

Let's Get This Show on the Road.

Songs of the Dambusters.

Goxhill Memorial Hall. 21 May 2022.

I have tried to see this show to review it for, what seems like, an age. I have a boyhood obsession with all things related to The Dambusters.

It could almost have been a WW2 dance hall ready for the Brylcreme Boys to sweep the girls off their feet as described in a song featured tonight To Dance With Ruby Raithby. On stage were a number of period props that were given greater significance later. But a little teddy in a flying scarf and goggles sat next to a sheepskin-lined flying jacket designed to combat the extreme cold experienced by bomber crews as they flew night-time raids over Germany. From each microphone stand hung an RAF tunic. From one stand, an ominous-looking gas mask was suspended.

With the scene set, Dick took to the stage and picked up a guitar, supplemented by a banjo, a bouzouki and a mouth organ at various points. He kicked off proceedings with the titular song Let's Get This Show on the Road and followed it up with A Family at War. Each song throughout the show was accompanied by a string of images projected onto a screen to one side of the stage, often reminding the audience just how chilling a task flying as the crew of a Lancaster bomber really was. The life expectancy of a Rear Gunner in a Lancaster was just two weeks and recounted in Tail-End Charlie, and The Elbow Song, about a former rear gunner who Dick had met in his later years.

Song after song evoked memories of wartime Britain, and especially life in Lincolnshire known as Bomber County and given its own song. It is clear how deeply inspired Appleton must have been because he wrote 43 songs inspired by the work of 617 Squadron, or Squadron X as they were originally known. The songs were written for anniversary commemoration in 2013 for BBC Radio Lincolnshire. Only 8 were used, and that is why this concert provides a perfect themed basis to share some of the remaining songs with audiences. They are too good not to share.

Dick is very well known to Folks Lincs audiences and he performed naturally and with ease. The chat went down well, as did the many terrible jokes shared with the audience in between the more serious content of the songs and the inspiration behind each.

My personal highlight during the first half of the show was the beautifully, haunting Silence Over Scampton which somehow touched a nerve within me. It told the tale of the ground crew left behind, as the airmen flew towards their destiny and explored the feelings of those at home in

Scampton who knew so many would never return. They never did say a real goodbye. The sacrifice was real. Then the show quite literally went from the sublime to the ridiculous as Dick performed Make Do and Mend to open the second half of the show... to do so, he popped on a wig and headscarf to portray the women of WW2 and this wonderful piece of nonsense brought a smile to the audience.

He did NOT make an attractive woman though it has to be said!

We learned how the teddy at the front of the stage had been crafted from a genuine RAF flyer's flying jacket and was wearing his actual flying scarf.

Interestingly, though the concert is intended as a tribute to the men of Bomber Command, it does not seek to glorify the act of war, or of using bombs from above to kill people. Dick Appleton reminded us all through Mothers' Day, that the day the dams were broken was Germany's Mothers' Day. The futility of war also featured in the song Norman, which was about an airman who died on the attack on the dams in Z for Zebra, leaving a young wife grieving. "One more young man doing his duty, One more family torn apart" the song said and you felt every word's truth.

We learned of the guilt felt by Barnes Wallis, the inventor of the bouncing bomb employed on the raid in Commoners and Kings. Once again, I was reminded of the duo's earlier song Ten Tall Men that outlined the fact that the Lancasters were flown at sixty feet over water at night. That is the height of ten tall men standing on each other's shoulders. The whole exercise was sheer madness; the fact that the crews agreed to even attempt such a feat is tribute to their determination "to do the right thing" to try to shorten the war in the long run. This, despite the hideous death toll of those who never came home.

The songs were not all doom and gloom by any means, and the mood was kept light by this masterful musician and entertainer. In the first half I enjoyed Rosie the Riveter and To Dance With Ruby Raithby, both far more light-hearted. So too was Dick's rendition of The Elsan Incident, but the reason for the show was perfectly encapsulated in the final song of the show, We Will Remember Them.

A deeply touching reminder that it is only in the twenty-first century that the men of Bomber Command have been properly honoured with a memorial to those who gave their lives in service. The bombing of Germany was brutal, there is no escaping the fact and to glamourise it is wrong. But it is right to remember the men who sacrificed everything in order to oppose those who chose to march against freedom across Europe and wanted to destroy those who stood against them by any means necessary. That is what Dick Appleton has done here, and I applaud him. I hope that he gets the chance to perform this show again and again, and that it will continue to attract appreciative audiences all across Bomber County, Lincolnshire.

Andy Evans 22 May 2022