



# Beginners' Guide

## English Folk Music



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## *The Full English*

The Full English was a unique nationwide project unlocking hidden treasures of England's cultural heritage by making over 58,000 original source documents from 12 major folk collectors available to the world via a ground-breaking nationwide digital archive and learning project. The project was led by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and in partnership with other cultural partners across England.

The Full English digital archive ([www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)) continues to provide access to thousands of records detailing traditional folk songs, music, dances, customs and traditions that were collected from across the country. Some of these are known widely, others have lain dormant in notebooks and files within archives for decades.

The Full English learning programme worked across the country in 19 different schools including primary, secondary and special educational needs settings. It also worked with a range of cultural partners across England, organising community, family and adult learning events.

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## Introduction

English Folk Music is a diverse and broad genre made up of songs and tunes from across the country. There are also strong connections with related traditions of the British Isles, Europe, America, and further afield.

English Folk Music is often recognised as being music that contains elements passed on from one generation to another often with some element of **oral** (or aural) **transmission** – that is, it is passed from one person to another learning by ear rather than from books or recordings or written notation. That is only one aspect of folk music though, and nowadays (and in the past) many people learn music and songs from recordings of other singers or find material in books.

English Folk Music encompasses strong regional traditions that are evident through differences of style, form, purpose and instrumentation. There is rarely one 'true' version of a tune. One tune will have different variations in rhythm, pitch and melody depending on the place in which you hear it, and how the tune is used e.g. if it is being used for accompanying dancing, or it is being played on its own. Tunes also vary depending on how folk collectors transcribed them, and subsequently shared them in publications etc. The diversity and variety of tunes is an important characteristic of the music.

A lot of English Folk Music is considered **traditional** in origin, meaning music that is passed along over generations, but might change to reflect the changes within the community over time. The knowledge of who first wrote or played the tune has been lost through time. The tunes have lived on through being played and appreciated by musicians and listeners over the decades and centuries. Traditional music has also been a focus for 'collectors' who have recorded and transcribed music in efforts to preserve it for posterity, and to make it available to others.

There is now also a lot of English Folk Music that is **contemporary** – the composers are known, and may be still living, composing and playing. Contemporary folk tunes, songs and dances may use the styles, forms and structures of the traditional material



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for inspiration, as well as being influenced by other traditions and other types of music.

You can hear English Folk Music at sessions and concerts, at social dances (ceilidhs/barn dances) and with performance dance (morris, rapper, clog, longsword etc.) and at festivals, competitions and celebrations (religious and secular).

Please browse through the other slides in this gallery which provide information on:

- Types of Tune
- Tune Examples
- Instruments
- Players
- Further links

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## Types of Tunes

Tunes can be used in many different ways – as songs, instrumental listening pieces, marking special occasions and as accompaniment for social and performance dances. Dances have travelled across regional and national borders for centuries, and been enjoyed by all sections of communities – from royal courts to village squares. This accounts for some of the similarities between the types of tunes used in English folk music and those found in the British Isles, Europe, America, and further afield.

Folk tunes in the British Isles and England in particular are grouped by their rhythmic characteristics or time signatures; often this is because they are the traditional tune for a particular type of dancing. Just as people dance at weddings, clubs and discos, in the past social dancing formed an important part of family and community gatherings and live music played a huge part in this.

Common types of English tunes are **jigs**, **reels**, **hornpipes**, **polkas** and **waltzes** though there are other types as well. The tune types are grouped by the same names as the dances.

The structure of a traditional tune is usually quite short. A typical English folk tune will be made up of an 8 bar phrase (commonly called an 'A' part), which repeats, and then a subsequent 8 bar phrase ('B' part), which also repeats. In practice, the whole piece (AABB) would be played through a few times before finishing the tune. It is common for tunes to be played in 'sets' – one tune played a few times, followed by a second complementary tune – before stopping or continuing into additional tunes.

There are, of course, lots of exceptions to the 'typical' example above – with some tunes having more bars within each part, or not repeating some of the parts, or tunes having several different parts, and sometimes repeating different parts at different times!

## Tune example: Jig

Tunes in compound time (6/8, 9/8, 12/8), used for dances such as Circassian Circle.

The term 'jig' may derive from an old French word, *giguer*, which translates as 'to leap' or 'to gambol'. Jigs come in a variety of styles, but basically a single or double jig is denoted with the time signature 6/8 and a slip jig has a 9/8 time signature on written music. The jig has notes usually group in threes, with a 'bumpy' feel. Think of tunes like Humpty Dumpty and Blaydon Races.

