

A shanty is ...

... a song sung to the rhythm of a job of work. It helps the work greatly.

The **shantyman** leads the singing. He makes up verses for as long as the job requires, perhaps four hours at a stretch.

A shantyman does no other work. A good shantyman was agreed to be worth ten men on a rope.

Apart from a few exceptions, shanties are sung **only** for work, not for pleasure. Nowadays, however, they are often sung for pleasure in folk clubs and maritime festivals!



The **Exmouth Shantymen** enjoying the Sea Shanty Festival at Paimpol.

Written in 1921

1921, **Terry**, Richard Runciman, [The Shanty Book, Sailor Shanties](#) :

Shanties were labour songs sung by sailors of the merchant service only while at work, and never by way of recreation. Moreover - at least, in the nineteenth century - they were never used aboard men-o'-war, where all orders were carried out in silence to the pipe or the bo'sun's whistle.

Before the days of factories and machinery, all forms of work were manual labour and all the world over the labourer, obeying a primitive instinct, sang at his toil: the harvester with his sickle, the weaver at the loom, the spinner at the wheel. Long after machinery had driven the labour-song from the land it survived at sea in the form of shanties, since all work aboard a sailing vessel was performed by hand.

... When the sailing ship ruled the waters and the shanty was a living thing no one appears to have paid heed to it. To landsmen of those days -

before folk-song hunting had begun - the haunting beauty of the tunes would appear to have no appeal. This may be partly accounted for by the fact that he would never be likely to hear the sailor sing them ashore, and partly because of the Rabelaisian character of the words sung aboard ship. We had very prim notions of propriety in those days. We were apt to overlook the beauty of the melodies and to speak of shanties in bulk as 'low vulgar songs'.

[In] the late 1880s, when the shanty was beginning to die out with the sailing ship, [people started to collect shanties for posterity]

Written in 1840

1840, **Dana**, Richard Henry Jr, [Two Years Before the Mast : A Sailor's Life at Sea](#), written after a voyage in US merchant ships that he began in 1834.

Chapter XVIII

... There was only one point in which they [working on an Italian brig] had the advantage over us [on an American ship], and that was in **lightening their labors** in the boats by their songs. The Americans are a time and money saving people, but have not yet, as a nation, learned that music may be "turned to account". We pulled the long distances to and from the shore, with our loaded boats, without a word spoken, and with discontented looks, while they not only lightened the labor of rowing, but actually made it pleasant and cheerful, by their music.

Chapter XXIX

The sailor's **songs for capstans** and falls are of a peculiar kind, having a chorus at the end of each line. The burden is usually sung by one alone, and at the chorus, all hands join in, -- and the louder the noise, the better. With us, the chorus seemed almost to raise the decks of the ship, and might be heard at a great distance, ashore.

A song is as necessary to sailors as the drum and fife to a soldier. They can't pull in time, or pull with a will, without it. Many a time, when a thing goes heavy, with one fellow yo-ho-ing, a lively song, like "Heave, to the girls!" "Nancy oh!" "Jack Cross-tree," etc., has put life and strength into every arm. We often found a great difference in the effect of the different songs ...

... Among her crew were two **English** man-of-war's-men, so that, **of course, we soon had music**. They sang in the true sailor's style, and the rest of the crew, which was a remarkably

musical one, joined in the choruses.

They had many of the latest sailor songs [not shanties] ... Battle-songs, drinking-songs, boat-songs, love-songs, and everything else, they seemed to have a complete assortment of, and I was glad to find that "All in the Downs," "Poor Tom Bowline," "The Bay of Biscay," "List, ye Landsmen!" and all those classical songs of the sea, still held their places. In addition to these, they had picked up at the theatres and other places a few songs of a little more genteel cast, which they were very proud of; and I shall never forget hearing an old salt, who had broken his voice by hard drinking on shore, and bellowing from the mast-head in a hundred northwesterners, with all manner of ungovernable trills and quavers in the high notes, breaking into a rough falsetto--and in the low ones, growling along like the dying away of the boatswain's "all hands ahoy!" down the hatch-way, singing "Oh, no, we never mention him" -

"Perhaps, like me, he struggles with
Each feeling of regret;
But if he's loved as I have loved,
He never can forget!"

The last line, being the conclusion, he roared out at the top of his voice, breaking each word up into half a dozen syllables. This was very popular, and Jack was called upon every night to give them his "sentimental song." No one called for it more loudly than I, for the complete absurdity of the execution, and the sailors' perfect satisfaction in it, were ludicrous beyond measure.

Written in 1849

Hermann **Melville**, 1849, *Redburn* [semi-autobiographical]

... I soon got used to this singing, for the sailors **never touched a rope without it**. Sometimes, when no one happened to strike up, and the pulling, whatever it might be, did not seem to be getting forward very well, the mate would say, 'Come men, can't any of you sing? Sing now and raise the dead.' And then some one of them would begin, and if every man's arms were as much relieved as mine by the song, and he could pull as much better as I did, with such a cheering accompaniment, I am sure the song was well worth the breath expended on it. It is a great thing in a sailor to know how to sing well, for he gets a great name by it from the officers, and a good deal of popularity among his shipmates. Some sea captains before shipping a man, ask him whether he can sing out at a rope.

Statue of John "Yankee Jack" Short at Watchet Marina, erected as a tribute to Watchet's famous shantyman. via [wikimedia](#)



Returning to Richard Runciman **Terry**, *The Shanty Book, Sailor Shanties* :

West Indian negro *shanties* are moveable wooden huts, and when a family wishes to change its venue:

The shanty is levered up on to a low platform on wheels, to which very long ropes are attached. The ropes are manned by as many hands as their length will admit.

A "*shantyman*" mounts the roof of the hut and sites astride it. He sings a song which has a chorus, and is an exact musical parallel of a seaman's "pull-and-haul" shanty. The crowd below sings the chorus, giving a pull on the ropes at the required points in the music, just as sailors did when hauling at sea. Each pull on the ropes draws the hut a short distance forward, and the process is continued till its final resting place is reached, when the shantyman descends from the roof.

Shanty singing in Sussex

Shoreham - [The Wellington Wailers](#), third Thursday at Duke of Wellington (pub) BN43 6RE

Brighton - Shanty session come-all-ye alternate Sundays, 6pm at the **Jolly Brewer**, 176 Ditchling Road BN1 6JA - call 01273 500295 to find the next session.

Hastings - [Port Side](#) shanty singers Rob, Liz and Dave.

West Sussex coast - [Duck Pond Sailors](#)

Brighton (untried) - [Homeward Bound](#) hour-long sea shanty learning experience with dressing up.

There is also my own online [YouTube list](#).