



The festive ballads of Britain

Some of our favourite carols have their roots in country folk songs, as **Tor McIntosh** discovers. And this rustic music is enjoying a revival

As the fire crackles in the corner, the humdrum of chatter from the bar hushes as a stocky, bearded man, one hand cradling a pint of ale, starts to sing in a deep baritone the first verse of *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night* to an obscure, upbeat melody. Within minutes, conversations are forgotten and the room reverberates with robust vocals as everyone in the pub joins in with the chorus, "Hail! chime on, chime on, Merry, merry Christmas bells chime on..." This is carol singing, Yorkshire style.

Based on paintings from the

Middle Ages that depict people dancing in circles accompanied by musicians, it's believed that carols originated as songs to accompany medieval circle dances – the word 'carol' derives from the Old French word *carole*, meaning 'round dance'. Today, it's pop songs and hackneyed Christmas hymns that follow us around shops during the ever-lengthening Christmas season. But away from these jaded festive tunes, a repertoire of toe-tapping traditional English folk carols have been kept alive for hundreds of years by rural communities and folk musicians.

Influenced by her upbringing in South Yorkshire, contemporary folk musician Kate Rusby has recorded two albums: *Sweet Bells* (2008) and *While Mortals*

Sleep (2011), which rejuvenate traditional Yorkshire carols. These include the instantly catchy *Here We Come A-Wassailing*, which was originally sung door-to-door by carol singers to wish people good health (the Old English phrase *waes hail* means 'be in good health'), while the sad Sheffield ballad *Poor Old Horse* was performed by mummers, one dressed as a horse, as they collected treats (read: alcohol, food and money) for "the poor old horse".

Wassailing and mummers' plays may no longer be popular traditions in Yorkshire today, but the singing of traditional »



The Holly and the Ivy

Along with mistletoe, holly and ivy are prominent plants in native British woodlands during winter, so it's no surprise that early country dwellers used these evergreens to decorate their houses, while paying homage to them in songs. Dating back to the early 18th century (a version was printed on a broadside in 1710), *The Holly and The Ivy* is believed to symbolise pagan fertility: the prickles and strong branches symbolising the male, while the soft-edged ivy entwined around the holly bush represent the female. Collector Cecil Sharp first published the tune in his *English Folk-Carols* (1911), after he notated it from Mrs Mary Clayton at Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire. Compared to the familiar plodding tune heard in school assemblies, the original music (still heartily sung in Yorkshire pubs every Christmas) is an upbeat melody that never fails to get toes tapping.

Carols Ancient and Modern (1833). Today the standard carol that we sing uses the text from Sandys's version – bar the occasional substituted word – accompanied by the so-called 'London tune,' originally found on a broadside printed around 1760 that is believed to have crossed the Channel from France.

Just to befuddle matters even more, there's another Cornish version knocking around based on a folk melody published in Ralph Dunstan's *Cornish Song Book* (1929). There's an ongoing debate as to whether the first line should be 'you' or 'ye' (the latter surprisingly a modern inclusion, possibly to make the carol sound more 'olde worlde') and the carol has also been the subject of punctuation confusion over the years, with some variations placing the comma before the 'merry', implying that said gentlemen were a bit tipsy.

Muddled heritage

It's not the only carol with a muddled heritage. *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night* has 30 regional variations alive today, with Yorkshire topping the leaderboard with its numerous interpretations, notably *Sweet Chiming Bells and Hail Chime On* (familiar verses, obscure refrains, peculiar upbeat melodies) and *Cranbrook* (well-known words, odd tune). With songs being subtly and often unknowingly adapted – meaning there are no 'correct' versions – and the lack of credited authors, pinning down the precise origins of a song has long been a tricky task.

Increased travel and emigration during the late 19th century saw songs from the English tradition spread to all four corners of the globe. It's not uncommon, for example, to find traces of English folk music in American jazz, while traditional English music merged seamlessly with Celtic tunes, resulting in the origins of the popular folk song *The Wild Rover* being contested by Irish, Scottish and English folk fans.

It wasn't until music collectors – notably Cecil Sharp, whose work in the early 20th century helped lay the foundations of the modern folk song revival – began jotting the songs down straight from the mouths »

» songs lives on. Every Sunday lunchtime in November and December, locals still pack into pubs to sing rousing renditions of English folk carols (www.villagecarols.org.uk). "It's a fantastic thing to witness," explains Kate, a veteran of such gatherings since her parents took her along as a child. "It's such a powerful thing when so many voices are singing in harmony, all united in one room, all smiley and moved by the sound they are making." Echoing the feelings of many locals, Kate believes that these uninhibited singsongs are the perfect way to bring a community together, and an integral part of getting into the Christmas spirit.

