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CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES



# Performing Englishness in New English Folk Music and Dance

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Research Project Closing Report

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## **Abstract**

Over the last ten years there has been a resurgence of interest in the English folk arts: new artists are exploring their English heritage of tunes, songs and dances, and established artists are finding new audiences; and folk festivals in England are experiencing great popularity. Whilst grass roots involvement in folk flourishes, a developing folk industry is also playing a central role. The research project has looked at the significance of this newly invigorated interest in English traditions as well as focussing on the kinds of English identities being forged and their politics. The project has had three main objectives. Firstly, it has examined the characteristics of this wave of English folk. Secondly it has looked in detail at the particular kinds of 'Englishness' that are being circulated when people 'do' English folk, whether as participants, performers, audiences or promoters. Thirdly it has examined why this wave of interest is happening now, and how it might relate to wider shifts in national identity. To address these questions the project has undertaken in-depth interviews with artists, participants and promoters, media analysis and participant observation at a range of cultural events.

At a time when processes like devolution and globalisation are prompting debate about English identity, the folk arts are increasingly significant as a place for the negotiation of new English identities that both celebrate English cultural traditions and embrace the diversity of Britain's multicultural present. The English folk arts, however, are becoming politically contested. The BNP have shown an interest in using the folk arts for the furthering of a nationalist agenda, but the emergent campaign Folk Against Fascism has acted as a focus for English folk artists' resistance to this, demonstrating that the English folk scene values an inclusive ideology. The report suggests that, as interest in English identity continues to grow, a clear understanding and backing of the contemporary folk arts among policy makers and the media may also assist in avoiding their appropriation by the far right.

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## Introduction

This document presents the key findings of the research project *Performing Englishness in New English Folk Music and Dance*. The project's research took place between September 2007 and August 2009, and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Grant number AH/E009867/1). It was hosted by the Centre for Research in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sunderland, and conducted by Dr Trish Winter and Dr Simon Keegan-Phipps.

### Background, aims and objectives

The project is based on the premise that there has been, over the last five to ten years, a gathering resurgence of interest in the English folk arts – that is, in folk or traditional music and dance that explicitly, often emphatically, identifies itself as *English*. Folk festivals in England have become increasingly popular; an increasing number of professional folk acts are foregrounding their Englishness; and the demography of folk audiences is getting younger – the genre is enjoying considerable and growing popularity with people in their teens, twenties and thirties. The performance of folk has moved beyond the boundaries of the folk scene and towards popular cultural contexts such as Mercury Music Awards nominations, mainstream music festivals and events. The media profile of folk has shifted, with greater media visibility for folk within arts and cultural programming (such as BBC2's *The Culture Show* and the BBC Proms series) and popular entertainment shows (for example *Later with Jools Holland* and *The Paul O'Grady Show*).

This resurgence of English folk has come in the context of wider debates, both public and academic, about English national identity. The last ten years have seen a number of academic publications that examine debates around English identity in the wake of devolution and other political processes (e.g: Aughey, 2007; Bryant, 2006; Hazell, 2006; Perryman, 2008, 2009) and a parallel series of popular books engaged in various kinds of searches for Englishness (e.g: Bragg, 2006; Kingsnorth, 2008; Paxman, 1998; Wood, 1999). Whilst a sub-genre of these latter texts locates its 'search for Englishness' in an investigation of English folk traditions (Irwin, 2005; Lewis, 2005), a sustained consideration of English folk culture has been absent from academic discourse on Englishness and its politics. This research has sought to address that absence.

