



**efdss**  
english folk dance  
and song society

# **An Introduction to English Sea Songs and Shanties**



**By David Atkinson**

# English Folk Dance and Song Society

The **English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS)** is the national development organisation for folk music, dance and related arts, based at Cecil Sharp House, a dedicated folk arts centre and music venue, in Camden, North London. Cecil Sharp House is also home to EFDSS' Vaughan Williams Memorial Library (VWML), England's national folk music and dance archive, which provides free online access to thousands of searchable folk manuscripts and other materials.

EFDSS creates and delivers creative learning projects for children, young people, adults and families at Cecil Sharp House, across London and around the country; often in partnership with other organisations. Learning programmes draw on the diverse and vibrant traditional folk arts of England, the British Isles and beyond, and focus on song, music, dance, and related art forms such as storytelling, drama, and arts and crafts.

## An Introduction to English Sea Songs and Shanties

This briefing document was commissioned by the British Council as background information for staff and artists participating in the Shifting Sands project (2010-2011), which explored the musical roots of both the UK and the Arabian Gulf, and created new material inspired by their retrospective traditions, with a special focus on 'songs of the sea'.

<https://vimeo.com/20238505>

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.

[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

David Atkinson is editor of the Folk Music Journal.

Front cover image: *The Lucy Broadwood Broadside Collection, EFDSS archive*

Published by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), March 2016

Written by: **David Atkinson**, 2009

Copyright © British Council and English Folk Dance and Song Society 2016

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

# Contents

• <b>Shanties</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
• <b>Forebitters or forecastle songs</b>	<b>Page 9</b>
• <b>Sea songs and ballads</b>	<b>Page 10</b>
• <b>Some seafaring customs and beliefs</b>	<b>Page 14</b>
• <b>Collectors</b>	<b>Page 15</b>
• <b>Select resources</b>	<b>Page 15</b>
• <b>Bibliography</b>	<b>Page 16</b>
• <b>Appendix 1: Shanties (song words)</b>	<b>Page 18</b>
• <b>Appendix 2: Forebitters (song words)</b>	<b>Page 24</b>
• <b>Appendix 3: Sea Songs and Ballads (song words)</b>	<b>Page 27</b>

---

## Shanties

The sea shanty (or ‘chantey’ – the spelling and the precise origin of the word are uncertain) is the prime example of the work-song in English. Shanties were connected with the repetitive heaving and hauling work that took place aboard wooden sailing ships. They generally have a dialogic, call-and-response structure, with the lead being taken by one person – the ‘shantyman’ – who set the rhythm and led the group in singing well-known verses or improvising new ones, with the rest of the group joining in the chorus.

### *Blow the Man Down*

Oh as I was a-rolling down Paradise Street  
*cho. To me way hay, blow the man down!*  
A saucy flash clipper I chanced for to meet  
*cho. Give me some time to blow the man down!*

The chorus would give the shantyman time to consider the line or couplet to follow, and the ability to improvise was regarded as the hallmark of a good shantyman – in fact, a necessity in work contexts where a given task could take a variable amount of time, according to the effort and energy of the crew and the force of the wind and current. The relative proportion of call and response, length of the lines, and the rhythm would all vary according to the kind of work the shanty was to accompany. Unlike other types of English folk song, a relatively stable text and coherent narrative were not considered important in shanties. The words would, however, often relate in a rather general way to the ‘typical’ interests of sailors: bawdy exploits ashore, conditions on board ship, the personality of the captain, the virtues of strong drink, popular heroes like Bonaparte and Santa Aña, and so forth. The published versions are usually said to be pale reflections of the sort of obscenity that normally characterized shanty singing. Nevertheless, the purpose of the shanty in setting the rhythm for and coordinating the physical work of the crew was paramount. It has been said that seamen could regard shanties simply as part of their work and not strictly as music at all.

There are roughly two classes of shanties: (a) *hauling* shanties (sometimes called pulling shanties); (b) *heaving*, or capstan, shanties. *Hauling* shanties were used for tasks in which the physical effort was intermittent; for example halyard shanties, used for raising or lowering sails. These were usually of the alternating solo line–refrain kind. *Heaving* shanties were used to accompany work of a more regular, rhythmic nature; for example, capstan shanties, used when heaving the anchor or

raising and lowering sails by 'mechanical' means, or pump shanties for working the pumps. These latter, though they might be of the same structure as the hauling shanties, could equally comprise a longer solo verse followed by a chorus of four or more lines. Broadly speaking, the hauling shanties set much more store on rhythm than on word sense, while the heaving songs would tend to have a more shambling rhythm but sometimes convey a more coherent and diverting narrative.

***Lowlands Away (capstan shanty)***

*cho. Lowlands, lowlands away, my John*

*Lowlands away I heard them say*

*My lowlands away*

*solo I dreamed a dream the other night*

*cho. Lowlands, lowlands away, my John*

*solo My love she came all dressed in white.*

*cho. My lowlands away.*

I dreamed my love came in my sleep  
Her cheeks were wet, her eyes did weep.

She waved her hand, she said goodbye  
I wiped the tear from out my eye.

And then awoke to hear the cry  
Oh watch on deck, oh watch ahoy!

