

## **WEST MIDLANDS**

### **■ BIRMINGHAM**

#### **CHARLES PARKER ARCHIVE**

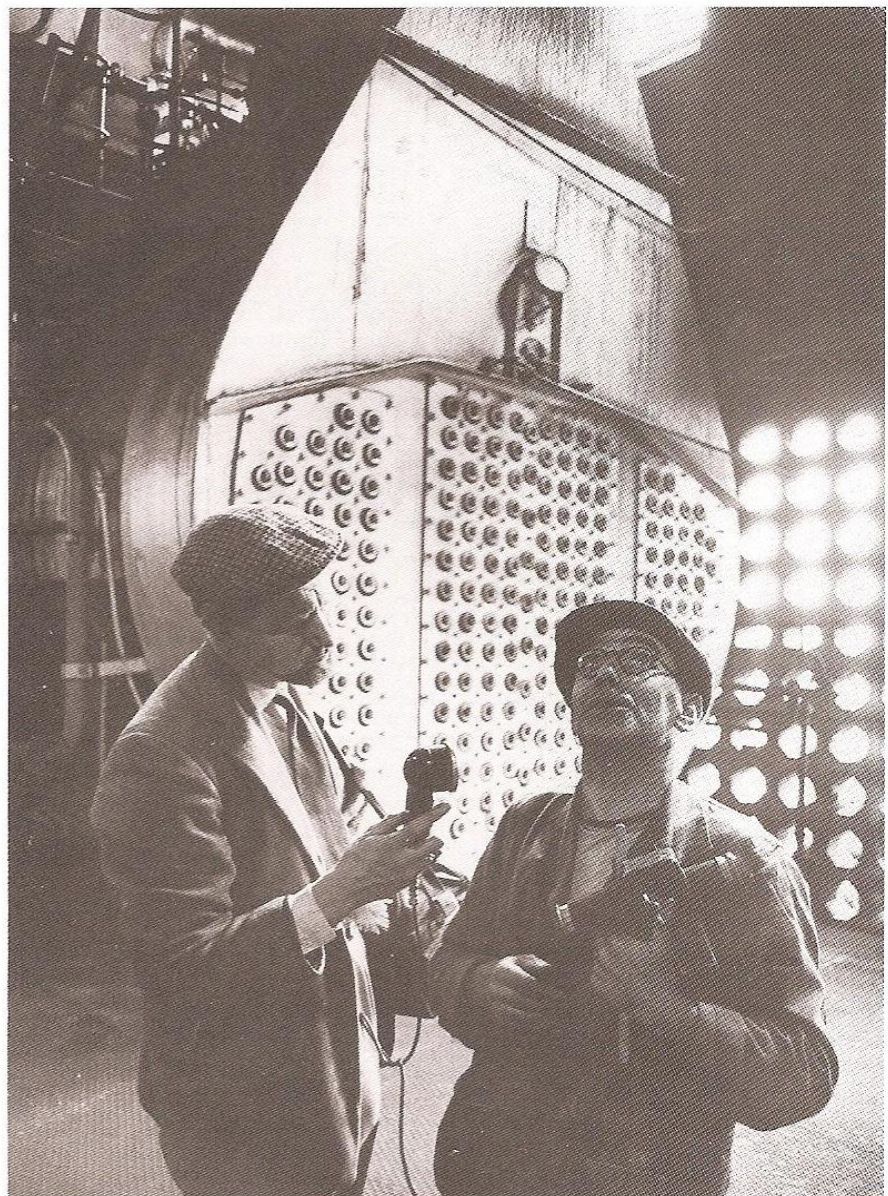
News of the Charles Parker Archive from Helen Lloyd, one of its trustees: 'Many people who work in oral history recognise how important it is to keep everything they've ever recorded and every scrap of paper relating to it, for the sake of future researchers; but few have done this so extensively as the oral history pioneer and radio producer, Charles Parker. From the 1950s to the 1970s, he kept over 5,000 hours of sound recordings and oral history interviews, plus transcriptions, notes, correspondence, scripts, news cuttings, and over 1,000 books on his main interests of international folk music, culture, politics, history and religion. These are now available to the public in the Charles Parker Archive at Birmingham Central Library. All the material has



been catalogued and all the recordings digitised, thanks to two projects funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund – the most recent being part of the Library's "Connecting Histories" project ([www.connectinghistories.org.uk](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk)). The Archive is a treasure trove for anyone interested in the decades in which Parker worked; in more distant decades remembered by those he recorded; in the history of radio and in the history of oral history!

