

Beginners' Guide to English Folk Song



Granny's Attic. Photo: Maria Alzamora, 2021.

Hazel Askew



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



English Folk Dance and Song Society

The English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) is the national folk arts development organisation for England, which champions folk dance and music at the heart of England's rich and diverse cultural landscape. EFDSS is based at Cecil Sharp House, Camden, England, which is home to its Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML), England's national folk music and dance library and archive, which provides free online access to thousands of searchable folk materials. We are a registered charity, a membership organisation, and a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England. We enable people, of all ages and backgrounds, to experience high quality, relevant and inspiring folk arts learning, in schools, with music hubs, and cultural organisations across England. We run the National Youth Folk Ensemble, London Youth Folk Ensemble, and our Inclusive Folk programme for learning disabled young people, and other youth activities. We also deliver professional development opportunities for educators and run the national Folk Education Network. Our award-winning Resource Bank provides many free teaching and learning resources.

The Full English was a nationwide project led by EFDSS in partnership with cultural organisations across England which took place 2012 – 2014. It made over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning programme. It was supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the National Folk Music Fund, and The Folklore Society.

Resource Credits:

Written by Hazel Askew, 2025.

Original version by Gavin Davenport, produced by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), June 2014.

Copyright © English Folk Dance and Song Society, 2025

- If not specified and credited otherwise, pictures are copyright of EFDSS.
- Permission is granted to make copies of this material for non-commercial educational purposes.
- Permission must be sought from EFDSS for any other use of this material.

EFDSS is a Registered Charity in England and Wales No.3050999

This resource, with the accompanying audio files and video, is freely downloadable from the EFDSS Resource Bank:

<https://www.efdss.org/learning/resources/beginners-guides/51-english-folk-music>

Contents

How to Use this Resource	5
A Note on Historical Context	6
Introduction: English Folk Song	7
What is a folk song?	7
English folk song and its connections	8
Where they are sung	9
How they are learnt	10
Collectors	11
The Roud Index.....	13
How they are sung	14
An evolving tradition	16
Some challenges in singing English folk songs.....	17
Folk Singers.....	18
Types of Folk Song.....	19
Ballads	19
Broadside Ballads	21
Border Ballads.....	22
Carols.....	23
Chorus Songs	24
Cumulative Songs	24
Lullabies and Dandling Songs.....	24
Lyric Songs	25
Nursery Rhymes and Singing Games	26
Street Cries	27
Wassails.....	28
Work Songs	29
Lace Tells.....	29
Sea Shanties.....	30

Themes.....	32
Cross-Dressing and the Performance of Gender	32
Customs	33
Comedy.....	34
Drinking Songs.....	34
Historic Events and Figures	34
Heroes and Villains	35
Factories and Industry.....	35
Folklore and Magic.....	36
Gypsy and Traveller Songs	37
Love	39
Mining Songs	40
Night Visiting Songs	41
Poaching and Hunting.....	41
Politics and Protest	42
Religion	44
Rural Life.....	44
Sailors and Soldiers	45
Further Reading.....	46
Other Related EFDSS Resources.....	46
Other Beginners' Guides in this series	46
Other Sources	47

How to Use this Resource

This resource is an introduction to English folk song and is designed as the first step for someone interested in the subject. It gives an overview of these songs today, as well as some of their history. It will also give an insight into where and how they are sung, how they are learnt, different types of song and some of the main themes they contain.

This resource assumes some basic musical knowledge, such as what 'chord' means, or the concept of 'harmonisation'.

Song examples are listed with their Roud number (see the section below on the Roud Index). If you want to find these songs, they are easily searchable with their Roud number online, or you can search on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library digital archives, using their Roud number or title in the search field.

1. How to find the search field on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website:



2. How to search on the website using a Roud number:

Search the VWML Archive catalogues 

Advanced search

text ▾

within


Date range

From

Options

- Results that match in **all** of the above fields
- Results that match in **any** of the above fields

Click to choose field(s)

- Title
- Reference number
- First line
- Place
- Roud number** 
- Performer
- Collector

A Note on Historical Context

Historical materials held by the VWML may contain content considered offensive by modern standards. Teachers are advised to check these links before sharing with students as materials may need contextualising.

Introduction: English Folk Song

This resource is a guide to the wealth of songs that are currently understood as English folk songs. These songs are part of a global family of musics that are shared from person to person over generations, often referred to using terms such as 'folk', 'traditional', 'roots', 'heritage' or 'old songs'.

What is a folk song?

There is no universal agreement about what is or isn't a folk song. The term was first used in the 19th century to describe the music of 'the people', which meant songs people sung for their own and others' entertainment at a time before recorded music, television or internet. Before then, these 'folk' songs would have just been referred to as 'songs'.

People often use the term 'folk song' to refer to traditional songs - old songs that have been passed from person to person over time in what is known as an oral (or aural) tradition. Many of these songs began as authored, printed pieces, but were anonymous or the original creator has been forgotten. People also still write new folk songs today, some of which enter contemporary oral singing traditions.

Today, the word 'folk' is also used commercially to describe a genre of music, just as you have jazz, classical and pop etc. This genre has no fixed boundaries, but usually describes traditional music and music connected to or influenced by traditions. However, it is sometimes also to describe a broader range of musics that might also come under headings such as 'acoustic', or 'singer-songwriter'.

This resource defines English folk songs as English language songs sung in England, that are part of, or have connections to, oral traditions - whilst acknowledging broader ranges of definition.

English folk song and its connections

Like folk songs from other parts of Britain and Ireland, English folk songs draw on a broad range of sources, such as:

- ancient ballads.
- popular songs.
- songs from plays and pleasure gardens.
- music hall songs.
- songs with unknown authorship or provenance.
- music composed by singers from oral traditions.
- music composed by contemporary folk performers.

Some folk songs deal with local and specifically English events or themes. However, many folk songs popular in England were also popular in other places too and were circulated orally and by print. Sometimes a song that is famous for being from one place or country, could actually have originated in another, and sometimes we don't have enough historical records to know the whole story.

This means there is sometimes no clear-cut separation between English language folk songs from England and from other places. This is true in today's global society, as well as historically, when oral singing traditions were much stronger.

English folk songs are related to the songs of many other places, including:

- songs from other parts of Britain and Ireland - songs travelled between these countries as people did, and you can find many versions of the same song or story, but with differences in words and tune. This sometimes makes it difficult to know where a song originated from.
- songs from other places in Europe - you can often find similar stories and folklore in English and European folk songs, even when they are in different languages.
- songs from places such as North America and Australia, where large numbers of English people moved for varied and complex reasons including colonialism, the transportation of prisoners, and economic migration.
- sea songs and shanties from other parts of the world, as sailors from different countries often worked alongside each other as they travelled around, and shared songs and musical ideas.

Where they are sung

Anyone can sing an English folk song. They don't need to be studied for years before you can sing them and join in with other singers. Historically, these songs were social songs and would have been sung in front of, or with, people you knew from your community, in the way that Christmas carols or football chants are sung now. However, this changed during the 20th century and you can now hear folk songs sung on stages too.

Today you can hear folk songs:

- at concerts and at venues performed by professional folk singers.
- at folk clubs, singarounds and open stages, as both performance and participatory music.
- being sung by choirs and other singing groups such as sea shanty singers.
- at folk festivals.
- at community events and celebrations.
- in homes.
- in videos and recordings online.



Singer and musician Angeline Morrison performing at Cambridge Folk Festival 2023.
Photo: Tony Birch, Fatea Magazine.

How they are learnt

English folk songs are part of what is known as an oral (or aural) tradition - music that is passed on from one generation to another through listening and playing, rather than learnt from written sources. However, songs have been collected and written down by people over the last 500 years, and many people nowadays learn them from written sources such as songbooks and archive manuscripts, as well as from recordings and online videos.



