

Decolonising the Collection: Romani and Traveller Singers in an Archive of English Folk Song

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‘Gypsy music’: the problem
with exotic stereotypes

The Barbican, London, 2000

‘The 1000 year journey’

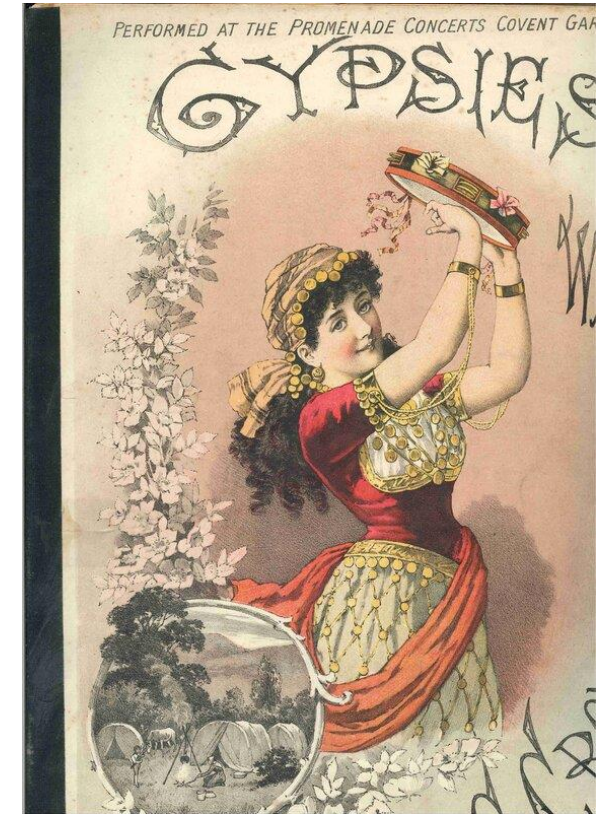
<https://www.barbican.org.uk/music/series.asp?ID=404>

- ‘Get in touch with your inner gypsy ...
- Come and feel the heat of a Gypsy fire’.



The negative impact of exotic stereotypes: June 2015, Conservative MP Philip Hollobone:

‘... many of these supposed Travellers are self-declared Travellers; they are not from any kind of Gypsy heritage at all’ ([Marsh](#), Wettermark & Hore, 2024: 7).



Above: AG Crowe's Covent Garden promenade music waltz *Gypsies*. 1910.
Left: *Gypsies On A Country Lane*. James Edward Meadows, circa 1860



The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

The library and archive of the English Folk Dance and Song Society

Originally the Cecil Sharp Library, based in Cecil Sharp House, opened in 1930, housing Sharp's personal book collection of over 1000 volumes.

England's national folk music and dance archive

Caters for Folk enthusiasts, independent researchers, academics, students across a wide range of disciplines, musicians, dancers, and arts professionals



Romani and Travellers in the VWML

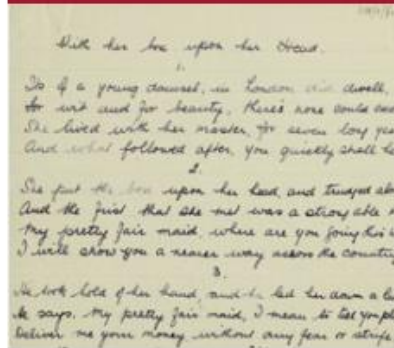
- Significant holdings of songs collected from Romani and Traveller people from the 1800s into the 2000s, including:
- Recordings, ranging from wax cylinders to commercial productions
- Original and copies of manuscripts from Cecil Sharp and other collectors in the first folk revival.
- Books, including out of print and rare publications
- Photographs

