



Gypsy &
Traveller
Voices

Vaughan
Williams
Memorial
Library



Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

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Open: Tuesday – Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

1st and 3rd Saturdays of the month from 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Accessibility: Step-free access to all floors.



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WELCOME

Did you know the voices of Gypsy and Traveller singers are preserved in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library?

Deep in these archives, centuries-old tunes wait patiently to be danced to, and stories long to be told again.

Here, you'll meet captivating singers and hear compelling songs that continue to strike a chord and resonate today.

e-Resource **For Beginners**

This digital e-booklet is intended to be read on your computer, laptop or smart device, such as a mobile or tablet.

It contains unique, clickable links that take you safely and directly to online content.



Step by Step Guide

- 1 Look out for the icons, like this one, that appear throughout this document.
- 2 Click using your mouse, or if using a smart device like a phone or tablet, press the screen with your finger.
- 3 This example will open the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library's website.



How to Guide

Whether you're brand new to exploring archives or a seasoned expert, this guide contains everything you need to search for Gypsy and Traveller voices in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

Start with these three simple ways.



Songs



Go to the **Songs** section of this e-booklet to search for a selection of songs categorised by themes like *love*, *family* and *place*.



Dive In

Follow our step by step tutorial to search the online archives.

Click below to watch:



Singers



Connect with the people who sang the songs in the **Singers** section of this e-booklet.



”

The most important concentration of material on traditional song, dance and music in the country

- Libraries and Archives Council

About

The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House in London holds England's national folk music and dance archives.

The building is named after Cecil Sharp, the best-known collector of folk song in England. The library was founded in 1930 to house Cecil Sharp's personal book collection. Today, it has books, pamphlets, periodicals, press cuttings, broadsides, paintings, photographs, slides, artefacts, records, reel-to-reel tapes, videos, cine films, compact discs, audio cassettes and more.

The library collections also include written, visual and audio materials, including songs sung by Romani Gypsy, Irish and Scottish Traveller people. These holdings can be viewed and heard in the library and online.

This guide is designed to help you access the material.





Priscilla Cooper
(1865 - ?)

Priscilla's maiden name and early life are unknown. She married Thomas, listed on the 1901 census as a *travelling Gypsy* born in Bexeleyheath, Kent. It says the pair were *here for a time, buying daffodils, primroses etc. for London market*. Later, Thomas is logged as a licensed hawker, renting fields to grow seasonal flowers to sell with Priscilla in London.



Lucy Carter
(1830 - 1912)

Lucy was born in Dorset. According to the 1911 census, Lucy and her husband Isaiah made and sold baskets.

They had twelve children, five of whom sadly died. Their baptisms show the family's extensive travels through Somerset and Devon.

Her maiden name might be Wells or Wills. A baptism at Wootton Fitzpaine church in Dorset shows one Lucy as the daughter of a razor grinder called Benjamin and his wife Mary.



Lucy died in April 1912, followed just five days later by her husband. She is buried in Martock churchyard. Lucy was recorded singing several songs, including: 'Month of May', 'Black as Sloes', and 'The Cornwall Cripple'.