Singer and fiddle player Eliza Carthy at Wychwood Music Festival 2007.
Photo: Damian Rafferty.

Collectors

At various times, English folk songs have been a focus for ‘collectors’ who transcribed and recorded songs in order to preserve them. Various people have notated English folk songs ‘source singers’ (singers who have learnt a song from the oral tradition) in the past and some people are still collecting today. The largest period of collecting was the early 20th century, a time when many oral traditions were dying out. This period of time has become known as the first folk revival.

Some well-known collectors from this time include:

- Lucy Broadwood.
- George Butterworth.
- George Gardiner.
- Anne Geddes Gilchrist.
- Percy Grainger.
- Maud Karpeles.
- Frank Kidson.
- Ella Mary Leather.
- Cecil Sharp.
- Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Some of these collectors (such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, George Butterworth and Percy Grainger) used the songs they collected to make arrangements of English folk songs that formed part of their classical music compositions.



Folk song collector, researcher and founder of the Folk Song Society
Lucy Broadwood (1858 - 1929). Photo: public domain.

Collecting folk (or traditional) songs can come with challenges and controversies over issues such as:

- what material is or isn't considered to be a folk song - some collectors didn't include music hall songs or what they considered popular songs, and some removed some words or verses they didn't think were appropriate.
- who the songs were collected from - in the early 20th century, collectors were looking for English folk songs, but focused on certain groups of people, so the records only reflect the music of some of the population in England. For example, more songs were collected from men than women, and collectors rarely ventured outside of working class white communities.
- where the songs were collected - many early 20th century collectors focused on rural areas as this is what they associated with folk song, often ignoring towns and cities.
- what the singers chose, or felt comfortable singing - sometimes people would only share songs they felt were appropriate to sing to a collector from the middle classes.
- the complexities of middle class people collecting working class culture

All these factors mean that English folk song collections are not a complete picture of folk song in England. They are influenced by the opinions of the collector and the values and customs of society at the time.

The fact that English folk songs were collected also means that these constantly evolving songs became recorded in fixed versions, which can often be seen as 'original' or 'authentic', when really they are just a snapshot of one moment in a song's journey.

Nevertheless, the wealth of material gathered at this time is still a great musical and historical resource, much of which can be found in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library online archives.

The Roud Index

The Roud Index is a numbering system for English language folk songs collected from the oral tradition anywhere in the world. Every different song is numbered, with different versions of it having separate entries, but with the same number. An entry in the Roud Index also includes the name of the original singer, date collected, collector, place collected where you can see or hear the song.

The system was invented in the 1970s by Steve Roud and is now hosted on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website, where you can use it to search all the known English language songs from oral traditions. You can also use Roud numbers to search other archives that contain English language folk songs.

You can usually find any folk song's Roud number easily online. It can be very useful for looking up different versions of a song and telling you all the different places in the world it has been sung.

See the 'How to Use this Resource' section above for more information on how to search using a Roud number.



Steve Roud. Photo: EFDSS.

How they are sung

There isn't one 'correct' way to sing an English folk song, and much of it is the personal choice of the singer.

Before the 20th century, singers largely sung unaccompanied without any instrumental backing, but today many people use instruments to 'arrange' a song or make vocal harmonies. There are also many folk, community and other types of choir that sing and perform arrangements of folk songs with multiple vocal parts.



Cecil Sharp House Choir in rehearsal with choir leader Rose Martin, March 2020.
Photo: Rosie Reed Gold.

There are common styles of harmonisation, counter melody, chords and ornamentation (musical decoration), but these are also ultimately the creative choice of the singer/accompanist.

There are also many different styles of vocal delivery when singing English folk songs. For example, some singers use a lot of ornamentation in their singing and others use very little or none.

Conventionally, English folk songs are sung in a way that feels natural and comfortable to the singer, allowing them to communicate the story and meaning of the song. You can sing in your own accent and say the words in a way that feels natural to how you speak them. Singers might change some language or dialect words if they feel unnatural for them to use and in order to avoid imitating an accent that isn't their own.

Unlike in opera or musicals, singers don't usually act out the words. Many traditional singers sing in a way which is fairly understated in order to keep the focus on the songs and the meaning, rather than themselves.

However, it has become traditional to be creative with English folk songs, so experimenting in musical arrangement and vocal delivery is also a part of the contemporary folk performance scene.



Lady Maisery (from left to right: Hannah James, Rowan Rheingans and Hazel Askew) at Underneath the Stars Festival 2023. Photo: Bryan Ledgard.

An evolving tradition

The main traditional element of an English folk song is the melody line (a single line of tune). There is rarely one 'true' version of a song, as they have been shared from person to person over many years and have changed during this process, just as communities have changed over time. The knowledge of who first sang or wrote a song has often been lost and the music has lived on through being played and appreciated by people over the decades and centuries.

Many people who sing English folk songs decide to edit or even rewrite songs. It's common for singers to collate a version of a song from multiple sources (perhaps using a song's Roud number to look at different versions), and even write additional words or change the tune.

You can also find many contemporary English folk songs - new pieces of music where the composers are often known and may still be living. Contemporary folk songs may use the styles, forms and structures of traditional material for inspiration, as well as being influenced by other types of music. Sometimes these songs also become part of the oral tradition and evolve as they are sung by many people over time.



A selection of folk singers.

Top: Shirley Collins, Peggy Seeger. Bottom: Lisa Knapp.

Some challenges in singing English folk songs

A singer of English folk songs has to decide what they feel comfortable singing about and what themes and stories they want to share with the people listening.

As with any historical resource, when looking at old or traditional folk songs, you may come across language, attitudes or stories which have sexist, racist, ableist or other offensive elements. As our values change over time, historical material can become outdated, and we have to make a choice about what is appropriate to sing today. This is an ongoing process that changes all the time and something a folk singer, or anyone working with historical material, has to take into consideration.

Some singers choose to deal with some of these issues by looking at different versions of a song (perhaps by using its Roud number) and picking the one they want to sing, constructing a song from multiple different versions, or perhaps even rewriting some or all of it. And of course, there are some songs a singer will decide are not appropriate to sing.

There are English folk songs about all different elements and experiences of life. This includes difficult topics such as: accounts of historical tragedies, injustices, death, murder, incest, the hunting of foxes, whales, hares and other animals. It is not necessarily inappropriate to sing a song about difficult things - like any form of art, it can show us a different perspective on life, help us to learn by hearing about a different experience, or teach us about a historical event. However, singers have to make a judgement on what they feel comfortable singing about and what an audience might feel comfortable hearing.

A singer also needs to consider whether a song is reporting on a difficult event, or whether it is offering an opinion or biased account of it, and whether they agree with the perspective offered in the song and think it needs to be heard.

How the song is performed can also help to communicate a singer's interpretation of a song and their reasons for singing it. This may be through how it is introduced on stage, or how it is arranged musically.

Folk Singers

Just as with the term 'folk song', there is also no universal agreement about what a folk singer is. Historically, any person singing the popular songs of their community for their own or others benefit was a folk singer (or just a 'singer', before the 19th century).

There are many professional performers whose repertoire is classified as 'English folk song', who have grown from a small group of singers in the 1950s who set out to explore British traditional music, led by people like Ewan MacColl and A. L. Lloyd. They were influenced by American folk song and the work of people like Alan Lomax.

This period became known as the second folk revival, and many revival singers became well respected performers and experts on traditional songs. These new singers in turn explored and collected songs from those people still singing songs that had been handed down through families and communities orally.

Today, there are still many professional and amateur English folk singers. Some of them are influenced by the collections of the first folk revival and/or the singers and styles of performers from the second folk revival. There are also many folk singers who have come to English folk songs in other ways, who are both innovating how the songs are sung and performed, as well as writing new folk songs.