However, the holdings are not easily searchable and often overlooked



Priscilla Cooper, photographed by Cecil Sharp in 1907

HHA



ALBINO: Harry Hurlbutt
Albino Folk Song
Collection

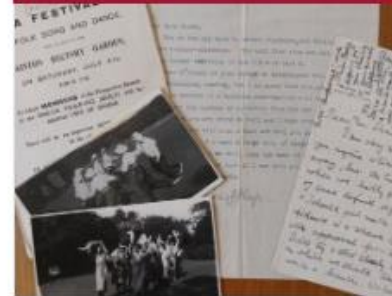
1880s-1960

VA



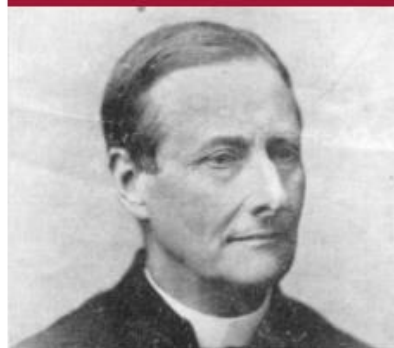
ALFORD: Papers of Violet
Alford

ARC



Archival material - small
collections and single
items

SBG



BARING-GOULD: Sabine
Baring-Gould Folk Music
Papers

JHB



BLUNT: Janet Heatley
Blunt Papers

LEB



BROADWOOD: Lucy
Broadwood Collection



- ‘....(we met) Betsy Holland, aged 26, ... (who) began a murder song that was just fascinating. Talk of folk-singing! It was the finest and most characteristic bit of singing I had ever heard. Fiendishly difficult to take down, both words and music, but we eventually managed it! I cannot give you any idea what it was all like, but it was one of the most wonderful adventures I have ever had.’

- *Cecil Sharp letter to Constance Sharp, 12 August 1907 (VWML Archives, CJS1/12/18/10/61)*

2. is Wetherington M.R. ^{Sharp. con} gipsies
Collecting

MINEHEAD VICARAGE,
SOMERSET.

church belonging.

21. VII 07.

My dearest Dady.

We are back again here after having a most of splendid time. The weather was gorgeous and we never had a drop of rain the whole time. They said up there that it had poured ~~in~~ every day for 3 weeks without cessation and that Monday & Tuesday were the first fine days they had had. So we were most fortunate. The first night we went up, as I told you to Exford where we slept - a very first rate hotel and extraordinarily cheap. Yesterday after taking down many saxes from old Parish, we went on to Limmersbath where I wrote to you. I had only just & parted & an letter when a most interesting adventure befell us. We had decided to make our way over the moor to Wetherington and were just wheeling our cycles up the hill when I saw a penny to a very dirty but picturesque little child

who took it and ran to a small cart that was under a tree down a little lane, and gave it to his father - evidently a gipsy. So I went up to him and chatted, and proached the question of saxes. No! he didn't say but his wife did but she was in a house close by trying to sell some crackery. We waited & gave him honey and played with a second child, a baby tied up in the cart. It was a peaceful little scene and he showed us his stove and the contrivances for making a tent in which they camped out every night - only using his van during the winter. Presently out came the wife Betsey Holland, aged 26, a bright dark-eyed gipsy looking woman. The baby cooed with delight directly she appeared. We attacked her about the saxes wh. she had appeared. We attacked her about the saxes wh. she had learned from her grandmother. A little persuasion and she sat down on a stone, gave her baby the breast, and then began a murder song that was just fascinating. Talk of folk-singing! It was the finest & most characteristic bit of singing I had ever heard. Fendishly difficult to take down both words & music but we eventually managed it! I cannot give you any idea what it was all like but it was one of the most wonderful adventures I have ever had. I photo'd the baby & her and she is mad to have the picture and told me they were making their way down to Comwall in Biddeford & Barnstaple. They will be at Biddeford on Saturday and I shall, I think, find it hard to keep away! Then we left the road and tramped

Title	<i>Execution Song</i>
Reference number	CJS2/10/1428
Level	Item
Date created	20 Aug 1907
Alternative reference number	FW 1311-1313 / FT 1428
Description	Cecil Sharp MSS, Folk Words p.1311-1313 / Folk Tunes p.1428. Note by Cecil Sharp relating to the performance
Access status	Open
Source contents	Frag, text; Music
Format	Manuscript
Performer	<i>Holland, Betsy</i>
Laws number	Laws P38
Date collected	20 Aug 1907