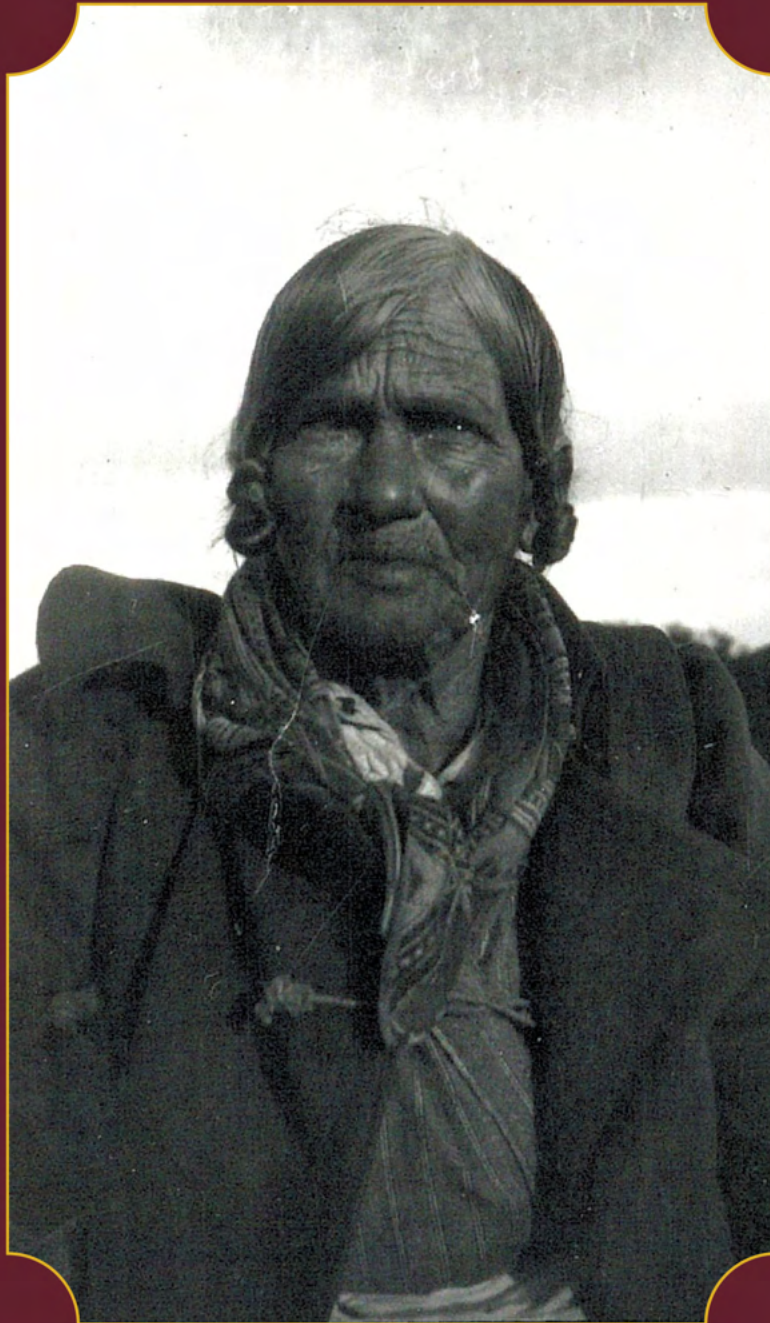




Emma Glover (Hughes) (1854 - 1929)