New English Folk is a dynamic but largely unexamined site where Englishness is being asserted, performed and negotiated at this time. A new generation of young musicians and dancers are turning to 'English folk' sources, singing folksongs collected in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dancing in festival dance tents to dance tunes published as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and reinventing morris dances. Artistic and cultural practices are an important way in which people create and assert a sense of identity, and it is interesting that people appear to be looking in these practices

towards an identity that draws on notions of 'English folk' and 'English traditions'. The findings of this research demonstrate that the politics of these performances of Englishness are often heavily contested (see page 16). It is vital that we understand how national identity is being negotiated at this time of change, and what the politics and implications of those negotiations and participations are. An examination of the important but, so far, critically invisible contemporary practices of English folk music and dance can make a new contribution to debates about how Englishness and Britishness are changing, about the relationships between artistic cultural practices and national identity, and to the scrutiny and problematising of 'Englishness'.

To this end, the research has worked towards three main objectives:

- 1) It has examined the characteristics of this wave of English folk.
- 2) It has looked in detail at the different constructions of English national identity that are being negotiated through this resurgence. In other words, it has considered the particular kinds of 'Englishness' that are being circulated when people 'do' English folk, whether as participants, performers, audiences or promoters. It has also investigated the politics of each of these constructions.
- 3) It has examined why this wave of interest is happening now.

To achieve these objectives, the research has focused on three key areas:

- English folk music acts (from individuals such as Tim Van Eyken and Chris Wood to big bands such as Bellowhead)
- Young morris and rapper dance sides and companies (such as Morris Offspring)
- Folk festivals and festival-based participatory activities (including ceilidh dancing and youth-orientated workshops).

### Researchers and methodology

**Dr Trish Winter** (Principal Investigator) is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media at the University of Sunderland; her research is in the field of British Cultural Studies, with particular interests in issues of identity, and has previously been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Her publications include the book *Sexing The Soldier*, (Routledge, 2007), co-authored with Dr Rachel Woodward.

**Dr Simon Keegan-Phipps** (Project Researcher) is an Ethnomusicologist and has – since the completion of the project – been made a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield. He specialises in the field of contemporary English folk and traditional music, and has published on the educational institutionalisation and recontextualisation of traditional music in contemporary England.

The specific academic backgrounds of the researchers has resulted in a project that has been multidisciplinary in its approaches. A number of the research methods employed are, however, common to both British Cultural Studies and

Ethnomusicology. Rather than quantitative or statistical analysis, the ethnographic methods that have predominated this research are qualitative, and fieldwork-based. They include: participation in – and observation of – cultural events, activities and performances; interviews with key individuals involved in the resurgence; and the analysis of music, song texts, choreographies and images related to the resurgence.

The primary focus of the research has been at the national level, focusing on professional folk acts that are nationally prominent, for example. Whilst the research recognises the central importance of grass roots activity to the folk movement, and has taken in such activity within its fieldwork, it has not set out to offer detailed, localised, ethnographies. There are two reasons for this scope. Firstly, the resurgence has itself taken place at a national level. Secondly, as noted above, contemporary English folk culture is an under researched area and although there is some existing work, (by one of the authors and others), with a local focus, there has previously been no sustained overview of the 'big picture'.

## Characteristics of the Resurgence

### Folk in the 'mainstream'

One essential element of the current resurgence of interest in the English folk arts is the considerable – and ongoing – increase in references to 'folk' generically within the wider English culture (i.e. beyond the cultural groups that actively identify with or participate in English folk). There has been a significant increase in the instances of the subject's appearance within mainstream public print, television and online media and journalism, and within programming of mid- to large-scale arts venues.

When related to music, this development has included a broadening of the term 'folk' within certain elements of cultural media and venue programming to include predominantly acoustic popular music and musicians, and its expansion with classifications such as 'Nu Folk' (e.g. in relation to acts such as Mumford and Sons, Noah and the Whale, and Ivan Campo) and 'Folktronica'. The majority of such cases do not make specific reference to Englishness per se, but they often involve English artists, are aimed at an English audience, and do not make discursive reference to any traditional 'Other' such as Celtic or American music.

