

## Folk Education Network Folk Education Development Day

**Cambridgeshire Music**  
**Wednesday 19 November 2025**

**Theme: Working with Rural Communities**

Presented by EFDSS in partnership with Cambridgeshire Music,  
and hosted online by Live to Your Living Room



Photo by Rachel Elliott, © EFDSS

## Report by Charlie Turner

Participants gathered at Cambridgeshire Music's site at Histon, north of Cambridge, and online via Zoom, thanks to the partnership between EFDSS, Cambridgeshire Music and Live to Your Living Room putting on the event. The hybrid setup was carefully thought through, with "Zoomlanders" (online) and "Inlanders" (in person) all able to contribute and share in the day.

Stu Hanna of Megson shared his insights from building up their Family Folk Show over the last 15 years, events which he and his wife Deb have built up and perform alongside numerous school visits. These events, mostly aimed at 0-8 year olds, provide a musical introduction, lively actions, and a gateway into folk music for young children and their grown-ups. It was great to have Stu's live music to illustrate the story - complete with actions and dance including Makaton signs and the "banjo wiggle"!

Hannah Mears-Young, programme manager of the EFDSS National Youth Folk Ensemble and Rachel Elliott, Education Director at EFDSS, shared good news of the Ensemble, now in their 10th year. This group of talented young musicians aged 14-18 are brought together to make music encompassing a range of folk traditions in England, including Bhangra, Brazilian and Haitian music as well as music originating from Britain and Ireland. Excitingly, their activities are youth-voice-led, with young people engaging in the creative process of building their own arrangements. They are regularly invited to perform at festivals, and also run an engagement programme, giving an impact far beyond the young people in the ensemble themselves.

Erin Brown of Comhaltas in Britain explained how this Irish folk music organisation operates worldwide. She told us about the regions and branches in Britain, including regional and national Fleadhanna competitions, which she described as an opportunity for all levels of musicians to work towards and perform and connect. She shared the activities of the lively Cambridge branch, with 80 students currently learning to play via their aural-based methods. The sense of community and growth came through strongly in her presentation and it was great to hear about performances and workshops locally and beyond.

Matthew Gunn, head of Cambridgeshire Music, gave a video demonstration of a new online music tool Bonza, which minimises lag to allow musicians to play together in real-time over the platform. This impressive piece of new technology shows great promise for virtual music-making collaborations over distance, connecting potentially geographically isolated people as never before. He also outlined Cambridgeshire Music's Folk & Global Strategy for the next 5 years, and is keen to have input from workshop participants.

After a lunch break and time spent networking, Prue Ward shared her path from classical training to folk music (and more), with a focus on her work at Cambridgeshire Music and accessible approaches to music. She led a hands-on workshop: participants both in person and online were invited to try unfamiliar instruments (even if sourced from their own kitchen pots and pans!) and play with making sounds, rhythm, improvisation and collaborative composition! The fun and self-expression I experienced really had me reflecting on my own practice in teaching dance and how I might use such an open-ended, exploratory approach.

David Brookhouse and Francesca Goodhart presented their work for both Heritage Learning Lancashire and the newly formed Beyond Borders organisation. Their work across Lancashire serves many geographically dispersed rural communities, where the creative arts are often hard to access and hence unfamiliar to the children they serve. The breadth of their work, on dozens of projects with hundreds of schools, was inspirational - as are the folk musicians, magicians, dancers and other artists with whom they work. They even run a free clog loan service whereby schools can borrow class sets of clogs for children to learn clog dancing - complete with video tutorials to support teachers learning alongside their students. There was some interesting dialogue around the role of performance in folk education, and how to help students experience accomplishment and success in other ways.

The final presentation of the day was from Becky Burrell and Hazel Beale of Cambridge Folk Festival. In 2026 the main event will be held on 1-2 August at Cherry Hinton Hall, but we also heard how the folk festival is to be woven into the city itself through the year, with multiple venues and lots of opportunity to reach a wider audience for folk across the city. They are also partnering again with Cambridgeshire Music to provide a youth folk summer school, culminating in a performance at the Festival.

Apart from the presentations themselves, the opportunity to meet others involved in folk music and dance in the area and beyond was really welcome, and it was a warm and friendly atmosphere. All in all, an engaging day with a variety of interesting speakers with lots to reflect on and take away!

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**Charlie Turner** is a folk dancer, caller and organiser. As a caller of American contra and squares, English country dance and ceildh, and a teacher of balfolk, she helps dancers find their groove, with clear, friendly teaching and satisfying dance selections. She emphasises connection, fun, flow and inclusivity in dance, and aims to build a welcoming dance community. She is a founder of Balfolk Cambridge and of Cambridge's gender-free contra dance series, Contrabridge.

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