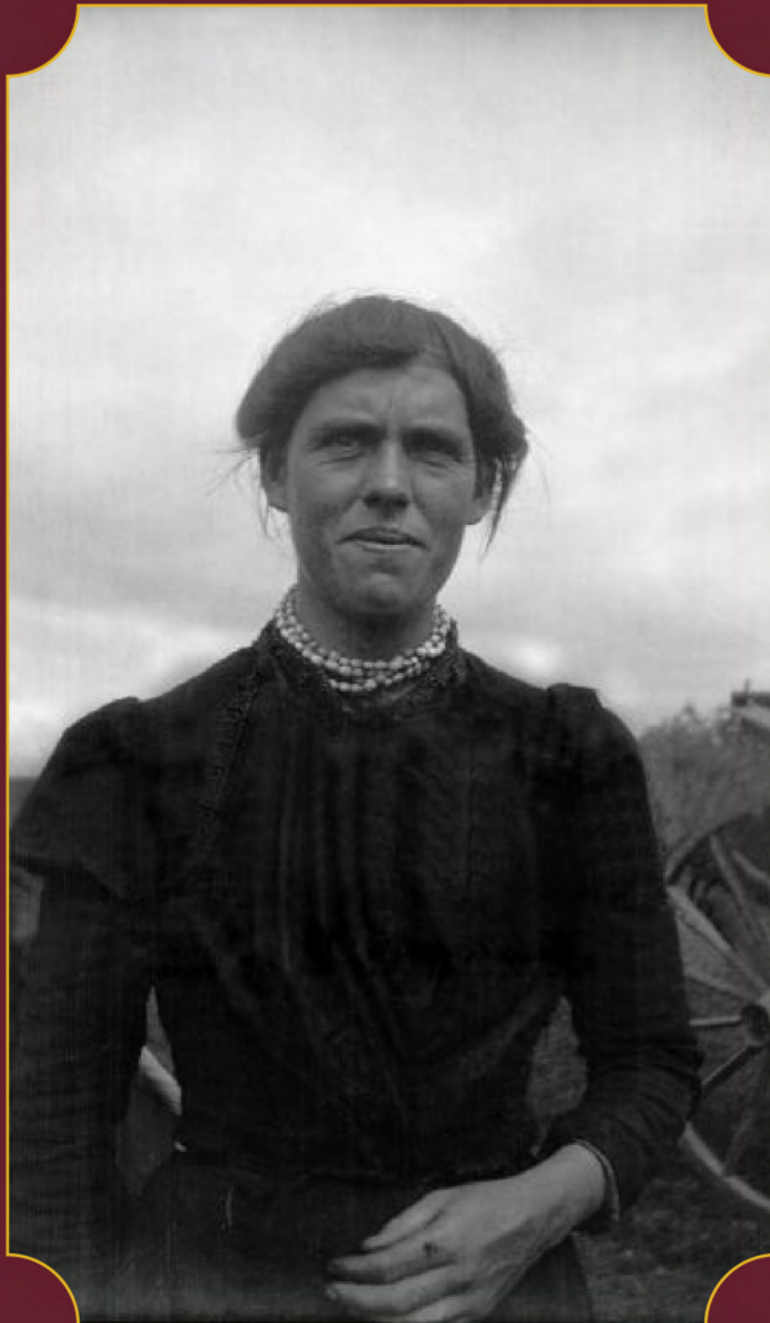
Emma was a Romani Gypsy, thought to be born in Westonzoyland, Somerset. She came to Huish Episcopi via Long Load and, according to letters written by the local Reverend Brown, lived in a caravan. She married a non-Traveller, William, a stone mason, with whom she had five children: William, Lillian, Alice Emma, Fred and Herbert.

By 1901, Emma was a widow. Cecil Sharp visited her many times between 1904 and 1909, which suggests he enjoyed her company and hearing her sing. He noted over fifty of Emma's songs. The titles of some songs perhaps tell us something about her experiences: 'Come Give Me a Slice of Your Bread', 'Locks and Bolts', 'Fare You Well Cold Winter', 'Keys of Heaven', and 'Still Growing'.



Rebecca Holland
(1826 - 1913)

Born in Gloucestershire, Rebecca, and her husband Joseph are listed on census reports as *travelling hawkers and Gypsies*. In 1861, they lived in a tent in Cutcombe. She gave birth to seven children across Devon and Somerset. The 1866 baptism of their daughter Faithful states the family were of no fixed abode. Years later, in 1891, the 88 year old widow lived in a caravan in Pinhoe with grandson Fredrick. By 1907 Rebecca lived on Stafford Common alongside her granddaughter Betsy Issacs. The pair sang for Cecil Sharp.



Betsy Issacs (Holland)
(1879 - 1960)

Born in Tiverton, Betsy was the daughter of a licensed hawker Thomas Holland and his wife Britannia. The family travelled often. Her seven brothers were born in different places: Culmstock, Dorwood, Morebath, Exeter, Withycombe, Carhampton and Witheridge. In 1881 the family lived in a caravan in Blackmore Lane, Cannington, Somerset and by 1891 at Raleigh Cross.



Throughout her life, Betsy continued to live close to her parents and grandmother, Rebecca Holland, who taught her many songs. At 21, she married Morris (Henry) Isaacs, a licensed hawker. A year later, they had baby Thomas. By 1911, Betsy and her husband lived in a bender tent at Green Lane, Huish Champflower, with new additions Joseph (7), John (5), Britannia (2) and baby Henry. Cecil Sharp photographed the family.



