



# Beginner's Guide: English Folk Song

Northern  
Garlands  
Joseph Ritson

THE  
FABER  
BOOK  
OF  
BALLADS

edited  
by  
Matthew  
Hodgart



Shanties  
from the  
Seven Seas  
Stan Hugill



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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**

## ***Folk Song***

There is no solid agreement about what is and isn't a folk song. The term was first coined in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century to describe the music of 'the people', which really just meant the songs people knew and chose to sing for their own and other's entertainment in a world without recorded music, TV or internet – they came from all kinds of sources – professional and amateur songwriters, plays, song sheets, books and more but often people learned them from one another. When we talk about folk songs we usually mean traditional songs, often many years old, where the known authorship of the song is of far less importance to the people who choose to sing it than its content. Many folk songs began as authored, printed sources but now are of anonymous or forgotten authorship. They have often been passed from singer to singer aurally as part of a continuing oral tradition.

## ***English Folk Song***

Like folk song in Ireland and Scotland, English folk song draws on ancient ballads, popular song, songs from plays and pleasure gardens, the music hall and music composed by the people who sang it. This makes it very difficult to categorise what is and isn't a folk song, and in the past collectors like Cecil Sharp were heavily biased toward rural material with no known authorship. This skews the picture somewhat, and it is fair to say that English folk song is drawn from a broad range of sources, linked by the common theme that the songs that have come down to us were popular within their community. Though some material deals with local and specifically English events or themes, songs popular in England were also popular in other parts of Britain and circulated aurally and by print, so there is no real separation between songs in the English language, rather this document reflects the types of folk song that might be found in England.

## ***Is It OK To Sing...??***

If you find yourself thinking 'I couldn't possibly sing a song about fox hunting' then that is of course, a singer's personal choice. Few people would think, however, that singing songs about transportation to Australia, death by hanging or the Peterloo massacre made you an advocate of any of the policies associated with those historical events. It is wise to judge the sensitivities of an audience on a case-by-case basis and perhaps consider what might be gained by them hearing, rather than not hearing a piece of material.

Folk song is famously full of tales of murder, incest, war, highway robbery, fratricide, doom and destruction. You'll also find songs about hare coursing, whale hunting, poaching, fox hunting, slavery and numerous other activities too grisly to mention. Whatever your personal attitudes to these

subjects, many of the songs remain fabulous pieces of music, whose lyrics can cast a vivid light on the past and our shared cultural heritage.

Many controversial historical songs make excellent starting points for discussion and offer striking evidence for contemporary popular views on issues which we can now only study from a point of historical detachment.

As a caveat, it is worth noting that there are some pieces within the archive whose language may cause offence to modern audiences, and material should be thoughtfully considered.

The categories and definitions below are intended simply as a handy beginners guide – they are neither authoritative nor definitive statements and it should be noted that some songs might be in multiple categories – for instance you could have a comic broadside ballad, or a custom song with a chorus mentioning real historical figures. These notes are intended only as an introduction to terms and ideas.

## **Folk Singers**

Historically, any person singing the popular songs of their communities for their own or others benefit was a folk singer, though it has now come to represent a more 'commercial' or genre-defining grouping. There are now many established professional performers whose repertoire is classified as 'English Folk Song', and this has grown from a small group of singers in the 1950s, who set out to explore and develop a particularly 'British' sense of tradition, led by people like Ewan MacColl and A.L.Lloyd. They were in turn heavily influenced by American folk song and the work of people like Alan Lomax. This was characterised as a folk song 'revival' and many revival singers have become very 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 aurally. These days, traditional and modern 'folk songs' are found together in repertoires and festivals of Folk Music throughout England.



*Photos: Shirley Collins,  
Martin Carthy, Peter Bellamy  
(Doc Rowe)*

# Types of Folk Song

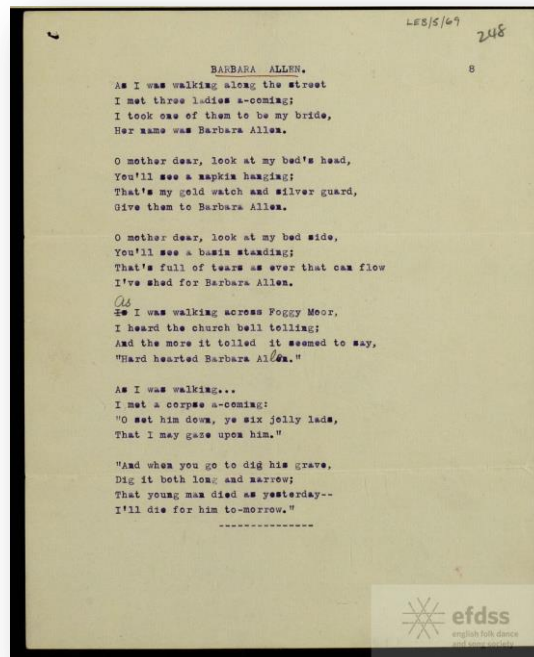
The categories and definitions below are intended simply as a handy beginners guide – they are neither authoritative nor definitive statements and it should be noted that some songs might be in multiple categories – for instance you could have a comic broadside ballad, or a custom song with a chorus mentioning real historical figures. These notes are intended only as an introduction to terms and ideas.