Making records

It's thanks to music collectors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that these English folk carols are in existence today. With the roots of folk music firmly planted in the countryside of a pre-industrial Britain, these collectors rescued traditional

English music from oblivion by embarking on a quest to notate the songs of the rural working classes that had previously only existed in the oral tradition. Rather than writing down the everyday songs passed down from their forefathers or circulated via broadsides (single sheets of paper, sold in the 16th century), the common man – such as illiterate farmers and peasants – committed the songs to memory before passing them on orally, resulting in lyrical and musical variations as the songs travelled from father to son and village to village.

Take the universally popular *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*, which exists in a wide variety of regional versions. Reputed to date as far back as the 15th century, the carol was first published as a Cornish variant by William B Sandys in *Christmas*

"It's such a powerful thing when so many voices are singing in harmony"

The revival of wassailing

For centuries in Britain's cider-producing counties, the ancient rite of drinking the health of apple trees, known as wassailing (not to be confused with the other form of wassailing, where people travelled from door-to-door singing carols in exchange for treats), took place on Old Twelfth Night. Before the days of crop spraying, it was believed that pouring cider on to the roots of apple trees while drinking to its health with cries of "wassail, wassail" would ward off evil spirits and ensure a healthy crop the following autumn. There's no evidence that the custom actually worked – it was possibly just an excuse to drink copious amounts of cider and have a singalong. Nevertheless, this age-old tradition is being revived in orchards throughout the West Country. More wassail ceremonies crop up each January, with popular events taking place in Whimple, Devon and Carhampton, Somerset.





LEFT Edwardian carol singers spread Christmas joy with their songs, many of which would have had different tunes – but often the same lyrics – as the carols that are sung today

they're feeling. Some of the songs are like mini films; you get the characters set up at the beginning, and then you hear what happens to them. By the end you can be on the edge of your seat waiting to hear what happens to the characters."

This homemade music, with its captivating, emotional, humorous and, at times, shocking narrative about everyday life, loss and love is a blueprint of the lives of people in the countryside of Britain hundreds of years ago. As Sharp wrote in *English Folk Songs: Some Conclusions* (1907): "[Folk music] reflects the mind of the community." And in doing so, we're treated to songs that evoke a lost time and record snippets of the lives and rituals of ordinary people in Britain.

Surviving regional traditions

A journey through musical heritage reveals pockets of distinctive folk traditions – many still in existence today. The high-pitched staccato sound of the Northumbrian smallpipes still echoes across the bare uplands of the Cheviot Hills, accompanying border ballads describing tales of bloody rivalries between England's northernmost county and its Scottish neighbour, such as *The Ballad of Chevy Chase*.

The rhythmic shuffle and clack of clog dancing – developed during the Industrial Revolution, when workers would tap along to the rhythm of the machines to keep their feet toasty – is frequently heard throughout Northumberland and Lancashire. In villages in and around the North York Moors during midwinter, the clashing of swords by a troupe of dancers in regal attire signals the start of the militaristic longsword dance, where dancers perform complex moves in a circle as they hold the hilt of their sword and the dancer to the right holds the tip.

In the folk world, wherever there is music you are sure to find dance, too. The May Day 'Obby 'Oss festival in Cornwall sees two 'Osses perform an ancient dancing ritual through the narrow streets of Padstow to a hypnotic folk song, and in villages all over Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire accordion

players strike-up folk favourites such as *Country Gardens* (also known as *English Country Garden*) to accompany morris dancing. In the cider-producing counties in the West Country, songs linked to the custom of apple wassailing are belted out by locals – in between large helpings of cider – on *Old Twelfth Night* (see box on page 37), while the region's rich seafaring and farming traditions influenced call-and-response sea shanties and work songs sung in fields. Many of us will still be able to recite the first verse and chorus of the sea shanty, *What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor?*

Local pride

Unofficial regional anthems often stem from folk songs – growing up in Cornwall, I

heartily sang *Trelawny* (the reaction of Cornishmen to the imprisonment of Jonathan Trelawny, a Cornish bishop, in the Tower of London by James II in 1688) while supporting the Cornish rugby team; to this

“This music is a blueprint of the lives of rural people in Britain hundreds of years ago”

day whenever I hear it sung in unison it gives me goosebumps. Whereas in Yorkshire you'll struggle to find a local unwilling to burst into *On Ilkla Moor Baht 'at* (about a man getting told off for not wearing a hat when he chased his lover on to Ilkley Moor); an anthem that hijacked its tune from *Cranbrook*, one of Yorkshire's many versions of *While*

Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night.