William Durkin (Unknown)

We believe William made a living selling broadsheet ballads. He sang several songs for Cecil Sharp including 'Dream of Napoleon', 'Barbara Allen', 'The Cobbled Butcher', 'Shannon Side' and 'I'm Seventeen Come Sunday'.

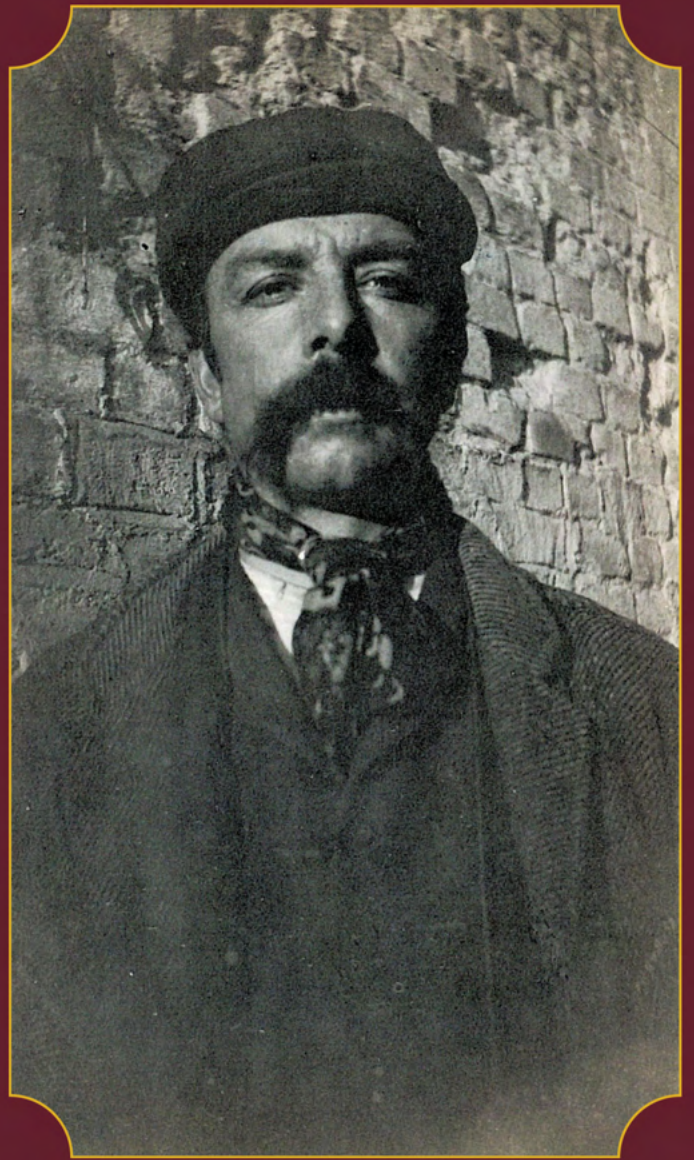
Although there are no photographs of William held in the archive, we know that Sharp met him in 1905 on a popular coaching route during Ilminster Fair. It was the same day as a memorable solar eclipse.



The man to the left is Henry Cave (1854 - 1907) a Somerset Traveller who lived in a bender tent.

Cecil Sharp described him as a 'first-rate fiddler'.

The man in this photograph is believed to be John Locke (1871 - 1947). The Gypsy fiddler was born in Tenbury Wells and lived in Leominster with wife Fanny when he met Cecil Sharp, who took this picture. Listen to one of his tunes here:



Kathleen Williams (Unknown)

Limited details are known about Traveller Kathleen. In 1921 she was married with three children. Cecil Sharp met her three times in Gloucestershire. He recorded her singing: 'Cold Blows The Wind', 'Green Mossy Banks Of The Lea', 'Saddle My Horse', 'The Indian Lass', 'Thorny Moor Woods', 'T For Thomas', 'I'm Seventeen Come Sunday', 'Still Growing', 'Jock of Hazeldean', 'Brisk Young Lover', 'The Crabfish', 'The White Cockade', 'The Little Girl', and 'The One Cow'.