Jon Boden at The Live Room in Saltaire 2021. Photo: Keith Belcher.

Types of Folk Song

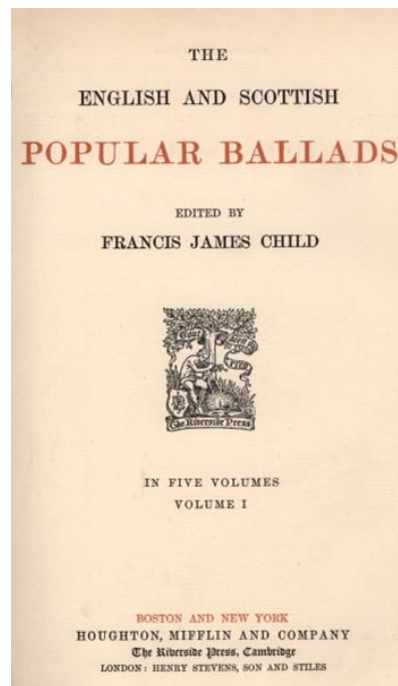
Below are some different types of English folk song you can find. The categories and definitions given are a beginners' guide and are not authoritative or definitive statements. Many songs also will fit into multiple categories, even if they are listed as an example of one.

Ballads

Ballads are a type of narrative folk song. They often have lots of verses and a structurally simple tune. Their stanzas are often four lines long, sometimes with repeated refrain lines in the verse. They often recount folk stories or historic events (with varying degrees of historical accuracy).

Ballads are a storytelling form found across Europe and in North America, and they have strong links to other European storytelling traditions.

During the 18th and 19th centuries there was a wave of interest in ballads that saw traditional songs and stories influencing literary writers, and many poets experimented with this form of storytelling



The 1904 Houghton Mifflin edition of Child's English and Scottish Popular Ballads.
Image: public domain.

In the late 19th century, the texts of many ballads and their variants were famously compiled by scholar Francis J. Child in a publication called 'The English and Scottish Popular Ballads'. 305 ballads were included and numbered and those songs are often referred to as the 'Child Ballads'.

In the 1960s, Bertrand H. Bronson compiled the melodies of many ballads using Child's numbering system in his book 'The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads'. These ballads are included in the Roud Index and both systems of numbering are still referred to today.

Many ballads, and oral singing traditions in general, survived much longer in Scotland and very rural areas, perhaps due to industrialisation and modern methods of entertainment also reaching these places much later. This means that more ballads were collected from these places around the turn of the 20th century, but evidence of transmission shows that ballads were more widely sung in the past.

The term 'ballad' is also used in the modern music industry to refer to slow, romantic pop songs, but these are not connected to folk ballads.

Some examples of ballads:

- The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood - Roud no. 333 (Child Ballad 132).
- The Two Sisters - Roud no. 8 (Child Ballad 10).
- Lord Bateman — Roud no. 40 (Child Ballad 53).

Broadside Ballads

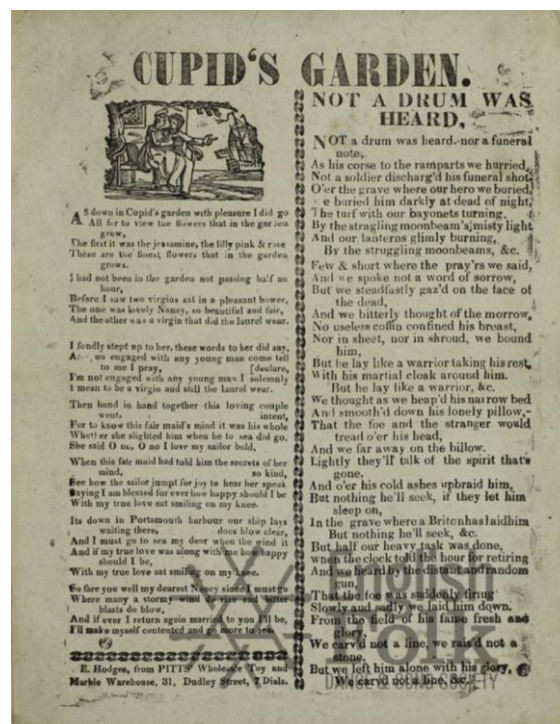
Also known as ‘broadsheet ballads’, these were in many ways the forerunner of the modern newspaper (the term ‘broadsheet newspaper’ is still used today). They were printed on large sheets of cheap paper and typical content included a ballad, a rhyme, news and sometimes woodcut illustrations.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries broadsides were one of the most common forms of printed material, and were mass-produced to tie into any occasion - journalistically recounting the ‘facts’ of a battle, a murder, a wondrous event, or sometimes just reprinting a version of a popular traditional song or ballad.

Songs words would usually be printed without a written melody, and sometimes with a reference to a well-known tune that they could be sung to. They would be sold on the streets by ballad sellers, who would often sing.

Some examples of broadside ballads:

- Maria Marten - Roud no. 215.
- The Woody Queristers - Roud no. 747.
- Cupid’s Garden - Roud no. 297.



A printed broadside that includes the song Cupid’s Garden. Image: from the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library digital archive.

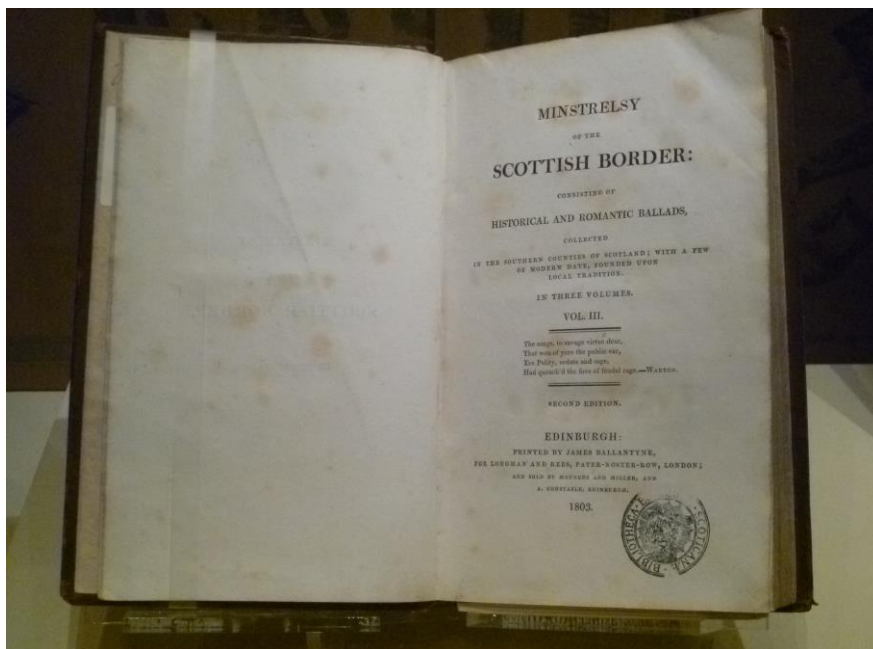
Border Ballads

There are a great number of traditional ballads from the borders between England and Scotland (Lowland Scotland and Northumberland), which are often referred to as 'Border Ballads'.

At points in the 15th and 16th centuries, this area was known for its 'lawlessness' and referred to as the 'Debatable Lands', 'Middle Shires' or 'Scottish Marches'. Clans and families would switch allegiance between the English and Scottish monarchy frequently and groups of 'reivers' would raid and feud as a way to gather wealth and goods.

Border Ballads are often heroic songs celebrating feuds, raids and even elopements on the border.

The popularity of all things Scottish in the Romanticism movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries helped to develop an interest in these songs and inspired later collectors of traditional folk songs.