From 1954 to 1972, Charles Parker worked as radio producer for the BBC in Birmingham, where he took advantage of new portable tape recorders to go out from the studio and record working people in their own environments. His most famous works are the award-winning Radio Ballads, made between 1957 and 1964, in collaboration with folk musicians Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger. They combine words, songs, instrumental music and sound effects in eight programmes which document the lives of railwaymen, road-builders, fishermen, coal miners, those suffering from polio, teenagers, boxers, and travelling people. These are of course highly edited, but the original unedited recordings can be heard in the Archive, such as the ninety-seven field recordings (including sound effects and music) made for the one-hour Radio Ballad, "The Travelling People". There's also a vast range of material relating to his many other radio programmes and to his work in socialist politics, folk music, theatre and teaching.

Parker was much involved in the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s. He was a leading figure in the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre and the Grey Cock Folk Club and was a member of the Critics Group, which met regularly with MacColl and Seeger for critical sessions that gave rise to performances of all kinds, including political theatre. He helped playwright Arnold Wesker to organise the Centre 42 touring arts festival and make a multi-media documentary drama, *The Maker and the Tool* (1962) and he collaborated with film-maker Philip Donnellan on films such as *The Colony* (1964), about West Indian migrants in Handsworth. He also taught classes for the Workers' Educa-



tional Association, the National Association for the Teaching of English and the Polytechnic of Central London. Documents and recordings relating to all this work are included in the Archive.

After Parker left the BBC in 1972, he became a founder member of the radical company, Banner Theatre, and was a producer and performer in their productions, until he died during rehearsals in 1980. The company used a mixture of drama, folk music, slides and oral history recordings, inspired by the Radio Ballads, and that inspiration continues in Banner's current performances. Their archive is also included in the "Connecting Histories" project.

*Reproduced by permission of Birmingham Archives & Heritage, who would be grateful to hear from anyone who has more information about this photograph.*

The catalogue of the Charles Parker Archive will soon be online, but can currently be viewed in the Archives and Heritage section of Birmingham Central Library. Oral historians will be interested to read what he wrote about his methods as well as to hear the results. Purists will find that his unedited recordings do not follow the advice given in contemporary oral history training of listening to the interviewee without interruption:



Parker sometimes asks interviewees to rephrase what they have said so that it will stand alone and make sense in a radio programme without a narrator. The programmes were a priority, not just because they were his job, but because he wanted to make the experiences of working people known as widely as possible.

'Parker's interest in oral history was inseparable from his socialism – and I remember Philip Donnellan telling me in 1990 that this was why Parker was dismissed from the BBC at the end of 1972. A former studio manager who worked with Parker at the BBC's Pebble Mill studios disagreed and told me that the dismissal was due to the expense of recording more interviews than were needed for an individual radio programme and to the amount of studio time used in the complex editing and mixing of the Radio Ballads. It may be that he was dismissed for both reasons: certainly his meticulous mode of operation sprang from his desire to do justice to the experiences of working people. But while those who dismissed him are forgotten, Parker's work endures and the Radio Ballads continue to be heard on CDs and MP3s!

'Among the subjects listed in Birmingham Central Library's publicity leaflet for the Charles Parker Archive are the experiences of migrants, travellers, those living with disability, folk and pop music, drama and the oral tradition, political protest and political theatre, and also Christianity (he was involved in a Christian theatre group in the early 1960s). The Archive is a key resource for those interested in the history of radio or in live performances of many kinds and it would not be an over-statement to claim that anyone researching any aspect of the social history of the second half of the twentieth century would find material in the Archive relevant to their research. The catalogue is accessible without prior booking, but advance booking should be made to view the Archive or listen to recordings. Visitors should bring proof of identity and home address, to obtain a CARN reader's ticket.'

● Further details: Charles Parker Archive, Archives & Heritage,