Reservoir Butler (Unknown)

There are no census or parish recordings to tell us details about the birth or life of Reservoir. She met Cecil Sharp in Armscote, Worcestershire, in the summer of 1913. He noted she was a married Gypsy woman.

Reservoir sang 'God Made A Trance', 'The Holy Well' and 'Christmas Now Is Drawing Near At Hand'. There are no known images of Reservoir in the archives.



The captivating photograph of this young woman wearing distinctive boots is recorded simply as 'unknown Gypsy'.





Samson Price (1870 - ?)

Samson's father - who shared the same name - was a travelling cutler. His mother Jane gave birth to him at Knighton, Radnorshire, and in 1871 he was baptised in Blakeney, Gloucestershire. Samson had five siblings.

Census records place the peripatetic family in the West Midlands, Wales, Pembrokeshire, Weobley, Leominster and Herefordshire. In 1939 Samson was a horse dealer and lived in a caravan at Martley, Worcestershire. His wife Matilda was a licensed hawker with whom he had three children.

Samson met Cecil Sharp at Little Stretton in 1923. Sharp noted Samson was a Gypsy, and Samson sang 'Van Dieman's Land', 'Leaves of Life' and 'God Rest You Merry Gentlemen'.



SONGS



Categories

Look out for these symbols throughout this section.
They represent the songs' themes.



Love



Craft



Loss



Place



Conflict



Family



Survival



Protest



Wild Card



The American Stranger



Priscilla Cooper is probably one of the first Gypsy singers to be recorded in the UK. She sang this song to Cecil Sharp in Devon in both 1907 and 1908 when he returned to record her songs on a phonograph wax cylinder.

The lyrics are from the perspective of an impoverished stranger who is looking for love and yearns for home.

Some says I am ragged, some says I am poor.

But to prove myself royal, I will gang along with you.

*O' in the middle of the ocean, there shall grow a
maypole tree.*

If I ever prove false to the girl that loves me,

I will take you to Amerikee, O' my darling to be.



The Dream of Napoleon

*One night sad and languid
I went to my bed*

*And had scarcely reclined on
my pillow*

*When a vision surprising came
into my head*

*And methought I was crossing
the billow*

*Methought as my vessel sped
over the deep*

*I beheld the huge rocks rising
craggy and steep*

*Where the widows are now
seen to weep*

*O'er the grave of the once
famed Napoleon*



In 1905 Cecil Sharp recorded broadsheet ballad seller William Durkin singing this song at Ilminster Fair in Somerset. War looms large in this lament. Many versions mention *weeping willows*. Durkin sang *weeping widows*.

Follow this link to hear 'High Germany', a song sung by Kent-born Romani Gypsy Phoebe Smith (1913 - 2001) that addresses a similar nautical theme.



Arise, Arise

*Awake, awake oh you drowsy sleeper
For it is almost day
How can you sleep you most charming creature
Since you have stolen my heart away*

*Begone, begone you will wake my mother
And my father he shall quickly hear
Begone, begone love and court some other
And whisper softly in their ear*

*And then her father heard them talking
He nimbly jumped out of bed
He put his head out of the window
And this young man was quickly fled*

*Turn back, turn back, don't be called a rover
Turn back, turn back a set by my side
And you must wait till his passion's over
Johnnie, I surely will be your bride*



Traveller Rebecca Holland sang this song to Cecil Sharp in 1907 at Stafford Common, Devon.

To hear another love song: 'Once I had a True Love', sung by Kent-born Romani Gypsy Phoebe Smith, [click this link](#).





Van Diemen's Land (Henry the Poacher)

Travelling cutler and horse dealer Samson Price (1870 - ?) is recorded singing this transportation ballad at Little Stretton in 1923. The song's narrator Henry tells how he was caught poaching. As punishment, he was sent to a penal colony in Tasmania for 14 years, where he lived miserably, only able to dream of his distant family. Though the song concludes with a warning, its overall message protests social circumstances.