In the male-only environment on board sailing ships, the bawdy nature of shanties, and their references to sailors' real or imagined sexual exploits and prodigious feats of drinking, are unsurprising as subject matter. Generations of schoolchildren must have sung the pump shanty 'Fire Down Below' in the belief that it is all about the undoubted fire risk that there was on board wooden sailing ships. But there is little question that the real subject of the song is sexually transmitted disease:

She was just a village maiden with red an' rosy cheeks

*To me way hay hee high ho!*

Oh she went to church an' Sunday school an' sang this anthem sweet

*Oh there's fire down below!*

While the crews were all male, they were often multi-ethnic, and this is thought to account for some of the unusual expressions that find their way into shanties. The ethnic background is sometimes reflected in comic songs like the pseudo-Dutch pump shanty 'Ja, Ja, Ja,':

Oh mein fader vos ein Dutchman

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja*

Oh mein fader vos ein Dutchman

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja*

Oh mein fader vos ein Dutchman

Und mein mutter vos ein Prussian

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja.*

Und der polis-man, fireman, steeple-man

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja*

Und der polis-man, fireman, steeple-man

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja*

Dey climb up on th esteeples

Und dey scheisen on ze peoples

*Mit mein ja, ja, ja.*

And so on. As such examples indicate, the texts of shanties are often incremental (allowing them to be extended as the work required) and, unlike the forebitters (see below). The halyard shanty 'Blow the Man Down' does cover the course of a sailor's encounter with a prostitute, through to the closing lines 'My shot-locker's empty, my powder's all spent / I've plenty of time, boys, to think and repent'. But 'Hanging Johnny', another halyard shanty, could go on almost indefinitely:

Oh they calls me Hanging Johnny

*Away, boys, away*

They says I hangs for money

*So hang, boys, hang.*

At first I hanged my daddy

And then I hanged my mammy.

Oh yes, I hanged my mother

Mys sister and my brother.

I hanged my sister Sally

I hanged the whole damned family.  
I'd hang the mate and skipper

I'd hang them by the flippers.

I'd hang to make things jolly  
I'd hang Jill, Jane, and Polly.

The call-and-response form is said to be 'ancient and universal', used by boatmen on the Yangtse and the Niger in much the same way as on Western sailing ships. Literary references to such songs occur as early as the fifteenth century (the very earliest is probably around 1400). A Dominican friar, Felix Fabri, on a pilgrim ship from Venice to the Holy Land in 1493, for example, records hearing the seamen singing 'when work is going on', in 'concert between one who sings and orders and the labourers who sing in response'. *The Complaynt of Scotland* of 1549 includes two anchor songs, one bowline shanty, and three hauling shanties. Most of the surviving English shanties, however, date from the nineteenth century, in the period following the wars with France. This background is sometimes reflected in shanties themselves:

Boney was a warrior  
*Way, aye, yah!*  
A warr-i-or and a terr-i-er  
*John Franswor!*

Boney beat the Prussians  
The Austrians and the Rooshians.

Oh Boney marched to Moscow  
Lost his army in the snow.

'Twas on the plains of Waterloo  
He met the boy who put him through.

Stan Hugill dates most of them to the period 1820–60. Shanties were generally not permitted on board naval vessels; and there is no surviving evidence that they were sung on board merchantmen of the eighteenth century. As the nineteenth century progressed, however, fierce capitalist competition led to flourishing trade routes and shipping lines, and to pressure on captains and crews to increase the rate and efficiency of shipboard work. It is in these conditions that the shanties flourished. A

---

good shantyman was always in demand, and some companies would apparently pay a bonus to a sailor who was also a good shantyman. ‘Freak products of capitalism’, A. L. Lloyd called the shanties. With the replacement of commercial sail by steam, which was complete by the 1920s, shanties on board ship had effectively died out. Stan Hugill often claimed to have led the last shanty in its proper context, ‘Fire Down Below’ sung at the pumps on board the *Garthpool* a few days before she was wrecked in October 1929. Subsequently, collectors continued to collect shanties from retired shantymen – despite the rigid taboo, according to Hugill, against singing them on shore – seeking to preserve part of a vanishing way of life that had long been becoming romanticized virtually out of all recognition.



---

## Forebitters or forecastle songs

Off duty, sailors were quite catholic in their musical tastes and would sing love songs, drinking songs, music hall ditties, and other songs that they may well have learned on shore and that would have been sung by their contemporaries on land. Pirate ballads were popular; but conversely, certain shore-composed sea songs were not. Charles Dibdin's patriotic composition 'Tom Bowling', is said to have been prohibited because it was thought to be a harbinger of death.

'Forebitters' or 'forecastle songs' (so-called for the part of the ship where off-duty crews would congregate) was the name given to songs created by sailing-ship sailors themselves; these and the shanties are the only proper sailor-made songs in English. Stan Hugill dates their composition to the period 1780–1830, when the Atlantic sea trade was beginning its period of growth. Among their favourite subjects were the adventures of Jack Tar on shore, where he is often robbed and ridiculed, especially by the women of the town, as in 'Ratcliffe Highway' or the well-known 'Maggie May'; or else Jack's triumphal outwitting of his rivals with the women, as in 'Doo Me Amma'. Others look forward to the pleasures – basically drink and women – of being in port again, as in 'The Gals Around Cape Horn', or 'Paddy Lay Back'. 'The Banks of Newfoundland' also looks forward to landfall, but the song began its life as a transportation ballad and something of that sombre mood remains.