## Ballads

Ballads are a type of narrative folk song, often having a large number of verses accompanied by a structurally simple tune and frequently recounting folk stories or historic events (with varying degrees of historical accuracy) in four line stanzas. It is a story telling form found across Europe but with strong links to Scandinavian and Germanic storytelling traditions. They fall into a number of categories – these may include (among others) love stories, humorous tales, Robin Hood ballads and songs of historical events. The latter were often found as **broad­sides**.

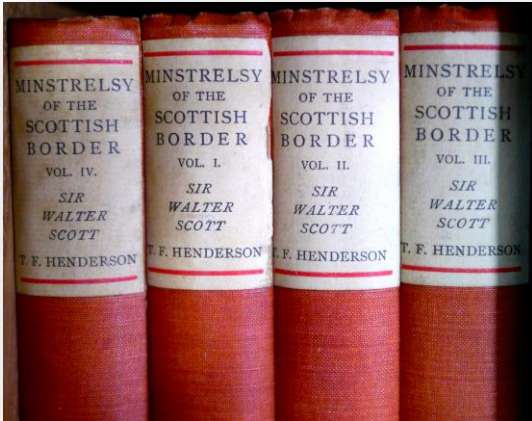
During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a wave of popularity for ballads that saw the traditional songs and stories influencing the literary writers of the time and many poets experimented with this form of storytelling.

Barbara Allen Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/5/69)



Version collected by Ella Bull, Cottenham, Cambridgeshire

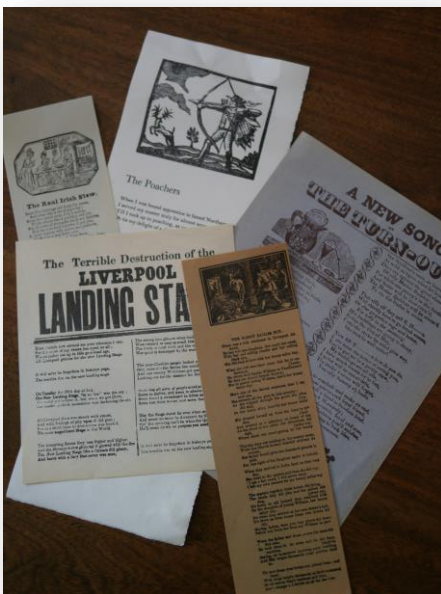
## Border Ballads



There is a strong tradition of these type of songs from the borders between England and Scotland (Lowland Scotland and Northumberland) and these are often know as **border ballads** for this reason. The popularity of all things Scottish, spearheaded by writers of the Romantic period including Sir Walter Scott, helped to develop a popular appetite for these types of songs and poems and helped to encourage the later collectors of traditional folk songs.

Photo: Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of The Scottish Border* (Gavin Davenport)

## Broadside Ballads



Also known as **broadsheet** ballads, these were in many ways the forerunners of our modern newspapers (we still talk about broadsheet newspapers today). Printed on large sheets of cheap paper in black ink (17<sup>th</sup> century ballads are often referred to as **blackletter ballads**). They became hugely popular following the introduction of the printing press and were mass-produced to tie into any occasion, from 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.

They reached their highest popularity in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when hundreds of thousands were sold. Many of the songs that have been collected in oral culture may have originated as broadside, printed ballads

Photo: A selection of broadside ballads (Gavin Davenport)

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## Lyric Songs

We rarely talk about lyric songs, but they generally are considered to be songs which just talk about feelings or situations but which don't have a sustained critical narrative in the same way as a ballad. Some of these are philosophical in nature or might fall into other categories like love songs, or songs in praise of food or drink.

- **The Life of a Man** Clive Carey Collection (CC/1/39)

## Chorus Songs

Chorus songs are folksongs with a hook – often important as part of a social gathering, where many singers in a room can join in with the leader on a chorus or repeated refrain. Sometimes, the chorus' popularity is what keeps a song popular with the actual verses being of less importance. Examples include drinking songs like **Fathom the Bowl**, **Drink Old England Dry** and many other songs feature a chorus to help keep the audience engaged with a story. Because of the importance of social function, many **custom songs** have choruses.