Click the link below to hear another song about poaching sung by Gloucestershire Romani Gypsy singer Wiggy Smith (1926 - 2002).

*Come all you gallant poachers that
ramble void of care
That walk out on a moonlight night
with your dog, your gun and snare
The harmless hare and pheasant
you have at your command
Not thinking of your last career out
on Van Diemen's Land*





*His eyes were black as any sloes
His cheeks were like the blooming rose
His voice did sound as clearly as the violets in the bloom
We got diamonds in each other's eye*

Black As Sloes



Sloes are the fruit of the blackthorn tree. It is one of the first to blossom in the UK spring, producing clouds of snow-white flowers. The fruit is distilled to make sloe gin for Christmas celebrations and its branches are carved to make walking sticks.

In this song, sung to Cecil Sharp by Traveller Lucy Carter at Tintinhull in 1906, an attractive lover's eyes are compared to sloes. Click the link above to read Sharp's full handwritten lyrics.

For another song about the colour of a lover's eyes, click this link. 'Blue Eyed Lover' is sung by Romani Gypsy singer Caroline Hughes (1900 - 1971) in Dorset.



True Lover's Farewell (Ten Thousand Miles)



On Christmas Eve, 1904, Romani Gypsy Emma Glover sang this song to Cecil Sharp in Huish Episcopi village, Somerset. That winter saw deep snows of over 40cm.

Recently a widow, Emma's sorrowful and yet celebratory song conveys a lost love. Sharp wrote it down as printed below. As you can see from the titles, like many traditional songs, it has different names and variations.



*Can't you see the little turtle dove
Sitting under the mulberry tree?
See how she do mourn for her true love
And I shall mourn for thee, my dear,
And I shall mourn for you.*

To hear another version of this song about love and loss by Romani Gypsy and Showman singer Tom Willett (1878 - ?) in Kent, click this link:



The Trees They Grow So High

(Still Growing)

*Oh father, oh father, you've
done me some wrong,
You've made me get me
married to a young man.
For he is only sixteen years
old and I am twenty-one,
Oh my bonny boy is young but
he's growing,
Growing, growing,
My bonny boy is young
but he's growing.*

*Oh daughter, oh daughter,
I'll tell you what I'll do,
I'll send your love to college
for another year or two.
And all around his college
cap, I'll tie a ribbon blue,
For to let the ladies know
that he's married,
Married, married.*

Traveller Kathleen Williams sang this song to Cecil Sharp at Puddlebrook, Herefordshire, in 1921. The song documents a conversation between a father and daughter, who airs concerns about her arranged marriage to a much younger boy. Her bold voice raises questions about the importance of freedom to choose a life partner.

Romani Gypsy May Bradley (1902 - 1974) is believed to have been born in Glamorganshire. Hear her sing 'The Trees They Grow So High' by clicking this link.





Oh God Made a Trance



Reservoir Butler, a Traveller, sang Cecil Sharp this song at Armscote in 1913. Originally the carol began *Oh God made a trance*. Reservoir sang a different line: *Oh God's in France*, a clear example of how folk songs can change over time.

For another old Christian song, click this link to hear Romani Gypsy May Bradley (1902 - 1974) sing 'On Christmas Day'. May is believed to have been born in Glamorganshire.



Follow this link to read Cecil Sharp's notes, made as Reservoir sang to him.

Execution Song (James MacDonald)

*You young and old, I now make bold,
I hope you will draw near,
This is one of the cruellest murders,
That ever you will hear.*

*'Tis of a lovely fair maid,
Her age was scarce sixteen,
Her beauty bright, our heart's delight
The fairest ever seen...*

*In private there we courted,
Till I got her with child,
And then to her precious life,
A plan I did contrive...*

*What she said was all in vain,
I gave her a dreadful blow,
And with a heavy loaded whip,
I left her in her gore.*



When Cecil Sharp met Traveller Betsy Holland in 1933 she was, in his words, *cooking over a large kettle and her husband Henry eating a large dumpling with a pocket knife*. In this placid domestic scene, Betsy sang a dark and highly ornamented murder ballad.