Yet others relate the adventures of particular ships. 'The Stately Southerner' can probably be dated to 1777–78, since it apparently celebrates the career of the American revolutionary hero John Paul Jones, who sailed the Irish Sea in the brig *Ranger*, firing on coastal towns and harrying British shipping. 'The Flying Cloud' was a favourite with both British and American seamen, in spite of its harrowing story which traces the life story of an Irish boy who ships on board a slaving ship under Captain Moore; most of their human cargo all die of the plague, and having disposed of the rest, the crew turn privateers and plunder the Spanish Main, until they are hunted down by a British warship and eventually condemned to death for piracy. The story as it is told is probably fictitious, but it has been thought to be based on the confession of a notorious pirate, one Benito de Soto.

---

## Sea songs and ballads

A wide range of ballads relate to the sea and many of them were popular with sailors, whose musical tastes (as noted above) were quite catholic. Conversely, many songs relating to seafaring were popular with singers on land, so, unlike the shanties and forebitters, this category is a permeable one. These are stanzaic songs, with varying degrees of narrative, mostly for solo singing (though a few have choruses or refrains, and on occasion have been adapted for use as shanties, as with 'The Golden Vanity', for example). They are not generally distinguishable by style from other kinds of songs sung for recreation, either at sea or on land. The ways in which the sea and the sailor's life are present in such songs vary greatly, and the following survey only touches on a number of the songs that have some seafaring association.

Certain naval and quasi-historical songs which can be considered as English sea songs, since they have had a certain currency with sailors and other singers, are by known composers. Perhaps the most iconic is 'Black-Eyed Susan' by John Gay (1685–1732). The eighteenth-century dramatist and songwriter Charles Dibdin (1745–1815) was responsible for a number of patriotic sea songs, which were appropriated for use in the navy during the wars with France. These include 'Poor Jack', 'Twas in the good ship *Rover*', 'Saturday Night at Sea', 'I sailed from the Downs in the *Nancy*', and 'Tom Bowling'. 'Bold Nelson's Praise' and 'Admiral Benbow' are among anonymous folk songs that nonetheless celebrate real naval heroes. John Benbow (1653?–1702) is perhaps largely forgotten today other than in song, where he is remembered for having lost his legs by chain shot. Nevertheless, a monument erected by public subscription in Shrewsbury in 1843 hails him as 'the Nelson of his times', and the Royal Navy has named three different ships after him. Naval historians have tried to reassess his reputation, pointing out that he achieved no remarkable successes over the enemy.

Among the ballads (narrative folk songs) that take sailors and the sea as their subjects, there is a wide range of 'realism' and/or imagination. Supposedly historical ballads include 'The Golden Vanity', which first appeared on seventeenth-century broadsides as 'Sir Walter Raleigh Sailing in the Lowlands' and has subsequently been collected a vast number of times from singers. In reality it is a most fanciful story: later versions lose sight of Sir Walter Raleigh but continue to tell of the cabin-boy who courageously sinks a Turkish privateer by swimming over to it and drilling holes in the hull, but is then refused rescue by his own captain. Sometimes he is rescued by the crew, sometimes drowned. On occasion, the cruel captain is

punished, either thrown overboard, or else tormented by the cabin-boy's ghost which returns to haunt him and/or causes the ship to sink. Though a narrative ballad in form, it was also on occasion sung as a shanty both at the capstan and the pumps.

A small number of pirate ballads with some basis in fact have enjoyed considerable popularity. The swashbuckling 'Henry Martin', which tells of three brothers who draw lots to determine which of them should turn pirate in order to maintain them all, is thought to have derived from the seventeenth-century 'Andrew Barton' (Child 167). In 1476 the Portuguese seized a Scottish ship commanded by John Barton, in consequence of which the Scottish king granted Barton's sons, Andrew, Robert, and John licence to take reprisals. The Bartons, however, appear to have grossly exceeded their remit and effectively became pirates, harassing not just the Portuguese but also English merchantmen. They are said to have sent three barrels of salted Flemish seamen's heads as a present to King James IV of Scotland, and the ballad describes Barton's mysterious 'beams', apparently a special kind of weapon that gave him increased firepower. Their activities caused Henry VIII to order that action be taken against them, and in 1511 Barton's ship was captured and the pirate beheaded.

The protagonist of 'Captain Ward and the Rainbow', John Ward (c.1553–1623?), is said to have been a fisherman at Faversham and later joined the Royal Navy. He seems to have turned to piracy in 1603, and in 1604 he sailed for the Mediterranean. By mid-1606 he had based himself in Tunis, where he remained until his death, acquiring a considerable fortune from piracy in the Mediterranean and commanding a substantial fleet of pirate ships. The ballad apparently relates to a (failed) English attempt to negotiate Ward's return to England in 1609, in which year he also survived an attempt on his life and a joint Spanish and French attack on Tunis.

'The Greenland Whale Fishery' recounts the hardships of this particular trade. A. L. Lloyd wrote: 'Until 1830, the whaling ships put out each spring from London, King's Lynn, Hull, Whitby, bound for the right-whale grounds of Greenland. The best of our whaling ballads are about the Greenland fishery. After 1830, the fleets moved to Baffin's Bay, and subsequently to the grounds off Hawaii and Peru, but still most of the songs the whalers sang were of the Greenland days.' The first stanza cites a date, which varies considerably, but 1784, 1794, and 1802 among the earliest listed. 'The Greenland Voyage; or, The Whale Fisher's Delight' (1725), though a quite different song, does demonstrate some continuity of subject. In contrast, 'Windy Old Weather' ('The King(s) of the Sea' or 'The Fishes' Lamentation') is a much more light-hearted song about the fishing trade, and there is reason to think it was especially well known among coastal and seafaring communities.