In parallel to this, musicians that *do* actively identify with English folk culture – and are accepted as such by that culture – are receiving new attention from mainstream media and programming (e.g. Bellowhead's appearance on *Later with Jools Holland* on 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2006; Jim Moray's supporting Will Young on his 2003 UK tour). The contexts for media appearances of English folk acts are often labelled generically as 'folk', as in the case of the BBC Proms 'Folk Day' on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2008, which made no emphatic reference to *English* folk music, although that was the predominating content of the event. The media profile of specifically *English* traditional culture is, however, increasing steadily: this is particularly apparent with respect to media events based around St. George's Day (e.g. special editions of *Later with Jools Holland* and BBC Radio 3's Late Junction in recent years).

References to folk dance in the mainstream media (within the contexts of the resurgence), tend to be more observational in nature, and relating to the upward shift in profile of specific genres, namely Cotswold morris and, to a lesser extent, Rapper dancing. Such references are made either through identifying a specific story (e.g. the Morris Ring's statement about declining numbers in January 2009; the ongoing question of morris dancing's possible appearance at the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony) or are simply indicative of the growing presence of the activity in the England's popular cultural consciousness (e.g. coverage of Morris Offspring's first tour – *On English Ground* – by BBC2's *The Culture Show* on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2006; the appearance of Black Swan Rapper on *The Paul O'Grady Show* on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008; the film *Morris, A Life With Bells On* in 2009). The peculiarities of folk dance are such that references are to specific varieties; notions of 'Englishness' are, therefore, always present, if not always explicit.



St. George's Day is gaining in cultural significance as celebrations of English national identity become more popular, and this is a cultural trend to which the rising profile of the English folk arts is inextricably linked.

As noted above, the profile of folk arts within the mainstream media has shifted, and a trend towards 'taking folk seriously' is perceived by many folk arts and industry participants. It should be noted, however, that there still also persists an enduring tendency within media and wider cultural representation of the English folk arts that views them as bizarre, anachronistic and an object of ridicule.

### *English folk in England's folk culture*

The other element of the resurgence has been the focussing of attention amongst the existing (and growing) folk-orientated culture in England towards *English* folk arts. This can be seen, first and foremost, in the increased number and popularity of folk music acts that foreground their Englishness. This emphasis on an act's English identity is achieved in three key ways:

- Discursively, through interviews, written works and speech during concerts. Chris Wood (vocalist, guitarist, fiddler and songwriter) is a clear example of an artist who has discussed his notions of what it means to be English in a variety of verbal and written settings. More recently, his discourse has been expanded and added to through the website and pre-show talks given by members of the Imagined Village project.
- Iconographically, particularly through album artwork. The solo musicians Seth Lakeman, Jim Causley, Eliza Carthy, Tim Van Eyken and Bellowhead are all examples of artists who have referenced recognisably English landscapes and social histories on their album covers and websites.
- Musically, through the performance of material taken from specifically English historical manuscripts and song texts, and through instrumentation (see page 12). Faustus, the Askew Sisters, John Dipper and Rob Harbron have all closely identified with the performance of material of English historical provenance, whilst the fiddle-singing and particular melodeon style of duo Spiers and Boden has also emphasised the act's Englishness.

The extents to which each of these three behaviours are combined in the foregrounding of English identity amongst folk artists vary considerably.

These specifically *English* acts are also increasing in their popularity with audiences and (therefore) promoters and festival programmers. In particular, there has been a reported shift of popularity from Irish traditional artists towards these English acts in recent years.

### *The consolidation of a folk industry*

In parallel with the popularity of folk in general, and English folk in particular, there has been an ongoing development of a structurally complex and increasingly professionalised folk industry. This can be seen, cyclically, as both a contributory factor and a result of the resurgence. The key contexts for the production of contemporary English folk arts generally (festivals, touring shows, CD distribution, etc.) are all now administered by the various facets of this developing industry.