To hear another ballad about murder, listen to 'In London's Fair City' sung by Scottish Traveller Belle Stewart (1906 - 1997), [click here](#):



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With thanks, we acknowledge the important research conducted by David Sutcliffe and Yvette Staelens. To explore David's website, 'Cecil Sharp's People' and to read Yvette's paper 'English folk music on the margin - Cecil Sharp's Gypsies', click these links:



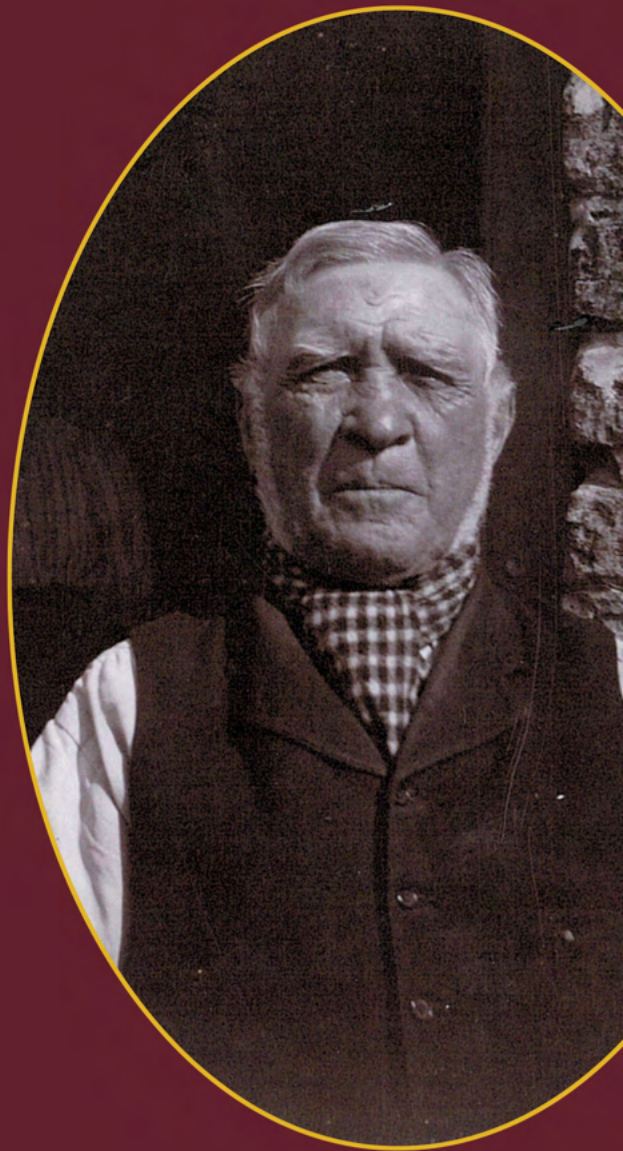
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Singers
- photographed by Cecil Sharp,
with thanks to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

Get in Touch

There are lots of stories in the archive we haven't had space to tell, like that of this man, Tom Cave (1828 - 1913), a horse dealer, dancer and fiddle player from Evercreech.

If you've got a story connected with the archive that you'd like to share, we'd love to hear from you.



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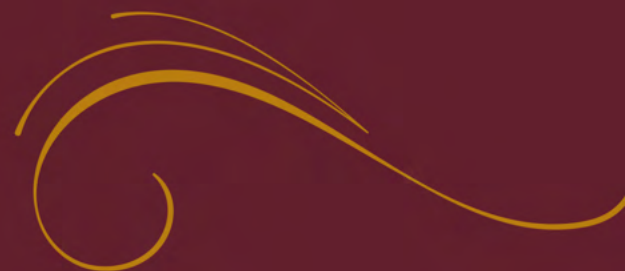
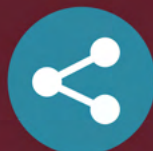
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Read the EFDSS Blog 'Gypsy and Traveller Voices in Archives' to find out more about the origins of this project.



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