A copy of 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border' by novelist, poet and historian Walter Scott (1771 - 1832), in the National Museum of Scotland. Photo: Kim Trayner, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Carols

Carols can loosely be described as songs of celebration, usually associated with a particular festivity and sometimes religious in nature. The term derives from the Old French 'carole', which originally referred to a circle dance accompanied by singing.

Today, carols are most strongly associated with Christmas, and there are plenty of these carols in the English folk tradition. Many commonly well-known Christmas carols also have roots in traditional songs and tunes.

There is also a tradition of 'pub carols' (sometimes known as 'folk carols' or 'Sheffield carols') which happen in pubs in the Sheffield/Derbyshire area, and more recently in other parts of the country too. This tradition would have happened all over the country around 200 years ago, when carols were not considered appropriate to sing in church and different villages had their own versions of songs. These carols are generally sung without any religious context and not as part of worship.

There are also many carols in the English folk tradition that celebrate other occasions and festivities, such as May and Easter. There are actually more English folk songs about May than about any other time of the year, except Christmas.

Some example of carols:

- Bedfordshire May Carol - Roud no. 305.
- Seven Joys of Mary. - Roud no. 278.
- The Leaves of Life - Roud no. 127.
- May Song - Roud no. 702.



Singer Lisa Knapp with a garland of May for her 2017 album *Till April is Dead – A Garland of May*. Photo: Teresa Klasener.

Chorus Songs

There are many English folk songs which have a repeated chorus or refrain between the verses. These often were, and still are, an important part of social gatherings, where everyone can join in with the singer on a chorus or repeated refrain.

Sometimes the popularity of a song's chorus is what has kept so many people singing it over time, with the verses being less well-known. A chorus can also help keep listeners engaged in a song, giving a break before the content of the next verse.

Some examples of chorus songs:

- A Farmer's Boy - Roud no. 408.
- Let Union Be - Roud no. 1238.
- If I Were a Blackbird - Roud no. 387.

Cumulative Songs

Cumulative Songs are a particular kind of chorus song where an extra line is added to a repeated refrain every time there's a new verse. These songs develop in length and complexity with each repetition, often for humorous value or to show off the skill and memory of the singer.

Some examples of cumulative songs:

- The Tree in the Wood - Roud no. 129.
- The Barley Mow - Roud no. 944.
- The Twelve Days of Christmas - Roud no. 68.

Lullabies and Dandling Songs

Lullabies and dandling songs are part of a body of songs used for the purposes of soothing or entertaining children. Lullabies are gentle songs intended to help a child sleep, and 'dandling' songs are for singing to a child whilst playfully bouncing them up and down.

Some examples of lullabies and dandling songs:

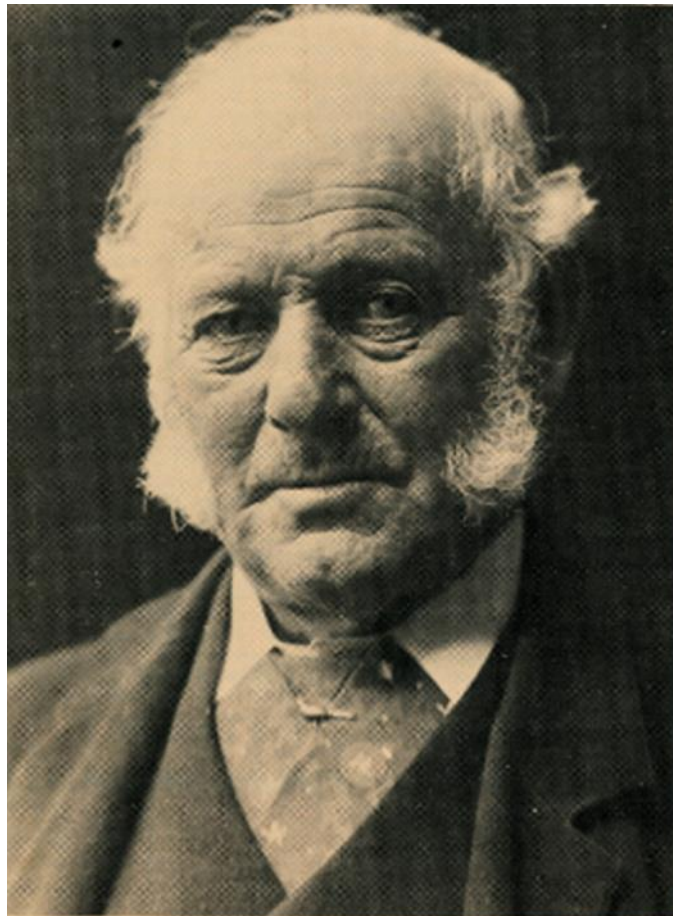
- Dance to Your Daddy - Roud no. 2439.
- Dunston Lullaby - Roud no. 8885.
- Lullaby 'Sleep baby sleep' - Roud no. 0.

Lyric Songs

This category is less well-known but refers to songs which talk about feelings or situations, but don't have a sustained narrative in the same way as a ballad. There are many songs like this in English folk traditions, some of which are philosophical in nature, or might fall into categories such as love songs, or songs in praise of food or drink.

Some examples of lyric songs:

- The Brisk Lad - Roud no. 1667.
- The Winter of Life - Roud no. 1308.
- Died for Love - Roud no. 60.



Singer Joseph Taylor (1833 - 1920) who sang a version of Died for Love to collector Percy Grainger, and later became the first English folk singer to be commercially recorded. Photo: public domain

Nursery Rhymes and Singing Games

Nursery rhymes and singing games are one of the few types of song that still have an oral tradition in England, as children often learn them from their parents or other children. New songs and games, as well as contemporary songs from popular culture, are still being added into this tradition.

Many well-known nursery rhymes can be traced back decades or hundreds of years, and versions were sometimes collected by folk song collectors in the early 20th century.

Some examples of nursery rhymes:

- Humpty Dumpty - Roud. No 13026.
- Sally Jump Over the Stars - Roud no. 11591.
- Who Killed Cock Robin - Roud no. 494.



A pair of children, participating in a Family Barn Dance at Cecil Sharp House, January 2025. Photo: Brian Slater.