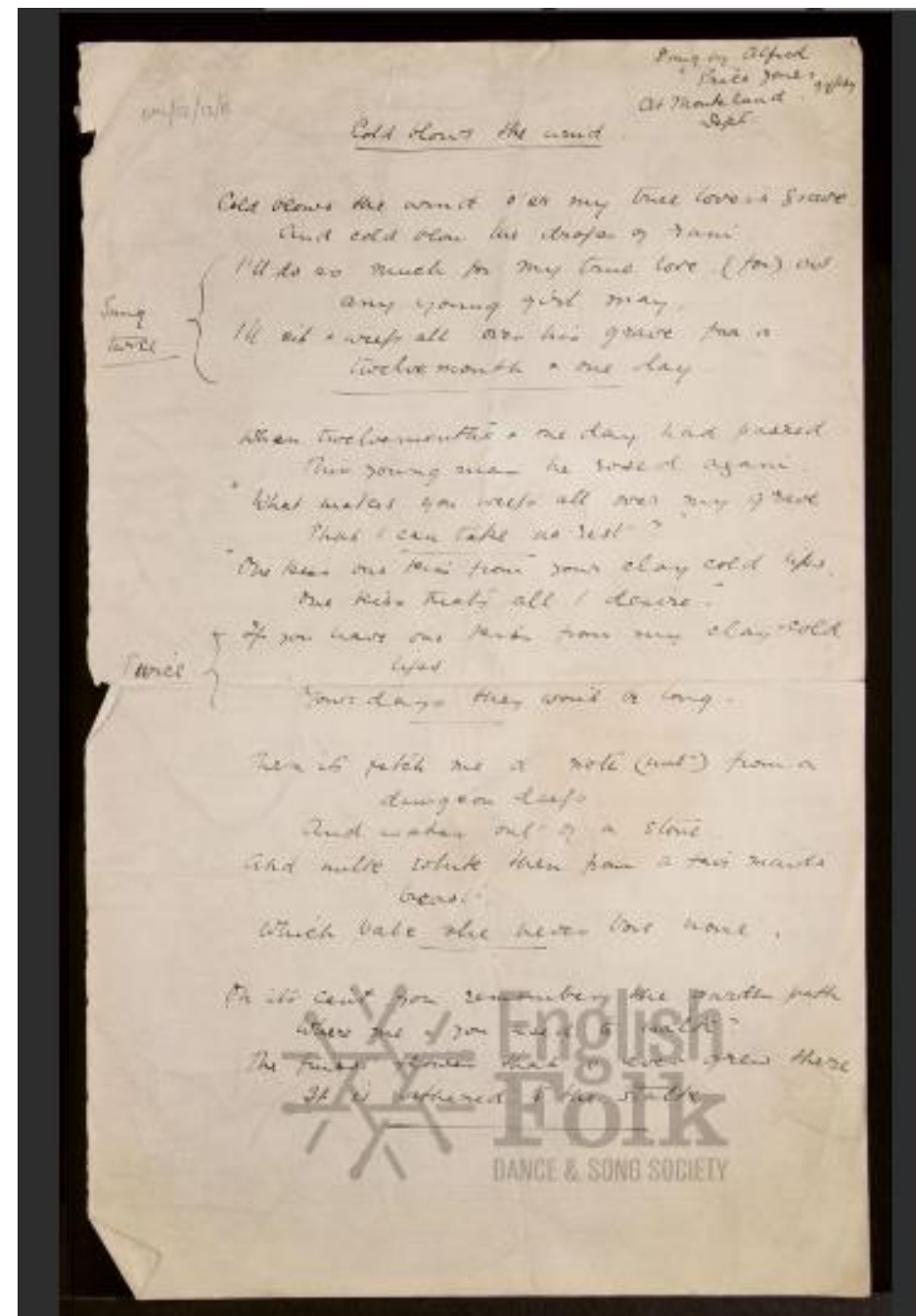
Execution Song Betsy Holland (26) 1428
at Linnamoth - Aug 20 1907

You young and old you now make bold I hope you will adown
 near for tis one of the cruellest murder-deeds That
 ever you did see tis all for a love-ly fair maid Her
 age was just sixteen And her beauty and pride was
 my delight when some thing did ap- pears

This f# (a) was sometimes & E.
 The bars (b) were sung in either way according to the words.
 The singer throughout constantly sang the pair of swans
 as E instead of I

efdss
english folk dance
and song society

Title	<i>Cold Blows The Wind</i>
Reference number	EML/2/39
Level	Item
Date created	Sep 1912
Alternative reference number	EML/2/13E
Description	Ella M. <i>Leather</i> MSS Collection (VWML) : Loose texts
Access status	Open
Source contents	Text
Format	Manuscript
Performer	<i>Jones, Alfred</i> Price
Date collected	Sep 1912
Child number	Child 78
Repository	EFDSS Archive
Roud number	<u>51</u>