### The Queen's Jig

Collected from Will Rolf by George Butterworth, 1912, Bucknell, Oxfordshire  
[www.vwml.org/record/GB/7d/18](http://www.vwml.org/record/GB/7d/18)

Trad. Arr. Rob Harbron

Chord symbols for the first staff: G, C, D, G, C, D, G

Chord symbols for the second staff: G, C, D, G, C, D, G

Chord symbols for the third staff: Am, C, D, G, Am, D

Chord symbols for the fourth staff: G, C, D, G, C, D, G, D, G

The Full English: [www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)  
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## Tune example: Reel

Tunes in simple time (2/4, 4/4, 2/4), used for dances such as the Dashing White Sergeant.

Probably of Scottish origin, the word reel can mean a whole dance, a particular movement or a tune in even time. The Anglo-Saxon word is hreol, and rulla is interpreted as 'to whirl'. According to Grove's Dictionary, the first specific written reference occurred in 1590, so reels are very much part of the musical heritage of the British Isles.

Think of tunes like Bobby Shaftoe, Knees Up Mother Brown, or Coming Round the Mountain.

### Country Dance (Henry Cave's)

Collected from Henry Cave by Cecil Sharp  
11 Sept 1907, Midsomer Norton, Somerset  
[www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/1488](http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/1488)

Trad. Arr. Rob Harbron

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## Tune Example: Hornpipe

An indigenous musical rhythm to England, Scotland and Wales, but strangely enough, not to Ireland, although of course, today, hornpipe figure strongly in the musical repertoire of Irish musicians. The hornpipe as a dance has been known in England since the 15th Century and is still very popular.

Hornpipes are common written in 4/4 time (like reels). However, they are often played with a 'dotted' or 'swung' feel. There are also some hornpipes written in 3/2 time which are particularly popular with English traditional musicians.

### The Evercreech Hornpipe

Collected from Tom Cave by Cecil Sharp, Evercreech, Somerset, 11 Sept 1907  
[www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/1492](http://www.vwml.org/record/CJS2/10/1492)

Trad. Arr. by John Kirkpatrick

The musical score for 'The Evercreech Hornpipe' is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of six staves of music. The first two staves contain the main melody with triplets. The third staff includes a first and second ending. The fourth staff contains a bass line with chords. The fifth and sixth staves continue the melody and bass line, also featuring triplets and a first/second ending.

The Full English: [www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)  
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## Tune example: Polka

This rhythm and dance probably came from what is now the Czech and Slovak Republics and is presumed to have originated from a Bohemian folk dance. It was introduced in Prague society in 1837 and a Prague dancing master introduced it to Paris in 1840. The polka went on to become a popular dance rhythm throughout Britain and Europe.

Polkas are commonly written in 2/4 time, and are very lively.

### New Jenny Lind Polka

Collected by Frank Kidson  
[www.vwml.org/record/FK/6/26](http://www.vwml.org/record/FK/6/26)

Traditional



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## Tune example: Waltz

In 3/4 time, the waltz is a smooth and flowing type of tune from the 16th century that has become widely popular across Britain and Europe.

### Miss Dillon's Waltz

Collected in Yorkshire by Anne Geddes Gilchrist  
[www.vwml.org/record/AGG/2/139/20a](http://www.vwml.org/record/AGG/2/139/20a)

Traditional

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## Instruments

Many instruments are traditionally associated with playing English Folk Music – some boast a longer association than others – for instance the pipe and tabor have been used since mediaeval times whilst the concertina was invented in the 1820s.

Instruments vary in the range of notes they are capable of making. Some are fully chromatic and able to play tunes in a variety of keys. Others instruments are limited to one or two scales, restricting the choice of tunes available to the player. However, the limitations of some instruments also encourage invention and creativity in approaches to playing music.

A variety of instruments associated with playing English folk music are described below:

### *Fiddle*

Often tuned identically to a classical violin, it is the technique and style of playing folk music on it that makes it a fiddle. The fiddle has been associated with folk music for many centuries. Recently there has been an increase in popularity of the cello and viola in folk music too.

- Fiddle On <http://www.fiddleon.co.uk>

### *Melodeon*

The melodeon has a set of bellows with buttons (often in two rows) on the right hand side providing the melody by allowing air through banks of reeds. There are fewer buttons on the left hand side, which provide bass notes and chords. The notes on both sides are different depending on whether the bellows are being pushed or pulled by the player. Melodeons usually come in fixed keys: D/G or C/F.

### *Piano accordion*

A set of bellows with a piano keyboard on the right hand side, and plenty of buttons offering bass notes and chords on left hand side. All the notes are the same on the push and pull of the bellows. Accordions are fully chromatic.



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### *Pipe/tabor*

Usually played by one player, the pipe and tabor combination has been used in folk music since mediaeval times. The pipe has mouthpiece at the top and, unlike recorders and tin whistles, it has only 3 holes at the end of its length, as well as the hole at the end of the pipe which lets the blown in air out. This allows the musician to hold and play the pipe with one hand, whilst beating out a rhythm on the tabor (drum) with the other hand.