Folk festivals include commercial opportunities for suppliers ranging from professional festival organisers and programmers through to caterers, mobile recording studios and folk-specialist sound equipment hire companies. They often facilitate activities such as CD signings and “meet the artist” events that serve to strengthen celebrity status amongst popular folk musicians. Some larger festivals offer opportunities for amateur festival-goers to record their own music, and even provide training on sound-recording, distribution and copyright protection in such a way that encourages a regular influx of new music and musicians to the burgeoning folk marketplace. This influx is also ensured through the institutionalisation of folk music education (Folkworks, Shooting Roots), and all such organisations are aware of their role within the folk industry – whether that be providing “folk stars of the future” or developing the loyalties of festivals’ audiences.

The consolidation of the industry has also been achieved through the growing profile of media-based competition, specifically the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards and Young Folk Award. Through the production and broadcasting of these competitions (along with the prizes they award) relations between the growing folk industry, the media and educational institutionalisations are cemented. The research has demonstrated that the *British* remit of the BBC Radio Folk Awards is underpinned by a predominantly *English* structure and discourse, and that the categories awarded reinforce a selective representation of folk culture (e.g. the ‘Folk Club Award’ does not appear alongside a “Folk Festival Award”) and imply an awkwardness towards the recognition of participant- rather than product-orientated artists (e.g. the short-lived nature of the ‘Best Dance Band’ award).

The research shows that the successes of this external-looking folk industry are, at least in part, founded on an internal, mixed economy of financial and community capital. In other words, there has been a reconciliation of the apparently contradictory notions of communal, traditional cultural expression and economically motivated professionalisation. The industry recognises the economic value of a “more-to-life-than-money” discourse; the professionalisation of the folk industry is celebrated as an indication of the folk arts being “taken seriously”, and therefore means to a culturally philanthropic end.

### Artistic features of the resurgence

There are no clear artistic trends unifying the music or dance of the current resurgence. However, the outputs of many of the acts involved in the resurgence can be identified as moving outside of English folk's traditional stylistic boundaries. Whilst some acts have remained musically or choreographically "traditional" in terms of instrumentation, source materials or performance contexts, many have forged artistic alliances with other ("mainstream") music or dance genres or styles. These can be approximately placed into two categories.

**1. Music and dance engaging with popular culture.** In other words, traditional musical or dance material presented in a way that references popular culture. The references are generally explicit (discursively acknowledged).

In the case of music, this may involve rock or pop instrumentation – such as the rhythm sections to most professional ceilidh bands in England. This instrumentation is not new to ceilidh bands, which can be regarded to some extent as the surviving legacy of the 1960s' and 70s' folk rock movement. However, emphasis on this instrumentation is growing with explicit references being made to specific rock and pop genres (as in the case of Glory Strokes, who perform traditional English dance tunes in the style of a Hardcore/Death-Metal band, or Whapweasel, whose music makes clear references to Ska and Two-Tone). Furthermore, there has been an increase of rock/pop rhythm sections amongst concert acts (see, for instance, the Demon Barbers and the Tim Van Eyken Band); Jim Moray's album *Low Culture* makes musical references to a variety of popular music genres. References to popular culture of this sort are not restricted to *contemporary* genres: the instrumentation and orchestration of festival-headliners Bellowhead are notable for musically and iconographically referencing nineteenth-century Music Hall – the very popular culture being rejected by folk revivalists at the turn of the twentieth century; Eliza Carthy makes reference to 1940s dance band music in the album *Dreams of Breathing Underwater*.

In the (less common) case of dance, traditional dance forms such as morris, rapper and clog, have been presented alongside contemporary forms of street dancing, or accompanied by specially-mixed, club-style dance tracks incorporating traditional tunes. The clearest example of this has been in the work of the Demon Barber Roadshow.

All of the above examples – to a lesser or greater extent – have the ideological effect of celebrating folk music as a constantly changing and hybridising music, open to external influences at the will of practitioners, and therefore as a form of popular culture. Notably, all identify themselves as English folk musicians, and the cultural capital bestowed upon sub-generic labelling (such as "folk-rock") is negligible.