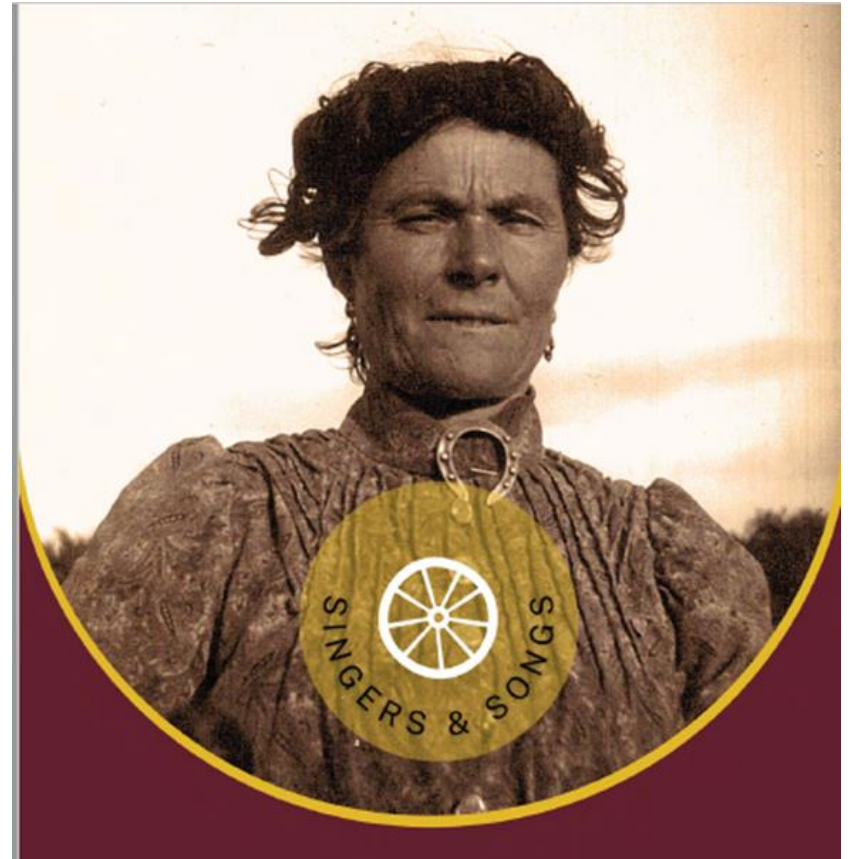


Why is ethnicity not recorded?

- The VWML developed primarily as a library rather than an archive.
- Archive accessions treated like library materials – indexed for song and dance tunes, but no further traditional archival categories.
- The Full English – name and place authority files added, but not a subject thesaurus.
- Prior knowledge needed to find Romani and Traveller singers.
- We as library and archive professionals remain gatekeepers

