

## **Decline of Modal Melodies in the Oral Transmission of English Folk Songs, 1890 to 1970**

(Revised version of a paper delivered to the Folk Song Conference at Cecil Sharp House in November 2018)

by Lewis Jones

### 1. Introduction: Traditional and Revival Folk Songs

Most of the folk songs in the original 1959 edition of *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* were notated before the First World War. In 2003 the English Folk Dance and Song Society published an updated edition, and the title was changed to *Classic English Folk Songs*. The reason for this, according to the editor, Malcolm Douglas, (p. ix) was because "the book has long been considered a classic of its kind."

In 2017, Steve Roud published his *Folk Song in England*, a study that ends in about 1950. During the first half of the twentieth century, argues Steve in his Chapter 11, traditional folk song was "in terminal decline."

This conference is entitled "Traditional Folk Song," and that designation draws a distinction between the old folk songs and the folk hymns, singer song writer songs, etc., of the present day.

I dislike the word "classic" as applied to folk songs since it suggests that there are other songs that are "non-classic" and by inference inferior; but I agree with Malcolm Douglas's point. I also agree with Steve's analysis, and with the title assigned to this conference. At an impressionistic, anecdotal level most of the songs harvested by the great collectors before and just after the First World War to me sound different from, for example, most of the songs performed during the folk song revival after 1950.

### 2. Tune Analysis

So, my contentions are that traditional folk tunes are different from tunes harvested more recently, and that a convenient way to measure and study the differences is to compare and contrast the scales or modes in which the two categories of songs are cast. To do this we need to resuscitate an interest in tune analysis, a practice that was common among the great collectors before the First World War, but that has today fallen into desuetude and disuse.

The study of harmony can be tricky and complicated. In contrast, the analysis of a simple folk tune or melody line is much easier. Such an analysis does not tell us all that much. A knowledgeable listener with a sensitive ear might be able to distinguish between, say, an Irish and a Scottish dance tune, or a Russian and a Swedish folk melody. But tune analysis, as practised by Cecil Sharp and attempted by me, can do neither of those things.

However, an elementary tune analysis *can* determine the nature of the musical scale or mode in which a melody is cast. Old English folk songs, such as those harvested by the great collectors, usually employ one of four scales: the Ionian major scale, the Mixolydian scale, the natural minor or Aeolian scale (that is, the minor scale without any sharpening of the upper notes as in the modern Harmonic and Melodic minor scales), and the Dorian scale.

Note: For explanations of the musical theory and terminology that underpins all this please refer to Folkopedia and to the pages entitled "Scales and Musical Modes in Celtic, Anglo-American and English Folk Songs" and "Tune Analysis: How to Dissect, Interpret and Categorise Anglo-American, Celtic and English Folk Melodies."

### 3. Cecil Sharp (1916) *One Hundred English Folk Songs*

Before the First World War, the best part of one half of the folk songs collected by Cecil Sharp, George Butterworth, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Grainger and others were Aeolian, Dorian, Mixolydian and Ionian/Mixolydian hybrids.

An excellent anthology that illustrates the melodic nature of traditional English folk songs is Cecil Sharp (1916) *One Hundred English Folk Songs*. On his count, more than half of the tunes in that compilation are modal: 27 Aeolian, 20 Dorian, 7 Mixolydian, and 4 that are modal but difficult to categorise.

In his Introduction to *One Hundred English Folk Songs* (1916) Cecil Sharp writes as follows:

More than half of the tunes here presented are cast in one or other of the ancient diatonic modes (excluding the major, or "Ionian"), the forerunners of our modern scales. Hitherto, musicians have regarded these modes as relics of a bygone era, which were employed in the early days of the history of music in default of something better, but were eventually discarded (*circa 1600*) in favor of a scale-system better suited to modern requirements. But the diatonic mode is the natural idiom of the English peasant, not one, be it noted, originally acquired from without, but one which he evolved from his own instinct. That the mode has always been, and is still, his natural vehicle of melodic expression, and that it should not, therefore, be regarded in any way as evidence of antiquity, is shown by the manner in which the folksinger will frequently translate into one or other of the modes the "composed" songs which he takes into his repertory.

(An example of this is the version of "Little Brown Jug" harvested by George Butterworth. The original tune, as written by the American popular music composer R.A. Eastburn, is in a major key; but the tune as collected by Butterworth had been transmogrified into a minor modal scale, with a minor third.

#### 4. Tune Analysis of Fred Hamer (1967) *Garners Gay* and (1970) *Green Groves*

Fred Hamer collected most of his English folk songs in the 1950s and '60s. His *Garners Gay* (1967) contains 50 tunes and his *Green Groves* (1970) 39. This is a total of 89 tunes.