Writing in their book *English Folk Songs* (1959) collectors Ralph Vaughan Williams and AL Lloyd said: “folk songs are tough, and show an obstinate will to survive.”

With folk music constantly being rediscovered by collectors and musicians alike, leading to regular folk revivals, its invincibility is perhaps inevitable. But as Nigel Williamson writes in *The Folk Handbook* (2007), today's so-called folk revivals just means that “another generation of performers has stumbled upon the rich wellspring of traditional British folk song,” and in doing so “successive generations have come along to sustain the tradition and rejuvenate it, ensuring that folk music remains a vibrant, living form.”

So put away your *Best Of Christmas* compilation album and discover the ballads of Britain. It's a welcome relief from Slade screaming “It's Christmas!” for the umpteenth time. ☺



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» of country folk, did traditional tunes and lyrics make their way into books, on to scratchy recordings, and finally into archives (such as The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, www.efdss.org).

Ad-hoc editing by some collectors sanitised the organic songs of rural working-class Britain into tunes appropriate for the innocent ears of middle-class urban children, a tactic adopted by early collectors so as not to outrage schools and churches. Nevertheless, there are still a handful of questionable songs that survived the edit, such as *The Thrashing Machine*, a bawdy song blatantly about sex. Perhaps the collectors were hoping such transparent metaphors would pass over the heads of children, teachers and clergymen.

Most folk songs were written as ballads,

with a strong narrative that weaves in common themes such as love, death, drinking, work, sex and war, along with sinister themes such as murder, trickery and incest. Despite the centuries' long gap between the original songs and modern audiences, it's stories of unfaithful soldiers, sailors on stormy seas and the simple pleasures of drinking that still draw legions of folk music fans to play and listen to these ballads.

Kate Rusby is one of many folk musicians who believe the stories are as relevant today as they were 200 years ago. “[Folk music] addresses human emotions like no other genre of music... we still have the same emotions running through our lives, and when we hear stories of people living their lives, we can all relate to how

Singalong this Christmas

Candlelit processions, Welsh church services and hearty pub choruses – join in with a host of carols this Christmas

PLYGAIN, LLANFYLLIN, POWYS

Unique to Wales, this early morning carol service uses words and music that are centuries old. The Plygain service is an unusual experience for outsiders. For two hours, the church service belongs to the carol singers. There's no programme, parties of singers simply step forward and break into song. It is a point of honour not to repeat a carol. In Llanfyllin, the Plygain tradition is still strong and some families sing their own Welsh carols that are part of their heritage and fiercely guarded. Experience the tradition in Llanfyllin churches from December to 6 January or listen to a service online. www.museumwales.ac.uk

PADSTOW, CORNWALL

For well over 200 years, locals have taken to the streets of Padstow to sing carols. Today, the tradition continues every Sunday in December. The songs are unrehearsed and many have been passed down in families for generations, never written down.

Some, such as *Hark Hark*, are regional variations of famous folk songs, in case this case *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. As the carolers weave through the town, they sing to people they meet. www.visitcornwall.com

TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION, AVIEMORE, HIGHLAND

Right in the heart of the Scottish Highlands in the shadow of Cairngorm Mountain, Aviemore has a torchlight procession on Christmas Eve every year, from 5pm-9pm, complete with Santa, reindeer and lots of carol singing. Mince pies and mulled wine are sure to keep you warm as you listen to the local pipe band. www.welcometoscotland.com

THE ROYAL HOTEL, DUNGWORTH, YORKSHIRE

Set on the edge of the Peak District, this is one of a select few pubs in Yorkshire that opens its doors every



TOP LEFT Boxing Day merriment in Padstow **BOTTOM LEFT** Folky festive fun at Dulverton **RIGHT** A version of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

Sunday lunchtime – from the first Sunday after Armistice Day to the first Sunday after Boxing Day – for the mass singing of traditional carols. ☎ 0114 2851213 www.royalhotel-dungworth.co.uk

DULVERTON BY STARLIGHT, SOMERSET

On the first Sunday of December, Dulverton, on the southern edge of

Exmoor, becomes awash with craft stalls and morris dancers, as the smells of mulled wine and hog roast drift over the crowds. By day, local folk singer Ian Idris will be performing old English songs. Then, as the night draws in and the candles light up, join carol singers as they gather around the tree at Bank Square. www.visit-exmoor.co.uk

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