Pipe and Tabor: <http://www.pipeandtabor.org>

### *Button accordion*

A set of bellows with buttons on the right hand side arranged in 3 rows, playing in the keys of B, C and C#. This allows the instrument to be fully chromatic. The notes on this side are different on the push and pull of the bellows. There are buttons on the left hand side, which provide bass notes and chords (as the piano accordion) – and are the same on push or pull of the bellows.

### *Concertina – English, Duet and Anglo*

The English concertina was invented in the 1820s. It has a set of bellows with buttons on either side that play the same notes on the push or pull of the bellows.

The Anglo concertina was invented in the 1830s. It has a set of bellows, with buttons on either side that play different notes on the push or pull of the bellows.

The Duet concertina plays the same note on the push or pull like the English concertina, but has lower notes on the left hand and higher notes on the right hand side for a more piano-like arrangement.

International Concertina Association: <http://www.concertina.org>

### *Percussion*

Many different instruments are used to add and enhance rhythm within folk music. Some of these instruments include spoons, bones, drums, triangle, tambourine.

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## Bagpipes

There is evidence that bagpipes were played across England from the 13th century.

- **Northumbrian Pipes:** developed in the North East towards the end of the 18th century. These are quiet, bellows blown pipes.
- **Lowland and Border Pipes:** Played in the North of England and the Lowlands of Scotland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Border Pipes are currently undergoing a renaissance.
- **And many others**, including Lincolnshire bagpipes, Leicestershire Small pipes, Double Pipes from Cornish and England – see [www.goodbagpipes.co.uk](http://www.goodbagpipes.co.uk) for further information.

## Links

- Northumbrian Pipers Society: [www.northumbrianpipers.org.uk](http://www.northumbrianpipers.org.uk)
- [www.bagpipesociety.org.uk/bagpipe-guide/](http://www.bagpipesociety.org.uk/bagpipe-guide/)

## *Other popular instruments include:*

- Recorder
- Flute
- Banjo
- Whistles
- Mandolin
- Guitar
- Dulcimer
- Harp
- Harmonica
- Jews/Jaws harp

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## Musicians

There are hundreds of amateur folk musicians who play English folk music at home, in sessions, for dancing and celebrations. There are also lots of professional folk musicians who perform at folk clubs, arts centres, other cultural venues, and for folk dances, festivals, and special occasions.

Musicians have helped keep the folk material alive over the centuries. They have played the tunes and passed them on orally. They have also been recognised and listened to by collectors, who have commented, notated and recorded their interpretations of what they heard. This has enabled future generations to keep playing the material.

Sadly, there is often very little known about the original source performers that provided the collectors with the tunes and songs in [The Full English digital archive](#) and other collections. Sometimes we only know their names, and occasionally their age or occupation.

The advent of audio recording and broadcasting has provided more opportunities for musicians to be recorded and heard by more people than previous generations. Consequently it has been easier for individuals to be appreciated for their repertoire and style. Some of these individuals are highlighted in the Images of Tradition gallery available here: [LINK](#). You can listen to some of these individuals by following these links

- British Library
- Topic link – Voice of the People
- Veteran

The **BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards** celebrates current players of folk music. You can see the list of winners of awards here: [BBC Folk Award link](#)



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There are lots of opportunities for people to become involved in playing English folk music. Many of these are informal opportunities including regular sessions in pubs and at festivals. There are also formal opportunities involving one-off workshops, regular evening classes and private lessons. These are often organised by folk development agencies across the country.

You can find out more about these by contacting the Folk Educators Group.

- [EFDSS](#)
- [Halsway](#)
- [Sage Gateshead](#)
- [Folkus](#)
- [EATMT](#)
- [Folk South West](#)
- [Wren Music](#)



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## *Further Information*

The following links help provide further information English Folk Music:

- The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: [www.vwml.org](http://www.vwml.org)
- English Folk Info: <http://www.englishfolkinfo.org.uk/folkmus.html>
- Folkopedia: [https://folkopedia.info/wiki/Wiki/Main\\_Page](https://folkopedia.info/wiki/Wiki/Main_Page)
- Wikipedia/Folk\_music
- abcnotation.com: contains over 400,000 tunes in notation, with midi/mp3 files to listen to of each one too!
- The Village Music Project <http://village-music-project.org.uk/> – the repertoire of English Social Musicians from C17th onwards, available online in ABC format
- The Historic Dance and Tune Books which are also part of the VWML web site - [www.vwml.org/vwml-projects/vwml-historic-dance-and-tune-books](http://www.vwml.org/vwml-projects/vwml-historic-dance-and-tune-books)
- Folk Music: <http://www.folk-music.org.uk>
- <http://www.concertina.org>
- <http://www.fiddleon.co.uk>
- <http://www.pipeandtabor.org>
- [www.bagpipesociety.org.uk/bagpipe-guide/](http://www.bagpipesociety.org.uk/bagpipe-guide/)





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