Of these 89 tunes 54 are in full heptatonic or seven note scales, and 35 have scales with gaps in them.

Of the 35 tunes with gapped scales 31 tunes have a single gap; that is, they are hexatonic or 6 note scales. There are 3 tunes that have two gaps in them; that is they are pentatonic or 5 note scales. Then there is one tune that has 3 gaps in it; this we might call a quadratonic or 4 note scale.

Of the 54 heptatonic tunes 48 are in major scales (that is scales with a major third). Thirty-nine of these 48 tunes are Ionian, 2 are Mixolydian, 2 are Ionian/Mixolydian hybrids or show Mixolydian influence, 4 are Ionian/Lydian hybrids or show Lydian influence, and 1 (number 72 *McCaffery*) is Ionian with a seemingly random accidental note (a flattened 6<sup>th</sup>).

There are 6 of the 54 heptatonic tunes that are in minor scales (that is scales with a minor third). Of these 3 are Aeolian, 2 are Aeolian with Dorian influence, and 1 is Aeolian with modern minor scales influence (i.e. with sharpened 6ths and a sharpened 7th).

Gapped scales, as Cecil Sharp implied, should not be considered separately but as full heptatonic scales in which one or more notes are missing.

Of the 35 Fred Hamer tunes that have scales with a single gap 21 have a missing seventh. These tunes could be either Ionian or Mixolydian depending on whether or not the seventh note is assumed to be natural (Ionian) or flattened (Mixolydian). In addition, in a single case, number 21, *The Poisoned Cup*, 2 of the fourths are sharpened, indicating Lydian influence.

There are 7 hexatonic tunes with a missing fourth. These tunes could be either Ionian or Lydian depending on whether the fourth note is assumed to be natural (Ionian) or sharpened (Lydian).

Three of the hexatonic tunes have a missing note that is other than a seventh or a fourth. Number 5, *The Rambling Sailor*, has no third. If the third is presumed to be natural the scale is Mixolydian, if flattened the scale is Dorian. Number 57, *Valentine Chant*, changes key half way through. The key signature is Mixolydian but the tune is not. At first all of the thirds are flattened to produce a Dorian scale. Then the thirds become natural and the single seventh is sharpened to change

the scale to Ionian. Number 79, *When Shall We Be Married*, stays as an Ionian tune since it would be unviable to sharpen or flatten its missing sixth.

Of the 3 Pentatonic tunes Number 16 *When Shall We Get Married?* is missing a second and a seventh. To sharpen or flatten the missing second is unviable so the scale is either Ionian if the seventh is natural or Mixolydian if it is flattened.

Number 61, *Evie and Ivy*, has no sixth and no seventh. To alter the pitch of the sixth is unviable but a natural seventh would indicate the Ionian and a flattened seventh the Mixolydian mode. Number 85, *Kiss me Quick*, is missing a third and a sixth, either or both of which could be varied to produce a Mixolydian, a Dorian or an Aeolian scale.

The single Quadratonic or 4-note tune has no third, no sixth and no seventh, and it is possible to make assumptions about the missing notes that render the mode as either Ionian or Mixolydian or Lydian.

Here are a few of the main points that emerge from comparing and contrasting the 89 Hamer tunes with the 100 tunes in Cecil Sharp's 1916 collection:

1. Slightly less than half of Fred Hamer's tunes (39 out of 89 or 44 percent) have a straightforward seven note Ionian major scale of the do-re-mi type. This is slightly more than the 42 percent in Cecil Sharp's 1916 collection.
2. Fred Hamer encountered far fewer minor scale tunes than Cecil Sharp. His collection contains no straight seven note Dorian melodies, and there are a mere three (just over 3 percent) that are straight seven note Aeolian melodies. This contrasts with a total of 47 percent in Cecil Sharp's 1916 collection.
3. There are lots more tunes in gapped scales than was usual in English folk song melodies collected before 1914. Five note Pentatonic scales are considerably fewer than Sharp found in the Appalachians, but six note heptatonic scales are much more numerous than those in his 1916 collection of English melodies. The biggest single group of Hamer's hexatonic tunes (22 or just under a quarter) have missing sevenths and could be either Ionian or Mixolydian in mode. It is possible that these statistics capture English folk melody in transition. I suspect that an analysis of folk songs collected since 1970 would have fewer hexatonic scales and a greater percentage of straight 7 note scale Ionian major "do-re-me" tunes.
4. There are no straight Lydian melodies in Fred Hamer's tunes, but a distinct Lydian influence is discernable in the sharpened fourths of some of his Ionian melodies. This is interesting given Sharp's assertion (Introduction, p. xv) that by 1916 collectors in England had unearthed less than half a dozen straight Lydian melodies. There is, however, no hint of Phrygian mode influence. The Phrygian mode is rare in English folk song but it does make an appearance from time to time, for example in the Playford dance "The Beggar Boy" and in the version of "The Trees They Grow So High" in *The*

*Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*. A crucial factor, however, is that, unlike the Lydian mode, the Phrygian is a minor mode with a minor third, and it is specifically minor mode melodies that spun into a rapid decline after the First World War.