'The Loss of the *Ramillies*' relates to the wreck of HMS *Ramillies* on the Devon coast on 15 February 1760, with the loss of 734 lives, and only twenty-six men saved. At least two different songs were written about the disaster, presumably close to the time. Printed broadsides commemorating shipwrecks are common, often with titles beginning 'The Loss of . . .' or 'The wreck of . . .', and there is some suggestion that they were sold to raise relief funds. Another example is 'The Loss of the Royal Charter'. The *Royal Charter* was wrecked off Anglesey in 1859 with the loss of over four hundred lives and Charles Dickens wrote an account of the disaster.

Interestingly, due to the location of the wreck, ballads were also printed in Welsh. 'The Ship in Distress' is an unusual song which recounts a story of shipwreck and 'survival cannibalism'. The subject seems to have a record in both fact and song. The Portuguese 'A Nau Caterineta', French 'La Courte Paille', and Danish 'En Mærkelig Vise om de Söfarne Mænd' all deal with 'survival cannibalism'. Better known in English is 'Little Boy Billee', a parody written by the novelist W. M. Thackeray, which has also been taken up by singers, including the sailing barge skipper Bob Roberts whose singing was extensively recorded.

Fictional, but no doubt with some factual resonance, are songs such as 'The Young Sailor Cut Down in his Prime', which tells of an encounter with the funeral procession of a sailor who has died of a sexually transmitted disease. But in other copies the character is a soldier, or even a young girl, so this clearly belongs at the border of sea songs proper. 'Caroline and her Young Sailor Bold' has a woman dress as a sailor to follow her true-love to sea, and another such is 'The Female Cabin Boy'. A song called 'A Broadside' tells of a sea battle and has the surprise appearance of a heroic female to take the captain's place. The 'female warrior' is a not uncommon figure in British balladry, but such disguises can also be matched in songs about soldiers.

The sea is nevertheless a common setting for songs of parted lovers. Both 'Adieu Sweet Lovely Nancy' and 'Farewell, My Lovely Nancy' share the general theme of faithful love between a sailor and his sweetheart, made more poignant by the inevitable departures that the sailor's life entails. Another is 'Polly on the Shore', as much a love song as a sea song. On the other hand, the murder ballad 'Captain Glen', in which the killer goes to sea as a ship's captain in order to escape the scene of his crime, does include a particular maritime motif. The crew begin to fall ill and a fearsome storm arises and imperils the ship. At this point the boatswain reveals the captain's secret, and the crew members throw him overboard, at which the storm immediately subsides. The superstition concerning the presence of an evil-doer on

board ship is apparently deep-rooted, going back to the biblical episode of Jonah and the whale.

Another element of sea lore reappears in 'The Mermaid' where the mermaid, with a comb and a glass in her hand, indicates that the ship is doomed – though often in a rather upbeat way, with the ballad's memorable and lively tune and 'landlubbers lying down below' chorus. The figure of the mermaid can be traced back to the sirens of classical antiquity – in the *Odyssey*, for example – and seems to have become established in Britain in the Middle Ages, where mermaids sometimes turn up in ecclesiastical iconography. The comb and glass probably attached themselves to the alluring female figure as symbols of vanity. Belief in mermaids apparently persisted over many centuries, and travellers' tales from the sixteenth century onwards record sightings and even captures of mermaids, and fakes created out of parts of monkeys and fish have been regularly reported. It has been suggested that sailors' sightings of marine mammals such as the manatee and dugong contributed to the belief in the existence of mermaids. The ballad's popularity is very much wider than its seafaring subject might suggest.

---

## Some seafaring customs and beliefs

Countless beliefs and superstitions are attributed to sailors. Whistling, for example, was sometimes used as a means of summoning a wind when becalmed, and other reported practices for this purpose include whipping the ship's boys. Sharks were feared, for it was thought they could 'smell' sickness on board, and when caught they were treated with unusual savagery. Sailors and fishermen commonly regarded pigs as unlucky: they would not say the word 'pig' at sea, would not sail if they had met a pig on the way to the ship, or would not allow pork or bacon on board. Sailors also detected evil omens in such things as a ship's cat being lost overboard, or birds alighting on the rigging or following the ship – so the premise of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has a basis in seafaring belief.

The ceremony of 'crossing the line' takes place on crossing the Equator. A sailor dresses as Neptune and comes on board, where he is greeted with great respect and welcomed by the captain. Various ceremonies are enacted, and anyone who has not previously crossed the Equator is blindfolded and their face daubed (with tar or treacle, or anything else) and shaved with a rusty razor, after which they are dumped into a sail or a tub of water. In modern versions of the ceremony the horseplay tends to be toned down.