**2. Music and dance engaging with "high art" culture.** Examples of these have been less common, but no less significant in shaping the nature and popularity of

the resurgence. Where folk music and dance makes reference to “high art” culture, such references are generally implicit.

Musicians whose work can be seen to reference music of high cultural status include Chris Wood and the English Acoustic Collective: clear parallels can be drawn between the music of these artists and trends in twentieth century art music compositional techniques, including minimalism, polytonality, experimental performance techniques and extended forms. The string quartet Methera, on the other hand, makes clear reference to that fundamentally classical ensemble.

The referencing of “high art” culture in English traditional dance is clearest in the work of the collective morris dance company, Morris Offspring. In re-contextualising morris for the concert stages of middle scale arts venues, the company has engaged with choreographic techniques associated with contemporary concert dance, such as extended forms, the extrapolation of patterns of movement from basic morris steps and figures, and the abstraction and decontextualisation of movement, as well as emphasising virtuosic performance.

Again, all of those musicians and dancers who participate in the combining of English traditional material and ‘high art’ techniques continue to identify as primarily folk artists, and do not locate their work within any discursive sub-category.

### *English folk music as ‘World Music’*

One significant shift to have taken place during the course of the resurgence has been the re-labelling of English folk music as a form of ‘World Music’. For a short period, for example, Bellowhead used the tag-line ‘English World Music’ on their website; more significantly The Imagined Village project has had considerable successes in relocating English folk within the world music market, and introducing the genre to world music audiences. The latter group has achieved this through the musical combination and visual association of English folk musical materials and the instrumental and stylistic elements of non-Western – specifically Indian – origin. Meanwhile, the magazines fRoots and Songlines have played an important role in mediating this new engagement of English folk and world music.

One contributing factor in the movement of English folk music to world music markets is the economic benefits of broadening media coverage, and the introduction of English folk music to wider and greater audiences. However, those audiences have remained primarily local (English). It is perhaps more significant to note that the re-branding of English folk in this way has been accompanied by a great deal of discourse on the subject of Englishness and English national identity in the contemporary, globalised context. Within this discourse, English cultural identity is often presented as economically and politically beleaguered in

comparison to other cultural identities in Britain and globally. The politics of this discourse will be discussed later (see page 15).

### *Englishness in folk music*

Due to close geographical and participatory proximities, English folk music has undergone constant – if unspoken – comparison with other traditional musics, and particularly with Scottish, Irish and Northumbrian traditional musics. These musics have, during the latter half of the twentieth century, enjoyed greater global popularity and media interest; they have also undergone greater levels of institutionalisation and canonisation, and therefore exhibit more clearly defined core characteristics and symbols (such as specific instruments, performance styles and musical features). This research has shown how various, pre-existing characteristics of English folk music have seen a growth in profile over the course of the resurgence, and are emerging (albeit tacitly) as an English stylistic canon – a set of symbols indicating an *English* musical tradition that is distinct from other traditional musics of the British Isles.

**1. Fiddle-singing.** The term is being used increasingly by artists, promoters and writers within the folk music industry to refer to the individual practice of singing and playing the fiddle simultaneously. Of the current wave of fiddle-singers, Eliza Carthy and Nancy Kerr are perhaps the earliest high-profile figures to be closely associated with the activity, but since then many of the musicians to appear at the forefront of the resurgence in English folk music have identified closely with it, including Jon Boden, Seth Lakeman, Chris Wood, Paul Sartin, Bella Hardy and Jackie Oates.