## 5. The Decline of Traditional Folk Song in the C20 and Some Reasons For It

The biggest single change in the nature of English folk songs into the C20, as illustrated by the analysis of the Fred Hamer tunes and by other evidence, is the virtual elimination of minor mode melodies, with the Dorian nearly extinguished and the Aeolian almost gone too. Nor is there any evidence, except in a single song, that the old Aeolian or natural minor mode is being replaced by the modern Harmonic and Melodic minor scales. In contrast, there is evidence of influence by all three major modes, Ionian, Mixolydian and Lydian.

The Fred Hamer tunes are indicative of a wider trend. Before the First World War the great collectors harvested numerous melodies in the minor modes of Aeolian and Dorian; in sharp contrast, since 1945 source singers have communicated comparatively few of them.

The factors behind these changes are described by Steve Roud in his Chapter 11, and there is no need to discuss them at length here. There were, for example, the effects on oral folk song transmission of the disruptions of war, of popular songs, of gramophone records, of the radio, and of the teaching of folk songs in schools. Steve also points to the factor that, in my view, was the most significant of them all. I will now give you my take on it, with the use of a little political, economic and agricultural history.

## 6. Rural England, Enclosures, and the Great Agricultural Depression

The great collectors before World War I were driven on by a sense of urgency. The members of the Folk Song Society realized that the time was short, and that vigorous efforts at rescue archaeology were needed if the old folk songs were not to be lost forever. The *Prospectus of the Folk Song Society*, referring to "folk songs, ballads and tunes," remarked that "great numbers of these exist which have not been noted down, and which therefore are in danger of being lost." [June 1908. *Folk-Lore* 19 (2): 147-8 (147).]

The Society's Leaflet Issued to Clergy continued the theme: "We need hardly point out the historical and antiquarian importance of folk songs, but, in addition to this, their intrinsic musical beauty makes it imperative that they should be preserved. You would do a great national service by helping our search." [June 1908. *Folk-Lore* 19 (2): 150-152 (151).] In the Preface to *English County Songs* Lucy Broadwood and JA Fuller Maitland wrote:

In all parts of the country, the difficulty of getting the old-fashioned songs out of the people is steadily on the increase, and those who would undertake the task of collecting them ...should lose no time in setting to work. In almost every district, the editors have heard tantalizing rumours of songs that 'Old So-and-So used to sing, who died a year or two back.'

Fuller Maitland, speaking of Lucy Broadwood, affirmed:

I well remember various experiences in her company, and the fearful job we had to take down these songs, both of us working with pen and pencil as hard as we could go. But it always strikes me that they are in such dreadful danger of disappearing altogether. We hear them always from the very old people in the villages. ...These old people are the great source of folk song; and they are dying out fast! We do not know how many songs we have lost. ...It is like a sort of race against time. ...It does behove everybody to do all they possibly can. [Broadwood, Lucy E. March 1905. "On the Collecting of English Folk Song." Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association 31: 89-109. Fuller Maitland's comments, which came in the discussion after Lucy Broadwood had delivered her paper, are on page 108.]

The theme was continued by Cecil Sharp (see Conclusions below). All were agreed that England's traditional rural society was dying.

Since before the middle of the eighteenth century rural England had been going through a long process of change and depopulation. Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* was published in 1770 at the time of the so-called Enclosure Acts. These Acts, promoted by the landed classes, privatised common land and ended public rights to graze animals on it. You can read the poem here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44292/the-deserted-village>

These are two of its more well-known couplets:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

The ills enumerated by the poet include extensive non-cultivated parklands attached to country mansions, abandoned farmsteads, a tavern defunct, the parson and schoolmaster gone, and the former inhabitants lost to the towns, cities and colonies. For a fuller analysis go here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Deserted\\_Village](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Deserted_Village)

The poem gives an overly romanticised and sanguine account of life in the old village, but it graphically illustrates a phenomenon that went on to destroy both rural society and the rural culture that produced our old folk songs.