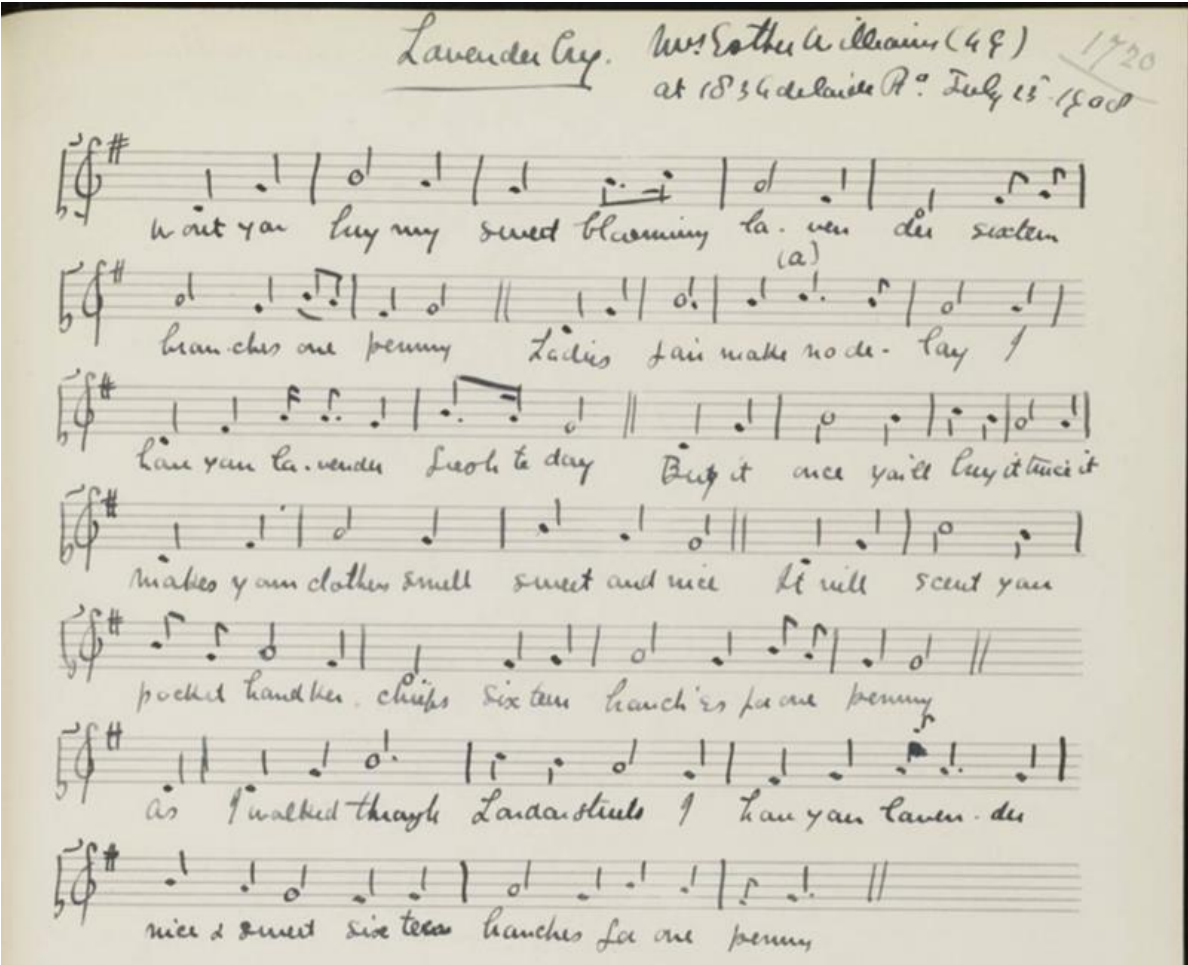
Street Cries

Street Cries are the historical version of the shouts and calls of market traders. They precede the idea of modern advertising by hundreds of years, but were catchy, memorable and distinctive, a bit like a modern jingle.

Many folk song collectors came across street cries when collecting traditional songs and noted them down. You can find songs advertising things such as logs, lavender, feather brooms, strawberries, and eels.

Some examples of street cries:

- Lavender Cry - Roud no. 854.
- Brighton Fish Cry - Roud no. 23439.



*Lavender Cry. Mrs Esther Williams (48) 1920
at 1836 delaware P^o July 23 1908*

*Writ you buy my sweet blossomy la. van des sixteen
branches one penny Ladies fair make no de-lay /
Have you la. vander Look to day Buy it once you'll buy it twice it
makes your clothes smell sweet and nice It will scent your
pocket handkerchiefs sixteen branches for one penny
as I walked through Landon streets I have you laven-des
nice & sweet sixteen branches for one penny*

Cecil Sharp's notation of Esther Williams's Lavender Cry, which she sang to him on 23 July 1908. Image: VWML digital archive.

Wassails

Wassails are songs sung whilst Wassailing - an old English tradition usually celebrated around Twelfth Night (5th January) or Old Twelfth Night (17th January) to welcome in the New Year. The term wassail is thought to come from the Old English 'waes hael' (be thou in good health) and some people think it could have connections with pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon traditions.

Wassailing traditions usually consist of making a wassail (a hot mulled punch often made from cider or apple juice), and taking it from door to door whilst singing and drinking, in a similar way to carol singing traditions.

There are also orchard visiting wassails (especially in the south west of England), where people drink and sing to the health of the trees, sometimes banging pots and pans to scare away evil spirits, so that they might have a good harvest that year.

Wassail songs usually speak about visiting different people in the community and describe the drink, bowl and toasted bread, which is sometimes put in the trees.

There are many different regional variations on wassailing traditions and people still create new versions today, sometimes even wassailing community gardens or allotments.

Some wassail songs include:

- The Gower Wassail.
- Here We Come A-Wassailing.
- Apple Tree Wassail

All wassail songs come under Roud no. 209.



An illustration of wassailers from John Mills, 'Christmas in the olden time' or 'The Wassail Bowl' (1846). Image: public domain

Work Songs

Work songs are sung by people whilst doing rhythmic labour. In England, there aren't many documented examples of rhythmic work songs. In Dorset, folklorist and song collector Peter Kennedy recorded workers at a stone quarry in 1954, who sang together to help them to hammer in time whilst splitting large areas of rock apart. Apart from that, the main work songs sung in England that we know about are lace tells and sea shanties, which you can find out more about below.

Lace Tells

Lacemaking tells are work songs and rhymes that were sung by lacemakers, particularly whilst learning in lace schools. The songs helped them concentrate on their work, with the movement of the bobbins being timed by the beat of the song.

Historically, they were sung unaccompanied and often contain parts of ballads, nursery rhymes and even hymns. Many texts of lace tells have been collected, but very few melodies have survived, however it's assumed that they may have been sung to the same tunes as the various songs they contain parts of.

Some examples of lace tells:

- Nineteen Miles As I Sat High - Roud no. 17769.
- A Lacemaker's Song - Roud no. 1144.



A lace class in Olney, Buckinghamshire in 1918. Image: public domain.

Sea Shanties

Historically, shanties were work songs sung on board sailing ships which helped to coordinate a ship's crew during repetitive jobs, such as raising and lowering the sail, hauling up the anchor and pumping out water from below deck. However, the term shanty is often now expanded as a musical category to include other sea songs.

Sea shanties usually have a call and response form, where verse lines (historically sung by a 'shantyman') are interspersed with refrains and choruses that would be sung by everyone else. The person singing the verse lines would sometimes improvise lyrics.

British sailing ships often had crew members from different places in the world working alongside each other and there are many different musical and linguistic influences on the development of shanties. These include:

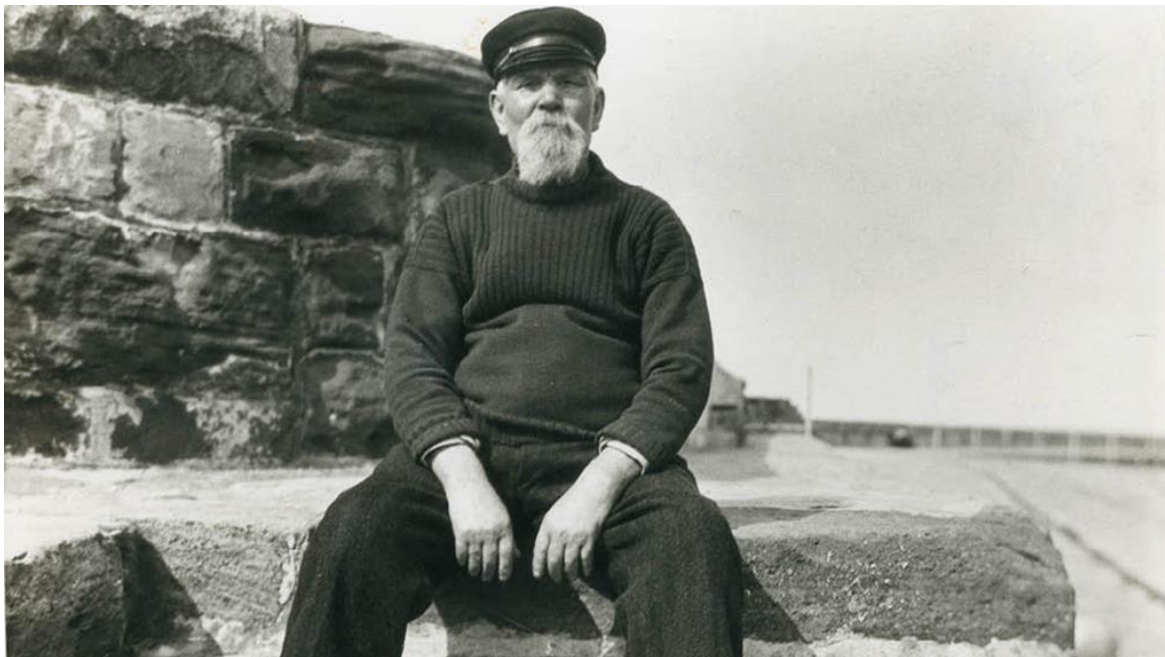
- Traditional British and Irish songs and dances tunes.
- Songs sung by enslaved Africans in America or the Caribbean.
- Spirituals and hymns.
- Other European music/languages such as French, Breton, and Dutch.
- Music and language from other parts of the world, such as Polynesia