- **Fathom the Bowl** Clive Carey Collection (CC/1/89)
- **Drink Old England Dry** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/9/260/1)
- See the EFDSS education **Chorus Songs pack** for more material and information.

## Cumulative Songs

Cumulative songs are a special kind of chorus song where they develop in length and complexity with each repetition, often for humorous value or to show off the skill and memory of the singer. Famous examples include

- **One man went to Mow** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/5/169)
- **The Twelve Days of Christmas** Cecil J. Sharp Collection (at Clare College, Cambridge) (CJS2/10/49)
- **The Barley Mow** Clive Carey Collection (CC/1/201)
- **The Tree in the Wood (the Rattling Bog)** Cecil J. Sharp Collection (at Clare College, Cambridge) (CJS2/10/3068)
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## Lullabies

Lullabies are part of a body of songs including **dandling songs** used for the purposes of entertaining or soothing children, with lullabies often being perceived as intended to help put a child to sleep.

- **A Lullaby** Anne Geddes Gilchrist Collection (AGG/2/82/23)

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## Custom Songs

Many folk songs are connected with customs, and the act of singing folk songs could be said to be a custom in itself, but many songs relate directly to specific activities or times of year. Obvious examples are **Christmas Carols** many of which have traditional roots, but there are also carols for May and Easter which have become less well known. Traditional activities such as harvest time, hunting, **traditional sports** like football and special days like May Day all have their own songs.

The many types of traditional dance and drama, including processions, Morris, Sword and plough Monday customs often also have songs related to them.

- **May Song**, Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/4/83/2)

## Work Songs

These are a class of **folk song** closely associated with trades and occupations, often they had a function of coordinating people in manual activities, for example waulking songs (from Scotland) or sea **shanties** where the strong emphasis of the rhythm helped everyone to pull ropes or push capstans in a coordinated manner. Marching songs could also be seen as closely related to work songs.

- **Haul Away** Joe Clive Carey Manuscript Collection (CC/1/458)

## Street Cries

Street Cries are the historical version of the shouts of market traders and hawkers – they precede the modern idea of advertising by hundreds of years, but were catchy and memorable and distinctive. Many folk song collectors came across these street cries when looking for traditional folk songs and noted them down.

- **Logs, Street Cry** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/3/35/9)
- **Tinker, Street Cry** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/3/56/5)

## Sea Shanties

Shanties are **work songs** associated with the sea, usually from the days of sailing boats, and often having the function of coordinating the actions of a ship's crew for activities including raising and lowering sail, hauling up the anchor or other activities. These functional songs passed into the tradition of life on board a ship so many of them continued into more recent times. Often people talk about any song associated with sailors and sailing boats as being a shanty, so the term may sometimes cover more general sea songs.

- **Tom's Gone To Hilo**: Cecil Sharp Collection (CJS2/10/3045)

## Themes

The songs we consider to be traditional have stuck around in the popular consciousness because of common themes that resonate with the general population over different periods of history. Often these are similar to the way in which you might group books or films into different genres. These categories are listed for convenience and some songs might fall into more than one category.

Visit the EFDSS Education Resource Bank for a range of thematic packs of folk songs.

## Calendar Customs

Some songs are very much associated with other activities tied to the old religious calendar of the British Isles. It isn't unusual to find songs associated with various begging/money raising traditions

- **Mayers Song** Ella Mary Leather Collection (EML/3/15)
- **Stafford Begging Song** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/5/485)
- **Pace Egging Song** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/4/213)
- **Calling On Songs** Maud Karpeles Collection (MK/1/3/4980)

## Carols / Religious



There is more to the term 'carol' than just Christmas carols – in the past carols covered a whole range of religious songs including those for Easter and may as well as many other significant points in the Christian calendar.

- **God rest you merry Gentlemen** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/9/392/1)
- **Cruel Herod** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/9/392/4)

*Photo: An unusual coloured broadside of carols from the Lucy Broadwood Collection*

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## ***Comedy and Diversion***

Sometimes elaborate jokes told over several verses, at other times these might simply be parodies of other well-known and more serious songs. Their principal aim is to make an audience laugh. Some trades may be traditional butts of jokes: for example tailors and parsons!

- **Three Jovial Welshmen** Cecil J. Sharp Collection (at Clare College, Cambridge) (CJS2/10/190)
- **Butter and Cheese and All** George Gardiner Collection (GG/1/2/36)

## ***Historic Events and Figures***

Often starting out as printed song sheets (see Broadside ballads) there are many songs telling stories of famous events, real people, battles, disasters and other things that were considered newsworthy or worth commemorating. Often they become changed over time

- **The Death of Nelson** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/9/87/1)
- **Admiral Benbow** Anne Geddes Gilchrist Collection (AGG/3/216f)

## ***Heroes and Villains***

Sometimes historic but often distorted deliberately or by time to become mythic accounts. These range from stories of Robin Hood, highwaymen and famous pirates to accounts of Lord Nelson.