The Great Agricultural Depression started in the early 1870s, and, in conjunction with associated factors such as the mechanisation of agriculture, it had, by 1914, largely completed the destruction of the rural society from which our traditional folk songs sprang.

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 influential landed interests were responsible for the passing of the Corn Laws. These imposed high tariffs on imported grain to protect British farming from foreign competition. By the 1830s, however, industrial interests, given added influence by the Great Reform Act of 1832, argued for the repeal of the Corn Laws. The Anti-Corn Law League, headed by John Bright and Richard Cobden, conducted an escalating campaign. In 1846, at the height of the Irish potato famine, the Corn Laws were repealed by the Conservative government of Robert Peel.

This was seen by landed interest Tories as a betrayal and, with Benjamin Disraeli as their most effective spokesman, they brought down Peel's Conservative administration and ushered in a further period of Whig or Liberal rule.

Landed interests feared that the repeal of the Corn Laws would lead to a flood of cheap food imports. In the short term this did not occur. However, by the early 1870s the development of steam ships and locomotives, especially the building of large steam powered merchant ships, and the construction of transcontinental railways in Canada and the USA, opened up Britain to a flood of agricultural imports, particularly of grain, the staple crop of British farmers. Arable farming suffered a severe decline that lasted until the onset of the First World War and was exacerbated after 1900 when newly invented petrol driven tractors led to massively increased outputs of grain from Canada, the USA, and other countries that had a lot of land and a shortage of labour. The free trade orthodoxy of the British Liberal Party was challenged in the 1906 General Election by the Conservative and Unionist parties, fronted by Joseph Chamberlain. They argued for Imperial preference and for fair trade not free trade. The Liberals, however, with their images of the Big Loaf of free trade as against the Small Loaf of protectionism, won a large parliamentary majority.

The agricultural depression that began around the time of the 1870s has generated a large literature that cannot be adequately summarised or discussed here. The Wikipedia article entitled "Great Depression of British Agriculture" is currently (November 2018) rather brief and inadequate but it cites useful scholarly sources. An old (1937) but still valid treatment can be found in R.C.K. Ensor's *England 1870-1914*, a classic text that is now freely downloadable as PDF images from the Internet Archive. Ensor summarises what he refers to [p. 115] as "the disaster to agriculture" from 1870 to 1886. He concludes that "the motto over the door of Dante's *Inferno* might have been truthfully posted at the entrance of a typical English village" [p. 118]. (The motto, of course, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here.") Then, in the period from 1886 to 1900, continues Ensor [p. 284], "agriculture was ruined a second time over." Wheat prices plummeted still further and by

1900 the acreage under wheat was little more than half what it had been in 1870. In the early 1890s a Royal Commission on Agriculture generated useful data for the historian but did nothing to solve the problems. In the period from 1901 to 1914 some sectors of agriculture, such, for example, as the rearing of livestock on imported grain, flourished; but agriculture's percentage share of GDP kept on falling as the industrial revolution continued apace, embracing new technologies and new industries. The rural areas were depopulated and towns and cities grew rapidly. By 1914, concludes Ensor [p. 513],

Farming had ceased to be of any real consequence in the life of the nation, and the days (still so recent) when a good or bad harvest meant a good or bad season for trade in general seemed as dead as Queen Anne.

## 7. Conclusion

Cecil Sharp, like the other great collectors, realised that folk song in the rural communities of England was dying. But his message was upbeat. The folk song revival pioneered by Sabine Baring Gould, he wrote (p. xiii), arrived just in time and

happily ..before it was too late to make amends for the contemptuous neglect with which our predecessors had treated their national musical heritage. A few years later, with the passing of the last survivors of the peasant class, it would have been quite impossible to have recovered anything of real value, and the products of a great peasant art would have been irrevocably lost.

Indeed, Sharp (p. xiii) discerned a silver lining:

It may be thought that, owing to the late hour at which the interest in our folk music came ultimately to be aroused, it is but a shrunken harvest that has been garnered. But I do not think this is so. That the postponement has added very materially to the difficulties of the collector--by compelling him, for instance, to take down his songs from aged and quavering throats instead of from young fresh-voiced singers--is, of course, true enough. Nevertheless, I do not think that this has appreciably affected either the quality or the abundance of the recoveries. Indeed, our belated conversion has even had some actual advantages. For the investigations have thereby come to be made at a period when the scientific spirit is abroad, and consequently the work has been conducted with thoroughness, accuracy and honesty of purpose. And this is scarcely the way in which it would have been done a century or more ago.