Shanties were not permitted in the Royal Navy but were often sung in the Merchant Navy and in the context of trans-Atlantic trade. This means that shanties have historical connections to the trafficking and enslavement of people from Africa, as many ships were trading goods from places that had enslaved workers, and shanties may have been sung on ships that were trafficking people.

The development of steam power and modern methods of shipping meant that the practical usage of shanties as work songs died out in the first half of the 20th century. However, sea shanties are still very popular today and have had various moments where they have entered mainstream consciousness. You can find many sea shanty bands, choirs, singing groups and festivals.

Some examples of sea shanties:

- Santianna - Roud no. 207.
- A Long Time Ago - Roud no. 318
- Let the Bulgine Run - Roud no. 810



John Short (1839 - 1933) from Watchet, Somerset. A sailor and shantyman who later worked as a town crier, from whom Cecil Sharp collected songs. Photo: Cecil Sharp.

Themes

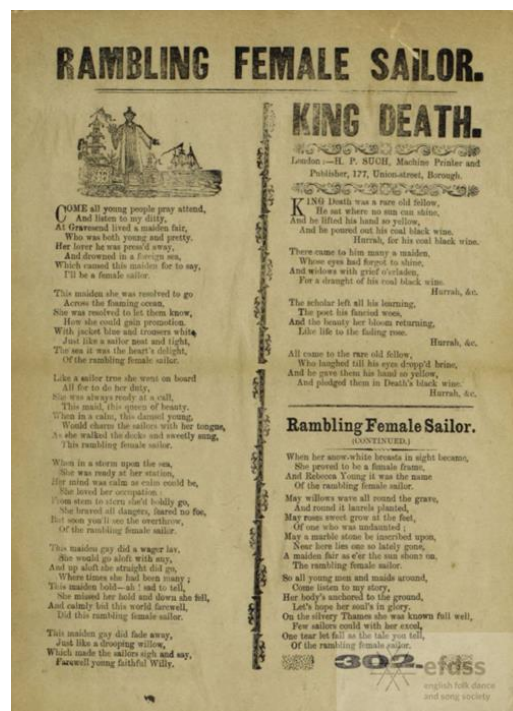
Folk songs have many common themes that have resonated with people throughout different periods of history. Below is an introduction to some of the popular themes found in English folk songs. These categories are listed for convenience and some songs might fall into more than one section.

Cross-Dressing and the Performance of Gender

There are many folk songs that tell stories of cross-dressing, often with women dressing as men. Sometimes this is in order to follow a man they love and sometimes they are pursuing an occupation that was not open to women at the time (such as working the military or on board a ship). This also gave these women an autonomy and freedom that women wouldn't otherwise be able to access in the past.

Some examples of songs about cross-dressing:

- The Female Drummer - Roud no. 226.
- Sovay - Roud no. 7.
- The Female Rambling Sailor - Roud no. 17784.



A printing of The Female Rambling Sailor. Image: VWML digital archive.

Customs

There are many folk songs about customs and traditional celebrations that happen at certain times of year. Often these will be specific to a certain area and their particular traditions.

Types of traditional dance and drama, including processions, morris, longsword and mummer's plays, also have songs related to them.

Some examples of songs about customs:

- Pace-Egging Song - Roud no. 614.
- Earsdon Sword Dance Song - Roud no. 610.
- Padstow May Song - Roud no. 305.



Performers and spectators at the Padstow May Day celebrations in 2007. Photo: Brian Ledgard.

Comedy

Comedic folk songs can contain wordplay, jokes told over several verses, or sometimes even be parodies of other well-known or serious songs. Some have origins in the music hall and were so popular that they entered oral singing traditions. Songs that might have improvised verses (such as sea shanties), also lend themselves to comedic content.

Some examples of comedic songs (content warning: some of these song contain bawdy lyrics):

- Butter and Cheese - Roud no. 510.
- Our Goodman - Roud no. 114.
- Cock-a-doodle-do - Roud no. 3464.

Drinking Songs

People often sing together at special occasions and social gatherings, and as people often drink at these events, there are many folk songs about drinking and having a good time. A lot of these songs celebrate the company in which the singer finds themselves and they often have a chorus that people can join in with.

You can also find songs about the process of making alcohol.

Some songs related to drinking:

- Ye Mariners All - Roud no. 1191.
- Who's the Fool Now? - Roud no. 473.
- John Barleycorn - Roud no. 164.
- Hopping Down in Kent - Roud no. 1715.

Historic Events and Figures

Some folk songs tell stories of famous events, real people and other things that were considered newsworthy and worth commemorating. Often they have changed over time and may not be historically accurate, but they are a great window into societal attitudes to events at different points in time.

Some examples of songs about historic figures and events:

- Peterloo - Roud no. V17535.
- Nelson's Monument - Roud no. 1552.
- The Death of Queen Jane - Roud no. 77

Heroes and Villains

There are many folk songs that tell stories of heroes and villains. These may be folkloric or mythical figures, or true stories of real people, that might have become distorted over time. You can find songs about characters such as Robin Hood, famous pirates and highwaymen, amongst others.

There is also a subsection of songs known as ‘Goodnight Ballads’ - first person accounts of criminals admitting their sins (usually with no regrets) before being condemned to die. Many of these were written by broadside ballad sellers capitalising on popular news stories.

Some examples of songs about heroes and villains:

- Turpin Hero - Roud no. 621.
- Robin Hood Rescuing Three Squires - Roud no. 71.
- Sam Hall - Roud no. 369.

Factories and Industry

With the rise of the industrial revolution, industry was the daily occupation of many people. This means there are songs about the hardships of day to day work in factories and industrial jobs, and also love songs associated with those trades.

Fishing and whaling songs also reflect historical trades that were carried out on a large scale as part of an industrial process.

Some examples of industrial songs:

- The Factory Girl - Roud no. 1659.
- The Poor Cotton Weaver - Roud no. 937.
- The Yarmouth Fishermen’s Song - Roud no. 2434.

Folklore and Magic

Many folk songs contain narratives that include folkloric and magical elements. These can include:

- Ghosts.
- Magical or mythical creatures (often talking creatures).
- Shape-shifting.
- Spells and witches.
- Fairies and elfin people.
- Superstitions.
- Rituals and offerings.

These most commonly occur in ballads (especially in the 'Child Ballads' categorised by F. J. Child).

Sometimes these magical and folkloric elements are very old, appearing in songs recorded hundreds of years ago, and sometimes these elements have been added later in the song's life and are not in all the known versions.

Some examples of songs with folkloric and magical elements:

- The Broomfield Hill - Roud no. 34 (Child Ballad 43).
- The Two Magicians - Roud no. 1350 (Child Ballad 44).
- The Unquiet Grave - Roud no. 51 (Child Ballad 78).



