

The Shalder Shanty Voyage: setting up a dementia inclusive singing group in the pandemic

A storyteller, a sailor and a shanty-woman, **Jan Bee Brown** is passionate about enabling people to live their best lives. A fervent admirer of feisty female pirates throughout history, Jan has walked several planks and weathered many storms in her portfolio career in the arts. Jan now lives in Shetland where she works part time as Dementia Advisor for Alzheimer Scotland, swims in the sea, shares stories and sings sea shanties.



Jumping ship

With schools, libraries, pubs and community centres closed during the pandemic my profession as a storyteller and shanty-woman was in the doldrums. I went to work in a Care Home where I was encouraged to share stories and sing sea shanties. Managing activities in full PPE was a challenge, however I learned a lot in a year about the power of singing and I devised some cunning strategies for keeping things Covid compliant. I laminated the lyrics so they could be re-sanitized after each session, and I also learned not to 'sanitise' the lyrics, as folks liked their shanties 'spicy'. Then suddenly, thanks to the singing postman from Paisley, we were on trend. *The Wellerman* was 'top of the pops' and sea shanties became a Tik Tok sensation. When we found ourselves complaining of 'cabin fever' (and as singing was banned indoors) we wrapped our mutinous crew in blankets and sang in the garden, accompanied by a bearded staff member dressed as a mermaid!

What shall we do with the drunken sailor?

The familiarity of many of the shanty tunes, the repetitive nature of the rhythm and the simple call and response of many shanties, enabled people living with dementia to sing along without needing to follow the words. Sharing a nautical story over tea and cake complemented the session and led to discussion about some of the saucier lyrics. Sea shanties put the wind in people's sails and always made them smile. It also helped the staff as it made a change and put a swing in their step!

After a year of lockdowns, it was time for a change, with a new job as the Dementia Advisor for Alzheimer Scotland and so I moved to Shetland to set up home 60 degrees north. I was interested in seeing if shanty singing would be beneficial as a therapeutic activity for people living with dementia in the community.

Out of my comfort zone of the care home setting, I realised what an impact lockdown and the restrictions that interrupted daily life had had on folk who were diagnosed with dementia before the pandemic. Suddenly isolated from supportive neighbours and friends, the loss of contact and familiar routines made life very difficult for our clients and the lack of social stimulation has, in some cases, led to a rapid deterioration in their condition.

Safe Haven

Thanks to the grant from Luminate and their Dementia Inclusive Singing Network, we started up The Shalder Shanty Singers in January 2022. 'Shalder' is the Shetland word for oystercatcher and the name certainly has a ring to it. From the windows of the centre you can see shalders on the shoreline.



Scalloway once had a popular singing group, however members of the local over 60s group shared that they no longer had the confidence to sing as their voices had changed with age. Folk also shared that they were still unsure about going out in terms of safety, as new Covid variants emerged. Luckily the Scalloway Youth & Community Centre is well set up with CO2 monitors and fans that enable fresh air to circulate in the gym hall. The hall has an echo so however small the group might be, we still sound good!

Setting Sail

Once our logo and poster were designed, we contacted BBC Radio Shetland who came along and ran an article about our shanty singing to raise awareness. As the new Dementia Advisor on Shetland I am able to work closely with my colleagues at Alzheimer Scotland and have been able to get feedback from the partners and the participants living with dementia. We advertise the group as a sing - a -long, with the Shalder Shanty Singers on the Alzheimer Scotland local activities programme, and this helped us build numbers.

All for me grog?

The Shalder Shanty Singers set out to be inclusive and intergenerational. When a new participant walks through the door we do not ask if they are a living with dementia and there are folk who attend who do not want to disclose that they have a diagnosis, so a gentle and supportive approach is necessary.

It has been really wonderful to witness the way folk have supported one another practically and mentally. It hasn't always been plain sailing though, and supporting a diverse crew has its challenges; every Captain needs a First Mate to ensure that everybody can enjoy a session. I learned to keep our sessions 'lightsome' – it doesn't matter really if we are out of tune or out of time – I learnt to slow down when folk felt frustrated or struggled to keep up. The band used to joke about what key I was singing in: "the key of sea" I'd reply! However, it soon became apparent that it was important to keep things consistent. Now we always start with the same two shanties, in case someone arrives late so they can join in easily, and I don't introduce a new shanty every session.



Music & the mind

I started to learn the concertina in lockdown, and as a relatively 'old sea dog' it is fantastic to learn a new trick! When I suggested the group to a client who liked music, they replied, "No, because I don't sing", so I suggested that they came and played along. I initially supplied an envelope full of sheet music, however I later realised that like myself, this crewmember played by ear. The sheet music was just 'sparrows on a line' (as they described it) and the envelope was more stressful than useful. One week they got very frustrated and we later got feedback that their confidence was so badly knocked, it had affected not only their mood but also their motor skills all week. We then realised that we needed to put some extra support in place, to ensure they could get the most out of the session.

Tall Ships Ahoy!

With restrictions lifting our numbers have swelled, and trying to maintain Covid safety is the next challenge. With the lighter days, we now have participants coming from remote areas including Unst, Shetland's most Northern Isle. However, driving long distances in the winter months will be a challenge when it is dark by 4pm. We are now in discussion about how to enable folk to join our singing activity online as there may be another variant in the future, so nothing is certain. The Tall Ships return to Shetland in 2023 and we will hopefully be able to sing them into Lerwick next summer, so watch this space!