The ceremony of 'burying the dead horse' or 'paying off the dead horse' took place after a month at sea. All of the ship's company are paid a month's salary in advance on leaving port, so they have, in effect, been working for nothing during the first month of the voyage. The idea that work that has already been paid for is a 'dead horse' can be found in other trades beside seafaring. After a month, an effigy roughly in the form of a horse is made out of sailcloth stuffed with shavings and some combustibles, which is then hauled up to the yardarm, set alight, and dropped into the sea. The shanty 'Poor Old Horse' was originally used only at this ceremony, but when the custom fell into disuse the song came to be used as a halyard shanty:

They say, Old man, your horse will die  
*And we say so, and we hope so*  
They say, Old man, your horse will die  
*Oh poor old horse.*

## Collectors

Both Cecil Sharp (1859–1924) and Percy Grainger (1882–1961) collected shanties from retired seamen in the Edwardian period, and J. M. Carpenter (1888–1984) did so more systematically in the late 1920s. Stan Hugill (1906–92) was a working sailor and his books are regarded as the most authoritative collections in this area. A memorial website, including bibliography and discography, has been established at <http://www.stanhugill.com/>. There are numerous other published collections of sea songs and shanties, but the provenance of items within them is not always entirely clear.

## Select resources

### *Electronic indexes*

The online Roud Folksong and Broadside Indexes provide the standard means for locating English folk songs in print, sound recordings, and manuscripts, but it should be noted that the classification system applied is based largely on narrative content and is therefore less reliable when it comes to song of variable narrative content such as sea shanties: <http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/home.cgi>

---

## Bibliography

Ashton, John, ed., *Real Sailor-Songs* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1891; repr. London: BroadsheetKing, 1973).

Doerflinger, William Main, *Shantymen and Shantyboys* (New York: Macmillan, 1951)  
Hugill, Stan, *Shanties from the Seven Seas: Shipboard Work-Songs and Songs Used as Work-Songs from the Great Days of Sail* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961).

- *Shanties and Sailors' Songs* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1969).

- *Songs of the Sea: The Tales and Tunes of Sailors and Sailing Ships* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).

Kinsey, Terry L., *Songs of the Sea* (London: Robert Hale, 1989).

Lloyd, A. L., *Folk Song in England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), pp. 265–315.

Palmer, Roy, ed., *The Valiant Sailor: Sea Songs and Ballads and Prose Passages Illustrating Life on the Lower Deck in Nelson's Navy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

- *Boxing the Compass: Sea Songs & Shanties* (Todmorden: Herron Publishing, 2001).

Sharp, Cecil J., *English Folk-Chanteys* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent; Schott; Taunton: Barnicott & Pearce, 1914).

Smith, Laura Alexandrine. *The Music of the Waters* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1888).

Tawney, Cyril, *Grey Funnel Lines: Traditional Song & Verse of the Royal Navy, 1900-1970* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

Terry, R. R., *The Shanty Book*, 2 parts (London: Curwen, 1931).

- *Salt Sea Ballads* (London: Curwen, 1931).

Walser, Robert Young. "‘Here We Come in a Leaky Ship!’: The Shanty Collection of James Madison Carpenter", *Folk Music Journal*, 7 (1998), 471–95.

Whall, W. B. *Ships, Sea Songs and Shanties* (Glasgow: James Brown & Son, 1910).



---

## Sound recordings (CDs)

Larner, Sam, *Now Is the Time for Fishing: Songs and Speech by Sam Larner of Winterton, England*, collected and edited by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, Topic TSCD511, 1999.

*Sea Songs & Shanties: Traditional English Sea Songs & Shanties from the Last Days of Sail*, Saydisc CD-SDL 405, 1994.

*Voice of the People, The: vol. 2: My ship shall sail the ocean: Songs of tempest & sea battles, sailor lads & fishermen; vol. 12, We've received orders to sail: Jackie Tar at sea & on shore*, Topic TSCD 652, 662, 1998.

*When the Wind Blows: An Anthology of Traditional Folk Music from Coastal England*, Veteran VTC5CD, 2001.

The compilation album *Rogue's Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs and Chanteys* (2006) by various artists from Martin Carthy and Richard Thompson to Lou Reed, Andrea Corr, and Van Dyke Parks, is an eclectic mix but attests to the continuing influence and vitality of traditional songs of this kind in a revival context.

## Websites

A Google search for sea songs and shanties retrieves many hits and much potentially useful information, although the accuracy and authority of such sites cannot always be guaranteed.

<http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/sea-shanty/0sea-shanty.htm>

<http://www.contemplator.com/sea/index.html>

<http://www.jsward.com/shanty/index.shtml>

The guide to recordings in the Library of Congress (Washington, DC) is authoritative:  
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/guides/SeaShanties.html>

---

## Appendix 1: Shanties

### Blow the Man Down

Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow the man down!

*To me way-aye, blow the man down.*

Oh, Blow the man down, bullies, blow him right down!

*Give me some time to blow the man down!*

As I was a-walking down Paradise Street,

*To me way-aye, blow the man down.*

A pretty young damsel I chanced for to meet.

*Give me some time to blow the man down!*

She was round in the counter and bluff in the bow,

So I took in all sail and cried 'Way enough now.'

I hailed her in English, she answered me clear,

'I'm from the Black Arrow bound to the Shakespeare.'

So I tailed her my flipper and took her in tow,

And yardarm to yardarm away we did go.

But as we were going she said unto me,

'There's a spanking full-rigger just ready for sea.'

That spanking full-rigger to New York was bound;

She was very well manned and very well found.

But soon as that packet was clear of the bar,

The mate knocked me down with the end of a spar,

And as soon as that packet was out on the sea,

'Twas devilish hard treatment of every degree.

So I give you fair warning before we belay;

Don't never take heed of what pretty girls say.