A compilation album made by The Museum of Witchcraft and WildGoose Records featuring versions of traditional songs about witchcraft and magic. Image: Museum of Witchcraft and WildGoose Records, 2007.

Gypsy and Traveller Songs

There are many folk songs in the traditions of Travellers and Gypsies in England, as well as songs that contain narratives about them.

In England, the main ethnic groups that feature under the umbrella term Gypsy and Traveller are Romani Gypsy people, Irish and Scottish Travellers, as well Roma who have arrived in more recent decades (although the histories and terminologies are not straightforward and many groups and individuals prefer different ones).

Gypsies and Travellers in England have a rich history of music, dance and song. These oral traditions continue today and some Travellers and Gypsies have become performers on the folk scene.

Songs from Romani Gypsies and Scottish and Irish Travellers are often connected to traditional folk songs sung by other communities in England. First revival song collectors were very impressed by the singing of Irish and Scottish Travellers and Romani Gypsies, and gathered many songs from them. However, the ethnicity of singers was usually not recorded, so their contributions have often been marginalised and overlooked.

There are also many folk songs with narratives depicting Travellers and Gypsies. Often they are portrayed in a stereotyped, and sometimes appropriated, way, where their lives are romanticised to rambling down winding country roads and camping beneath the stars. In these songs, the travelling way of life often becomes a motif of escapism and a way for a non-travelling person to break free from the constraints and conventions of English society. This is in stark contrast to the racism Gypsies and Travellers have experienced historically, as well as in the present day. As a result, care has to be taken when thinking about singing these songs and what is appropriate.

Some examples of Gypsy and Traveller songs:

- What Will We Do When We'll Have No Money - Roud no. 16879.
- The Squire and the Gypsy - Roud no. 229.
- I'd be a Gypsy - Roud no. 17498.



Priscilla Cooper (1865 - unknown), who was listed in the 1901 census as a 'travelling Gypsy' and was probably one of the first Gypsy singers to be recorded in the UK when Cecil Sharp visited her in Devon in 1907/8. Photo: Cecil Sharp.

Love

Just like in pop songs, 'love' is probably the most common subject in folk songs. These songs range from happy ones to tragically sad tales. Sometimes love is just a strand of the narrative and part of a wider story, and in other cases it is the whole point of the song.

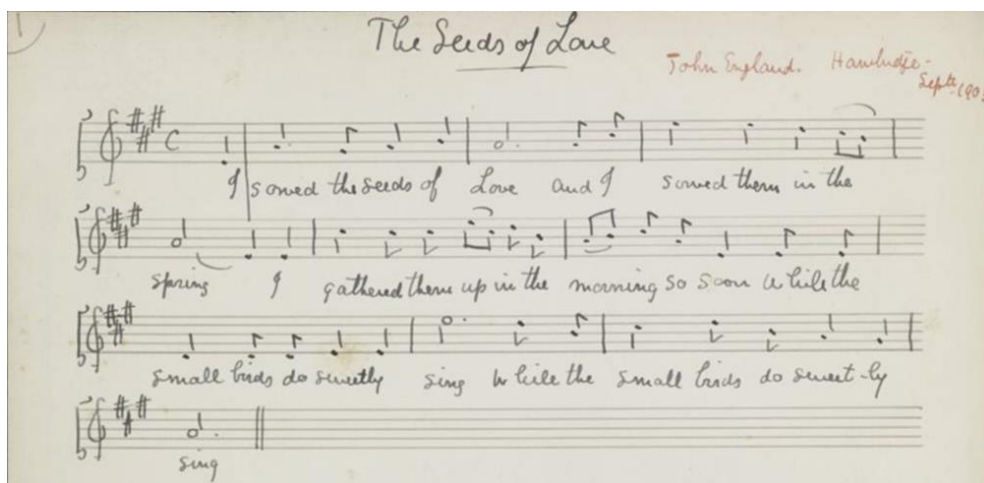
There are also a subset of folk songs about romantic love, which use floral, herbal and tree symbolism to tell stories. Common symbols are:

- Rose - love, sensuality, passion.
- Willow - sadness, grief, particularly a feminine sadness.
- Violet - modesty, faithfulness, everlasting love.
- Rue - regret, sadness.
- Thyme - courage, bravery - sometimes having a double meaning with 'time'.
- Lily - innocence, purity, virginity.

As well as songs about romantic love, there are also English folk songs about other kinds of love such as familial love or love for your country.

Some examples of songs about love:

- The Turtle Dove - Roud no. 455.
- The Tan Yard Side - Roud no. 1021.
- The Seeds of Love - Roud no. 3.
- The Wife of Usher's Well - Roud no. 196 (Child ballad 79).



Cecil Sharp's notation of John England's singing *The Seeds of Love* in Somerset in 1903. This is the first folk song Sharp collected and is sometimes seen as the start of the first revival song collecting movement. Image: VWML digital archive.

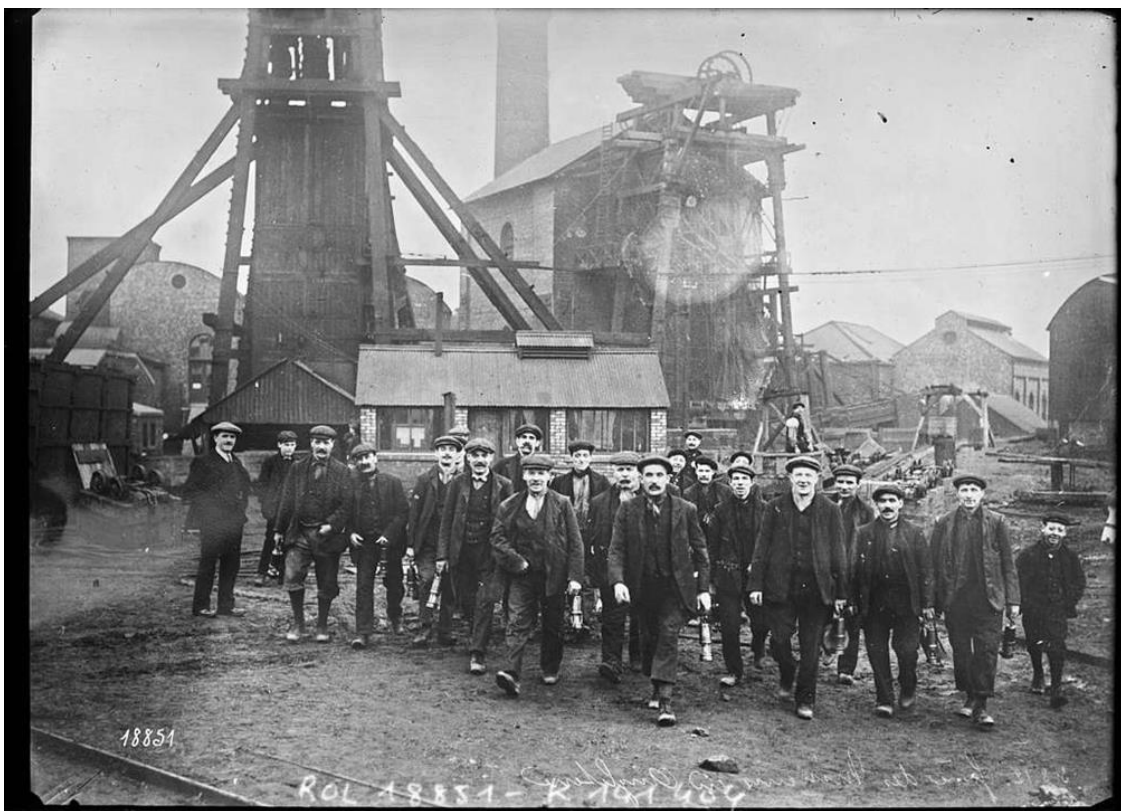
Mining Songs

The history of mining in England goes back to Roman times and it has been an important industry at many points in history. There are far fewer working mines still open today, and some mining and former areas still strongly associated with the industry, such as the north east, the midlands and Cornwall. As a result of this, there are many folk songs about mining and colliers.

