brother, too, trad jazz had become music to the ears. He liked Ball, Barber and Bilk – encouraged that Acker's still blowing strong at nearly 82 – also much appreciated the Dutch Swing College Band.

"They're from Holland," he adds, perhaps a little unnecessarily.

The pie and peas band has since played on four continents, twice in the 1990s was invited to appear at the Sacramento International jazz festi-



val, has seen numerous membership changes.

So why still do it? Keith ponders but briefly. "Just crackers," he says. "Bloody crackers."

THE others are Phil Smith on double bass, Danny Daniels on drums, Don Fairley on trombone, trumpeter Nick Hill and Jim McBridie who plays clarinet. Still they practise for an hour a day – musicians call it keeping their lip in, or finger in the case of the strings.

Former members include 96-year-old Arnold Douglas from Staindrop, though he may be a bit short of puff these days.

The Anniversary Waltz perhaps being inappropriate, they start with the Downtown Strutters Ball, follow with Smile Awhile – the first tune they ever performed in public – and with numbers like the Sheikh of Arabee and Hindustan. That one's a bit difficult, not much rhymes with Hindustan.

Keith has a bit of a bad throat – it may help, the gravel-voiced bit – Gavin's trapped a nerve while playing the banjo, gets constant pins and needles in his arms. "Occupational hazard. It's a nuisance but I'm trying to do something about it," he says.

The audience is appreciative, applauds frequently, but not what

I got 1/6d. When we had a fiver between us, we thought we were well away

you'd call wild for it. It's possible they've heard it all before.

The dancers are altogether more vigorous. Strictly, they're fantastic.

The band plays a number about being old and grey – The Beatles may have based When I'm 64 on it – insist that they've no plans to tone it down a bit.

"We'll do it as long as we're standing," says Keith. "It may sound ridiculous, but we still love every minute. When it works, it's wonderful."

It's getting on 10.30pm when we head back down the motorway. The band, as ever, plays on.

■ The Tees Valley Jazzmen play at the Bowburn Hall Hotel on the first Sunday of every month at 8.30pm. Admission is £4.

NORMA Salisbury, Gavin Belton's partner, has two young grandchildren who were born with cystic fibrosis – an inherited lung disease. Life expectancy of sufferers is just 35.

Joined by the Fenner Sisters from Sedgfield, the Tees Valley Jazzmen have already played three fund-raising nights and plan a fourth – Glaxo Social Club in Barnard Castle, November 20, 8pm – to help fund gene therapy research into the disease.

Val and Trevor Cockerell, the children's other grandparents, are also much involved. "As a family we just decided that we had to do something. We're trying to get the families of other cystic fibrosis sufferers involved. It's a terrible disease," says Norma.

The jazz nights have so far raised around £3,000, including £1,100 at the Blue Bell in Acklam, while family friend Kate Upsall-Davies last weekend ran the New York marathon to help the cause.

■ Tickets for the Barnard Castle night in aid of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust cost £8, including a pie and peas supper. Details on 01833-638926 or from Norma on 07887-520412.