---

## **Lowlands**

I dreamed a dream the other night,  
*Lowlands, Lowlands, away, my John,*  
I dreamed a dream the other night,  
*My Lowlands, away!*

I dreamed I saw my own true love,  
*Lowlands, Lowlands, away, my John,*  
I dreamed I saw my own true love,  
*My Lowlands, away!*

She came to me all in my sleep,  
*Lowlands, Lowlands, away, my John,*  
I dreamed I saw my own true love,  
*My Lowlands, away!*

And then I knew my love was dead.  
*Lowlands, Lowlands, away, my John,*  
I dreamed I saw my own true love,  
*My Lowlands, away!*

---

## **Fire Down Below**

*There is fire in the lower hold,  
There's fire down below,  
Fire in the main well,  
The captain didn't know.*

There is fire in the forepeak,  
Fire in the main,  
Fire in the windlass,  
Fire in the chain.  
*Chorus*

There is fire in the foretop,  
Fire down below,  
Fire in the chain-plates,  
The bosun didn't know.  
*Chorus*

There is fire up aloft,  
There is fire down below  
Fire in the galley,  
The cook he didn't know.  
*Chorus*

---

## **Boney**

Boney was a warrior,  
*Away ay-yah!*  
A warrior and a tarrier,  
*John Fran-swor!*

Boney fought the Roo-shi-ans,  
*Away ay-yah!*  
Boney fought the Proo-shi-ans.  
*John Fran-swor!*

Boney went to Elbow,  
Boney he came back again.

Boney went to Waterloo,  
There he got his overthrow.

Then they took him off again  
Aboard the Billy Ruffian.

Boney broke his heart and died  
Away in St. Helena.

Give her the topgallantsails;  
It's a weary way to Baltimore.

Drive her, captain, drive her,  
And bust the chafing leather.



---

## Hangin' Johnny

They call me hangin' Johnny,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
They say I hang for money!  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

They say I hanged my mother,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
My sisters and my brothers  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

They say I hanged my granny,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
I strung her up so canny  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

They say I hung a copper,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
I gave him the long dropper  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

I'd hang the mates and skippers,  
*Away, boys, away!*

I'd hang 'em by their flippers  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

A rope, a beam, a ladder,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
I'll hang ye all together  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

Hang 'em from the yardarm,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
Hang the sea and buy a pigfarm  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

They say I hang for money,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
Hangin' ain't bloody funny  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*  
They call me hangin' Johnny,  
*Away, boys, away!*  
Ain't never hanged nobody  
*So hang, boys, hang down!*

---

## Storm-Along

Stormie's gone, that good old man,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
Stormie's gone, that good old man,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

They dug his grave with a silver spade,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
His shroud of finest silk was made,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

They lowered him with a silver chain,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
Their eyes all dim with more than rain,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

An able sailor, bold and true,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
A good old skipper to his crew,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

He's moored at last, and furled his sail,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
No danger now from wreck or gale,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

Old Stormy has heard an angel call,  
*To my way hay, storm along, John!*  
So sing his dirge now, one and all,  
*To my aye, aye, aye, Mister Storm-along!*

---

## Appendix 2: Forebitters

### Maggie May

Now you jolly sailor lads, come listen  
to my tale,  
I'm sure you will have cause to pity  
me,  
I was a damned young fool in the port  
of Liverpool,  
When I called there on my first port  
home from sea.

*Oh Maggie, Maggie May  
They have taken her away  
To slave upon Van Dieman's cruel  
shore.  
Oh, you robbed so many whalers,  
And dosed so many sailors  
But you'll never cruise 'round  
Peter Street no more.*

I was staying at the Home, from a  
voyage to Sierre Leone,  
And two-pound-ten a month was all my  
pay,  
As I jingled with my tin, I was easy  
taken in,  
By a little girl up there called Maggie  
May.

Oh, I'll never forget the day when I first  
met Maggie May,  
She was standing on a corner at  
Canning Place,  
In a full-sized crin-o-line, like a frigate  
of the line,  
And as she saw I was a sailor I gave  
chase.

She gave me a saucy nod, and I, like a  
farmer's clod,  
Let her take me line abreast in tow,  
And under all plain sail, we ran before  
the gale  
And to the Crow's Nest Tavern we did  
go.

Next morning when I woke, I found  
that I was broke,  
No shoes or shirt or trousers could I  
find,  
When I asked her where they were,  
she answers 'My dear sir,  
They're down in Lewis' pawnshop  
number nine.'

So to Lewis' I did go, but no clothing  
could I find,  
And the policeman took that wicked  
girl away,  
And the judge he guilty found her, of  
robbing a homeward-bounder,  
And now she's doing time in Botany  
Bay.

She was chained and sent away from  
Liverpool one day,  
The lads all cheered as she sailed  
down the bay,  
And every sailor lad, he only was too  
glad  
They'd sent that old whore out to  
Botany Bay.



---

## The Flying Cloud

My name is Arthur Hollandin,  
As you may understand  
I was born ten miles from Dublin Town,  
Down on the salt-sea strand,  
When I was young and' comely,  
Sure, good fortune on me shone,  
My parents loved me tenderly  
For I was their only son.

My father he rose up one day  
And with him I did go,  
He bound me as a butcher's boy  
To Pearson of Wicklow,  
I wore the bloody apron there  
For three long years and more,  
Till I shipped on board of The Ocean  
Queen  
Belonging to Tramore.

It was on Bermuda's island  
That I met with Captain Moore,  
The Captain of The Flying Cloud,  
The pride of Baltimore,  
I undertook to ship with him  
On a slaving voyage to go,  
To the burning shores of Africa,  
Where the sugar cane does grow.