- **Dick Turpin** Cecil Sharp Manuscript Collection (at Clare College, Cambridge)(CJS2/9/1375)
- **Robin Hood Rescuing Three Squires** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/5/454/1)

## ***Industrial Songs***

With the rise of the industrial revolution, industry was either the daily occupation of many ordinary people or a preoccupation. This means there are songs both of the hardships of day to day work in pits, mills and other industries and love songs associated with those trades. Whilst fishing and whaling songs could be songs of the sea, they're really songs reflecting important historical trades. Whaling was very much carried out on an industrial scale and as part of an 'industrial' process.

- **As I worked a Sewing Machine** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/9/173/8)
- **The Factory Lad** Frank Kidson Manuscript Collection (FK/17/110/1)

## ***Relationships***

Just like pop songs, 'love' is probably the most common subject for folk songs and it ranges from happy to desperate. Sometimes it is just a strand of the story providing 'love interest' to a bigger story, and in other cases it is the whole point of the song.

- **A Sailor's Courtship** Cecil Sharp Manuscript Collection (at Clare College, Cambridge)(CJS2/9/945)
- **Love it is Pleasing** Henry Hammond Manuscript Collection (HAM/2/1/23)

## ***Rural Life & Occupations***

Songs of farms and farming life are common – some are reflections of the people who lived and worked in the countryside, others are romantic exaggerations, written by urban songwriters with a rosy tinted view of life outside the town.

- **Jolly Thresherman** Ralph Vaughan Williams Collection (RVW/2/284)
- **The Haymakers** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/2/23/3)
- **Jolly Old Farmer** Frank Kidson Collection (FK/11/26/1)
- See the EFDSS Education pack on **Harvest Songs** for more information and examples.

## ***Hunting and Poaching***



The distinction between the two may nowadays appear to be one of social class, but these are common themes for rural songs. Many hunting songs are chorus songs intended for communal singing at the end of a day's hunting and may feature local references.

- **Fox Hunting Song** Lucy Broadwood Collection (LEB/5/276)
- **In Thornymoor Woods** Cecil Sharp Collection (CJS2/10/4949)

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## ***Sailor Songs***

Disregarding for a moment, the songs sung by sailors on board ship, there are all kinds of songs where sailors are the heroes – the romantic nature of sailors and soldiers and other people in uniform hasn't changed for hundreds of years, but the types of songs are very varied – there are historic songs of real naval battles, work songs or sea shanties and love songs recounting couples parted by long sea voyages. Press gang songs have helped to make the sailor seem more of a heroic underdog.

- **The Young Sailor** Cecil Sharp Collection (CJS2/10/186)
- **Bonny Blue Jacket** Frank Kidson Collection (FK/9/79/2)

## ***Soldier Songs***

Like songs about sailors, war songs are enduring in just the same way as perennial war movies or video games. Again, they may be tales of real battles and historical figures like Napoleon or they may simply be love songs where war parts two lovers.

- **The White Cockade** Anne Geddes Gilchrist Collection (AGG/2/148/22A)
- **Battle of Waterloo** Frank Kidson Manuscript Collection (FK/19/86/2)

## ***Songs of the Road***

Like soldiers and sailors, the traveller is a part of a Romantic world of the national imagination, of a bygone time of rambling England's country lanes and camping beneath the stars. There are as a result many songs about gypsy girls, tinkers, and wandering vagabonds, often with a highly unrealistic view of the realities of the travelling life. By contrast the characteristics of an oral tradition have persisted amongst real travellers, and many collectors, up to the present day have found unusual or unique versions of traditional folk songs among the traveller community.

- **I'd Be a Gypsy** Lucy Broadwood Manuscript Collection (LEB/9/45/2)
- **The Poor Gypsy Maid** Frank Kidson Manuscript Collection (FK/9/88/1)

## ***Songs of Good Company***

There are many, many songs concerned with the process of drinking and having a good time. Many criticise the non-drinker as miserable scourge of society, and the dreaded tee-totaller is the butt of the joke in many comic drinking songs. Others' celebrate the medicinal powers of alcohol. A very common sentiment is that celebrating the company in which the singer finds himself – undoubtedly a way for a singer in a pub or other social setting to ingratiate themselves with an audience and perhaps encourage a listener to buy them a drink.

- **I Likes A Drop of Good Beer** George Gardiner Manuscript Collection (GG/1/4/177)
- **A Health to All Good Lasses** Alfred Williams Manuscript Collection (AW/6/22)



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