Many folk songs about mining were repopularised and politicised by the pit closures and miners' strikes that took place in the latter half of the 20th century, and the devastation this caused to mining communities, the resonance of which is often still felt by people in those areas today.

Some examples of songs about mining:

- Black Leg Miner - Roud no. 3193.
- Byker Hill - Roud no. 3488.
- The Old Miner - Roud no. 1136.



Miners in front of a mine in 1912 during a strike. Image: public domain.

Night Visiting Songs

Night visiting songs tell the story of a secret meeting of lovers at night, often with a man travelling to a woman's house and knocking at the window. The stories usually end with the travelling lover having to leave early in the morning, and quite often going against their promise to marry.

There are many of these narratives in traditional folk songs, and even some recently written songs, and they can vary from being lighthearted, to sad or even ghostly.

Some examples of night visiting songs:

- Cold Haily Windy Night - Roud no. 135.
- Jack the Jolly Tar - Roud no. 511.
- The Lover's Ghost - Roud no. 179 (Child Ballad 179).

Poaching and Hunting

There are many folk songs about poaching (the illegal capturing and killing of animals on land that you don't own or have permission to hunt on), and hunting (the legal capturing and killing of animals on land you do own or have permission to hunt on). These songs are often about the pursuit of animals such as hares, foxes, deer and whales. These include:

- chorus songs intended for communal singing at the end of a day's hunting.
- songs that sympathise with the hunted animal or are from the animal's point of view.
- songs of successful poaching.
- songs about being caught for poaching and the consequences

There is a strong class element to these songs as one of the main differences between hunting and poaching is your place in society and whether you were from a landowning class.

Some examples of songs about hunting and poaching:

- Dido, Bendigo - Roud no. 584.
- In Thorney Moor Woods - Roud no. 222.
- On Yonder Hill There Sits a Hare - Roud no. 5173.
- Geordie - Roud no. 90 (Child Ballad 209)

Politics and Protest

Protest songs have a long history in the world and are sometimes categorised as a separate genre, but they are also very much part of English folk singing traditions.

England has a rich history of protest and this is reflected in English folk songs. You can find songs about specific marches and protests, songs that directly protest about something or have a political message, and also songs that are sung at protests.

There are many historical English folk songs of protest, including ones that oppose political injustice, personal injustice, class based oppression, or voice anti-war sentiments.

There are also many modern and contemporary English protest and anti-war songs. These can be seen as growing out of the protest song movement in 1950s USA, which aligned with issues such as civil rights, the women's movement and anti-war movements.

The very nature of folk song is also inherently democratic, as a particular song would only be sung and remembered if people liked it and kept singing it. English folk songs are also rarely associated with the ruling classes and so more closely reflect the general public's values and opinions. Broadside ballad sellers would pick up on these values and create lyrics aligned with them, as songs that reflected the public's opinions would sell better.

Some anti-war and protest songs:

- The Factory Operatives Call on Humanity - Roud no. V16539.
- Diggers' Song - Gerrard Winstanley - Roud no. 1521.
- I Wish the Wars Were All Over - Roud 2036.
- The Crow on the Cradle - Sydney Carter.



Women at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the 1980s, singing in protest against plans to store US nuclear weapons there. Photo: Bridget Boudewijn, from Greenham Women Everywhere.

Religion

Some folk songs contain religious, usually Christian, narratives or references. You can find many that are related to festivals such as Christmas and Easter, some that began as church hymns and subsequently entered oral folk singing traditions.

There are also many ‘apocryphal songs’ - songs that contain religious stories or texts that are not part of an accepted canon of scripture.

Some examples of songs with religious themes:

- The Bitter Withy - Roud no. 452.
- The Good Old Way - Roud no. 23864.
- The Cherry Tree Carol - Roud no. 453.
- The Seven Joys of Mary - Roud no. 278.

Rural Life

There are many folk songs about rural and farming life, or that are set in the countryside. This is partly because song collectors often focused on rural areas, due to their biases about what a folk song was, as well as longstanding associations of ‘folk’ with rural people and an idealised pastoral lifestyle.

Historically there have been many people living in the countryside, and it was only from 1851 that Britain became the first place in the world with more people living in towns and cities than in rural areas. This potentially contributed to a feeling of nostalgia towards rural life, as well as the element of escapism it can offer, sentiments which can still be seen in today’s world.

You can find songs about traditional rural activities such as hay-making, sheep-shearing and harvesting, as well as many songs with a rural setting. Some of these songs are the reflections of people who lived and worked in the countryside and some are romantic exaggerations, written by urban songwriters with a rose tinted view of country life.

Some examples of songs about rural life:

- The Jolly Thresher - Roud no. 19.
- Rosebud in June - Roud no. 812.
- The Merry Haymakers - Roud no. 153.

Sailors and Soldiers

Aside from sea shanties sung on board ships (see above), there are many other folk songs about sailors, as well as soldiers. These range from stories of:

- heroic deeds.
- romantic liaisons - both couples parted through service, or the casual liaisons of visiting sailors and soldiers.
- press gangs forcibly conscripting people into the military.
- desertion and the consequences.
- women cross-dressing in order to become a sailor or soldier.
- historical tales of battle (with varying degrees of accuracy).

Some songs also celebrate people who may not have been decorated by history, showing how the songs people sang and passed on were not (and are still not) controlled by an establishment, but instead reflect the opinions and values of real people. A common example of this is songs which are sympathetic to (or even pro) Napoleon, as it's believed some people thought he would come and rescue them from their poverty in England.

Some songs about sailors and soldiers:

- Polly on the Shore - Roud no. 811.
- The Deserter - Roud no. 493.
- Our Captain Cried - Roud no. 602.
- The Blue Cockade - Roud no. 191.
- The Young Sailor Cut Down in His Prime - Roud no. 2.
- The Grand Conversation on Napoleon - Roud no. 1189.

Further Reading

All links correct at time of publication.

Other Related EFDSS Resources

A Sailor's Life – for [KS1](#) and [KS2](#)

[Beyond the St Marylebone Workhouse: Songs of London Life Gone By](#)

[Black British History and Folk Songs](#)

[Black Sailors and Sea Shanties](#)

[Black Singers and Folk Ballads](#)

[Creating a New Song Cycle from Traditional Songs](#)

[Folk Chorus Songs Selection](#)

[Gypsy and Traveller Voices in Archives](#)

[Sea Songs and Shanties for Tall Ships](#)

[Seven Songs of Harvest](#)

[Singing Histories – London](#)

Other Beginners' Guides in this series

[Beginners' Guide to English Folk Collectors](#)

[Beginners' Guide to English Instrumental Folk Music](#)

[Beginners' Guide to English Folk Drama](#)

[Beginners' Guide to British Folk Customs: May](#)

[Beginners' Guide to British Folk Customs: From Plough Monday to Hocktide](#)

Other Sources

[Bodleian Libraries: Broadside Ballads Online](#)

[English Broadside Ballad Archive - University of California at Santa Barbara](#)

[Mainly Norfolk - a modern archive of contemporary recordings of traditional songs](#)

[Local Carols](#)

[Village Carols](#)



At the English Folk Dance and Song Society, we champion the folk arts at the heart of England's rich and diverse cultural landscape.

Our award-winning Resource Bank contains over 100 resources – incorporating hundreds of audio files, videos and supporting documents, all free to download. They offer endless practical ways to use folk song, music, dance, drama and more in all sorts of community settings, as well as in formal education.

efdss.org/resourcebank

Please help us keep our learning resources freely available for all!

**Support us now:
efdss.org/donate**