It all went well until the day  
We reached old Africa's shore,  
And five hundred of them poor slaves,  
me boys,  
From their native land we bore,  
Each man was loaded down with  
chains  
As we made them walk below,  
Just eighteen inches of space  
Was all that each man had to show.

The plague it came and fever too  
And killed them off like flies,  
We dumped their bodies on the deck  
And hove them overside,  
For sure, the dead were the lucky ones  
For they'd have to weep no more,  
Nor drag the chain and feel the lash  
In slavery for evermore.

But now our money it is all spent,  
We must go to sea once more,  
And all but five remained to listen  
To the words of Captain Moore,  
'There's gold and silver to be had  
If with me you'll remain,  
Let's hoist the pirate flag aloft  
And sweep the Spanish Main.'

The Flying Cloud was a Yankee ship,  
Five hundred tons or more,  
She could outsail any clipper ship  
Hailing out of Baltimore,  
With her canvas white as the driven  
snow  
And on it there's no specks,  
And forty men and fourteen guns  
She carried below her decks.

We plundered many a gallant ship  
Down on the Spanish Main,  
Killed many a man and left his wife  
And children to remain,  
To none we showed no kindness  
But gave them watery graves,  
For the saying of our captain was:  
'Dead men tell no tales.'

---

We ran and fought with many a ship,  
Both frigates and liners too,  
Till, at last, a British man-o-war,  
*The Dunmow*, hove in view,  
She fired a shot across our bows  
As we ran before the wind,  
And a chainshot cut our mainmast  
down  
And we fell far behind.

They beat our crew to quarters  
As they drew up alongside,  
And soon across our quarter-deck  
There ran a crimson tide,  
We fought until they killed our captain  
And twenty of our men,  
Then a bombshell set our ship on fire,  
We had to surrender then.

It's now to Newgate we have come,  
Bound down with iron chains ,  
For the sinking and the plundering of  
ships  
On the Spanish Main,  
The judge he has condemned us  
And we are condemned to die.  
Young men a warning by me  
Take and shun all piracy.

Farewell to Dublin City.  
And the girl that I adore,  
I'll never kiss your cheek again  
Nor hold your hand no more,  
Whiskey and bad company  
Have made a wretch of me,  
Young men, a warning by me  
Take and shun all piracy.

---

## Appendix 3: Sea Songs and Ballads

### The Mermaid

One Friday morn when we set sail,  
Not very far from land,  
We there did espy a fair pretty maid  
With a comb and a glass in her hand, her hand, her hand,  
With a comb and a glass in her hand.

*While the raging seas did roar,  
And the stormy winds did blow,  
While we jolly sailor-boys were up unto the top,  
And the land-lubbers lying down below, below, below,  
And the land-lubbers lying down below.*

Then up starts the capt'n of our gallant ship,  
And a brave young man was he;  
'I've a wife and child in fair Bristol town,  
But a widow I fear she will be.'

Then up starts the mate of our gallant ship,  
And a bold young man was he;  
'Oh, I have a wife in fair Portsmouth town,  
But a widow I fear she will be.'

Then up starts the cook of our gallant ship,  
And a gruff old soul was he;  
'Oh, I have a wife in Plymouth town,  
But a widow I fear she will be.'

And then up spoke the little cabin-boy,  
And a pretty little boy was he;  
'Oh, I am more grieved for my daddy and my mammy,  
Than you for your wives all three.'

Then three times round went our gallant ship,  
And three times round went she;  
For the want of a life-boat they all went down,  
And she sank to the bottom of the sea.

---

## The Sailor's Alphabet

A is the anchor that holds a bold ship,  
B is the bowsprit that often does dip,  
C is the capstan on which we do wind, and  
D is the davits on which the jolly boat hangs.

*Oh, hi derry, hey derry, ho derry down,  
Give sailors their grog and there's nothing goes wrong,  
So merry, so merry, so merry are we,  
No matter who's laughing at sailors at sea.*

E is the ensign, the red, white, and blue,  
F is the fo'c'sle, holds the ship's crew,  
G is the gangway on which the mate takes his stand,  
H is the hawser that seldom does strand.

I is the irons where the stuns'l boom sits,  
J is the jib-boom that often does dip,  
K are the keelsons of which you've told, and  
L are the lanyards that always will hold.

M is the main mast, so stout and so strong,  
N is the north point that never points wrong,  
O are the orders of which we must be'ware, and  
P are the pumps that cause sailors to swear.

Q is the quadrant, the sun for to take,  
R is the riggin' that always does shake,  
S is the starboard side of our bold ship, and  
T are the topmasts that often do split.

U is the ugliest old Captain of all,  
V are the vapours that come with the squall,  
W is the windlass on which we do wind, and  
X, Y, and Z, well, I can't put in rhyme!

---

## Greenland Fishery

'Twas in eighteen hundred and fifty-  
three  
And of June the thirteenth day,  
That our gallant ship her anchor  
weighed,  
And for Greenland bore away, brave  
boys,  
And for Greenland bore away.

The lookout in the crosstrees stood,  
With his spyglass in his hand.  
'There's a whale, there's a whale,  
there's a whalefish,' he cried,  
'And she blows at every span, brave  
boys,  
And she blows at every span.'

The captain stood on the quarter-deck,  
And a fine little man was he.  
'Overhaul! Overhaul! Let your davit-  
tackles fall,  
And launch your boats for sea, brave  
boys,  
And launch your boats for sea.'