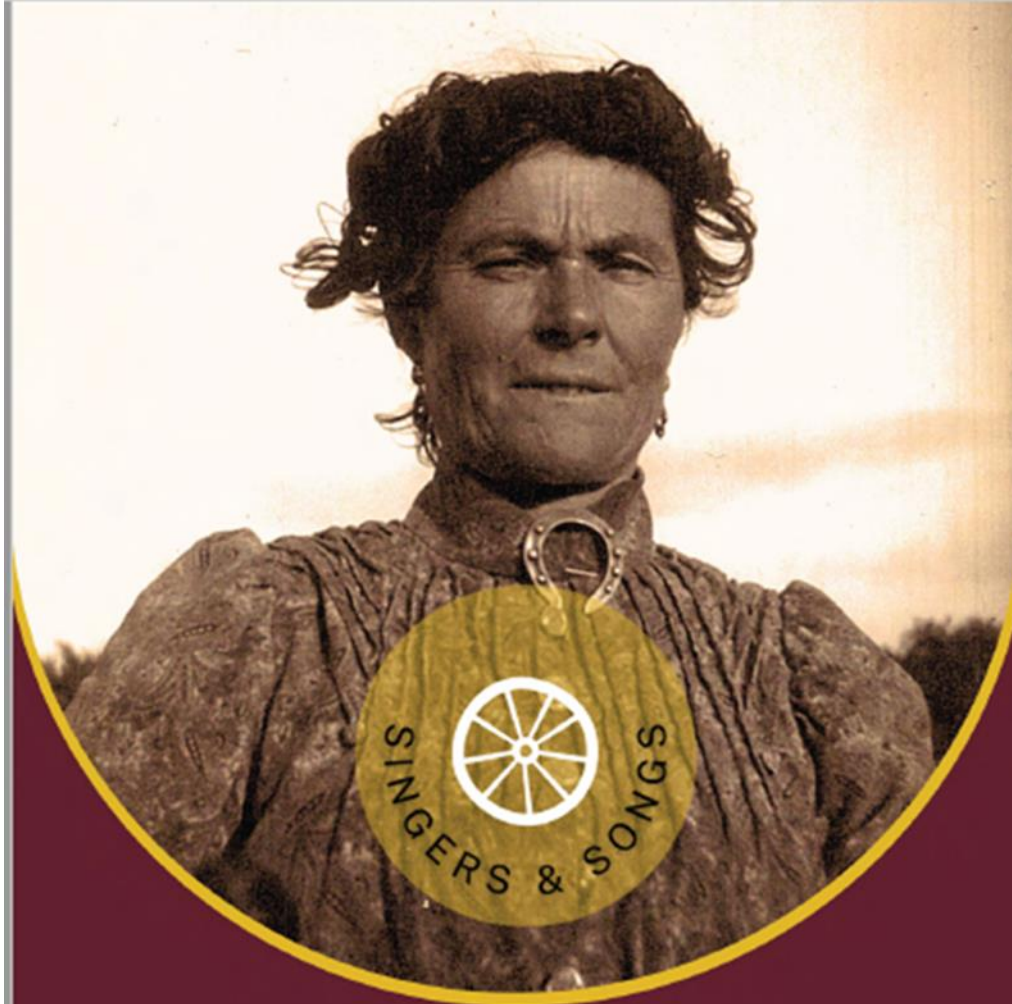
The 'Singers and Songs' resource

- Funded by the University of East Anglia through an AHRC Impact Acceleration scheme.
- Aim to make it easier for Romani and Traveller people to find material about their relatives and contributions of these groups to folk music in England.
- An open recruitment process for someone with lived or other significant experience of Romani and/or Traveller culture.
 - Careful to not break rules around recruitment based on ethnicity
 - Where to advertise?
 - What is a reasonable payment?
 - Wanted significant freedom for the person recruited to decide the structure and focus of the resource.



Singers and Songs: work group

- Commissioned Romani poet Dr Jo Clement (Northumbria University) to create the resource, supported by the library and academic team.
- Jo and the team were given input by a small focus group made up of Romani and Irish Traveller people with a personal interest in music and the project.
- After publication we worked with a Traveller-led arts and crafts [Fair](#) in Norfolk to present the project to new people, from a range of backgrounds.



Gypsy &
Traveller
Voices

Vaughan
Williams
Memorial
Library

How to Guide

Whether you're brand new to exploring archives or a seasoned expert, this guide contains everything you need to search for Gypsy and Traveller voices in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

Start with these three simple ways.



Songs



Go to the **Songs** section of this e-booklet to search for a selection of songs categorised by themes like *love*, *family* and *place*.



Dive In

Follow our step by step tutorial to search the online archives.

Click below to watch:



Singers



Connect with the people who sang the songs in the **Singers** section of this e-booklet.



Lucy Carter
(1830 - 1912)

Lucy was born in Dorset. According to the 1911 census, Lucy and her husband Isaiah made and sold baskets.

They had twelve children, five of whom sadly died. Their baptisms show the family's extensive travels through Somerset and Devon.

Her maiden name might be Wells or Wills. A baptism at Wootton Fitzpaine church in Dorset shows one Lucy as the daughter of a razor grinder called Benjamin and his wife Mary.



*His eyes were black as any sloes
His cheeks were like the blooming rose
His voice did sound as clearly as the violets in the bloom
We got diamonds in each other's eye*

Black As Sloes



Sloes are the fruit of the blackthorn tree. It is one of the first to blossom in the UK spring, producing clouds of snow-white flowers. The fruit is distilled to make sloe gin for Christmas celebrations and its branches are carved to make walking sticks.

In this song, sung to Cecil Sharp by Traveller Lucy Carter at Tintinhull in 1906, an attractive lover's eyes are compared to sloes. Click the link above to read Sharp's full handwritten lyrics.

For another song about the colour of a lover's eyes, click this link. 'Blue Eyed Lover' is sung by Romani Gypsy singer Caroline Hughes (1900 - 1971) in Dorset.



Beyond Singers and Songs

- A peer-reviewed article for [Music](#) and Minorities
- An article for The [Conversation](#) in relation to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month.
- An inventory of Romani or Traveller singers named in the VWML archive catalogue (Funded by University of Sheffield).
- Working with Romani film maker Lisa Smith



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m_dwPress

A Basket full of Eggs - coming in summer 2025

A short film by Romani filmmaker Lisa Smith. Follows the Romani singer and activist Minty Smith's great granddaughter Liza Mortimer on a journey to the VWML to explore how singers from her family have had an impact on folk music in England.



Thank you for listening!

- *Singers and Songs* resource on the VWML website - <https://www.efdss.org/learning/resources/resources-listing/12931-gypsy-and-traveller-voices-in-archives>
- *Calling Out the Catalogue*, Music and Minorities, vol. 3 (2024) - <https://mm.journals.qucosa.de/mm/article/view/25>
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