Now the boats were launched and the  
men aboard,  
And the whale was in full view;  
Resolv-ed was each seaman bold  
To steer where the whalefish blew,  
brave boys,

To steer where the whalefish blew.

We struck that whale, the line paid out,  
But she gave a flourish with her tail;  
The boat capsized and four men were  
drowned,  
And we never caught that whale, brave  
boys,  
And we never caught that whale.

'To lose the whale,' our captain said,  
'It grieves my heart full sore;  
But oh! to lose four gallant men,  
It grieves me ten times more, brave  
boys,  
It grieves me ten times more.'

'The winter star doth now appear,  
So boys, we'll anchor weigh;  
It's time to leave this cold country,  
And homeward bear way, brave boys,  
And homeward bear away.'

Oh, Greenland is a dreadful place,  
A land that's never green,  
Where there's ice and snow, and the  
whalefishes blow,  
And the daylight's seldom seen, brave  
boys,  
And the daylight's seldom seen

---

## **Ye Mariners All**

Ye mariners all, as ye pass by  
Come in and drink if you are dry  
Come spend, me lads, your money brisk  
And pop your nose in a jug of this

O mariners all, if you've half a crown  
You're welcome all for to sit down  
Come spend, me lads, your money brisk  
And pop your nose in a jug of this

O tipplers all, as you pass by  
Come in and drink if you are dry  
Come in and drink, think not amiss  
And pop your nose in a jug of this

O now I'm old and can scarcely crawl  
I've a long grey beard and a head that's bald  
Crown my desire, fulfill my bliss  
A pretty girl and a jug of this

And when I'm in my grave and dead  
And all my sorrows are past and fled  
Transform me then into a fish  
And let me swim in a jug of this

---

## **Polly on the Shore**

Come all you wild young men and a warning take by me  
Never lead your single life astray or into bad company  
As I myself have done, being all in the month of May  
When I, as pressed by a sea captain,  
A privateer to trade  
To the East Indies we were bound to plunder the raging main  
And it's many the brave and a galliant ship  
We sent to a watery grave  
Ah, for Freeport we did steer, our provisions to renew  
When we did spy a bold man-of-war sailing three feet to our two

Oh, she fired across our bows, 'Heave to and don't refuse  
Surrender now unto my command or else your lives you'll lose'  
And our decks they were sputtered with blood  
And the cannons did loudly roar  
And broadside and broadside a long time we lay  
Till we could fight no more  
And a thousand times I wished myself alone,  
All alone with my Polly on the shore

She's a tall and a slender girl with a dark and a-rolling eye  
And here am I, a-bleeding on the deck  
And for a sweet saint must lie  
Farewell, my family and my friends, likewise my Polly too  
I'd never have crossed the salt sea wide  
If I'd have been ruled by you  
And a thousand times I saw myself again,  
All alone with my Polly on the shore.

---

## Young Sailor Cut Down in his Prime

One day as I strolled down by the Royal Albion  
Cold was the morning and wet was the day  
When who did I meet but one of my shipmates  
Wrapped up in flannel yet colder than clay

*Then beat the drum lowly  
And play the fife merrily  
Sound the dead march as you carry him on  
Take him to the churchyard  
And throw the earth over him  
For he's a young sailor cut down in his prime*

He asked for a candle to light him to bed,  
Likewise a flannel to wrap round his head,  
For his poor head was aching, his poor heart was breaking,  
And he was a sailor cut down in his prime.

His poor old father, his good old mother  
Oft-times had told him about his past life  
When along with those flash girls his money he squandered,  
And along with those flash girls he took his own life.

And now he is dead and he lay in his coffin,  
Six jolly sailors to carry him along,  
Six jolly maidens shall carry white roses,  
Not for to smell him as you pass him by.

On the top of the street you will see two girls standing,  
One to the other they whispered and said:  
Here comes the young man whose money we squandered,  
Here comes the young sailor cut down in his prime.

On the top of his headstone you'll see these words written,  
All you young men take a warning by me  
And never go courting with the girls in the city,  
Flash girls of the city were the ruin of me.



---

## The Loss of the Ramillies

It happened to be on the first of May  
While the Ramillies to her anchor lay  
At twelve o'clock a gale came on  
And she from her anchor cut and run

The storm increased more and more  
The billows was rollong on the shore  
Our close-reefed tops'ls we quickly spread  
In hopes to weather the old Ram Head.

The rain poured down in a dreadful shock  
While the sea beat over our fore-top  
She would neither stay nor wear  
Nor yet gather way enough to steer

The bosun on the deck did stand  
He bowed his call and gave command  
'Launch out the boats, your lives to save  
Or the sea this night will be your grave'

Some in one place, some in another  
Five hundred men they all got smothered  
There was only four saved to tell the tale  
How the Ramillies behaved in the gale.

When the news to Plymouth came  
That the Ramillies was lost and all her men  
All Plymouth town was flowing in tears  
To hear the dreadful sad affair

Come, all you pretty fair maids, weep with me,  
Who lost your loves on the Ramillies  
There was only four saved to tell the tale  
How she behaved in the gale.

## Resource Bank

Inspire learning with folk

Explore free online materials for using English traditional folk song, music, dance, drama and other arts in your teaching and leading.



**Discover more learning resources**

[www.efdss.org/resourcebank](http://www.efdss.org/resourcebank)