**2. The English melodeon.** Previously ubiquitous at the grass-roots level of English folk culture, the melodeon (a diatonic button accordion) has become another significant musical icon of the resurgence. Its profile as a virtuosic instrument of the concert stage has been furthered by artists such as Tim Van Eyken, John Spiers and Saul Rose. In the live performances of acts where creative alliances with popular musics are clearest, (such as the Demon Barbers; Jim Moray; and numerous ceilidh bands), the melodeon plays an important role in the visual achievement of an unambiguous identification with English folk music.

**3. 'Funky chords' – harmonisation and arrangement.** The way in which folk songs and tunes are presented – be it harmonically or texturally - can be seen as a key musical vehicle of the resurgence. The selection of interesting methods for such musical presentation of traditional material has, of course, always been a consideration for a large proportion of English folk musicians but the intensity, variety and profile of this activity has increased considerably over the course of the resurgence (this is particularly clear in the music of Bellowhead, Jim Moray and Mawkin).

**4. 'Playing around the tune' - variation and improvisation.** These are features of instrumental performance practice that have also escalated in profile during the course of the resurgence – particularly through the instructive discourses of workshops and other educational events. The emphasis placed on this particular strain of spontaneous, creative activity has increased and become synonymous with a specifically *English* style. Clear champions of the technique include Chris Wood and Rob Harbron.

Across these areas runs the generic trend towards a rise in profile and status of instrumental music and musicians within English folk music culture. Instrumental music and song remain very closely linked, and little evidence exists of compartmentalisation of the two forms (as is more apparent in the other traditional music cultures of the British Isles), but there has been a growth in the number of musicians and acts that foreground instrumental music, or who enjoy considerable success without a strong singing profile (e.g. Rob Harbron; John Dipper; Mawkin; Methera). This shift speaks to a wider quest for equivalence of cultural status with the instrumental traditions of Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria (which can, in part, be attributed to the avoidance of the politically problematic anachronisms of many traditional song texts).

## English National Identities

Examination of contemporary English folk's textual, contextual and discursive characteristics summarised above has led to the identification of a number of differing constructions of Englishness. These constructions are often not exclusive within any specific performance, context or discourse; rather, they are fluid, regularly appearing in combination and sometimes contradictory. The expression of these versions of Englishness can be either explicit *or* implicit.

**1. A conglomeration of regional identities.** An English cultural identity is, in some cases being implicitly expressed through the *explicit* celebration of regional identity. This is particularly the case in the discourse of artists such as Seth Lakeman and Jim Causley, who make clear their strong identification with their home region of the South West. Notably, where specific regional identities are foregrounded, this is normally done so in terms of rurality and agricultural history, demonstrating strong links between this construction and a more generic, traditional identity (see No. 2 below). Whilst this is apparently paradoxical, the literature on folk movements in other nations over the course of the twentieth century demonstrates the significant role often played by regionalist discourse in the consolidation of a national identity (as in Ireland and Portugal: see Smith & Ó Súilleabháin, 1997; Castelo-Branco & Toscano, 1988).

**2. A traditional, 'historically rooted' identity.** This is one of the most common constructions: it emphasises a historical construction of tradition as treasured antiquity, often accompanied by – or even located within – iconic images of the idyllic rural landscape ('England's green and pleasant land'). Here, historical provenance is equated with authenticity; the Englishness being implicitly depicted in this construction is, then, that of an essentialised, indigenous, white people. The historical element of this construction is often non-specific ("people have done this for hundreds of years"). But it has *also* become increasingly specific to the period of the first folk revival (approximately 1890-1930), with an increasing amount of activity invested in celebrating the achievements of that revival's leading figures (e.g. the Mary Neal project; and a general return to the source materials collected by Cecil Sharp and his contemporaries).

**3. A lost identity.** The idea that English cultural identity has been lost or forgotten is an ideological continuation of the historically rooted Englishness, and presents the performance of English traditional culture within a narrative of discovery. It is especially prevalent in written discourse surrounding the resurgence and is clearly evoked in titles to a wide range of publications on English identity, including those that do not reference folk per se (e.g.; Bragg, 2006; Crystal, 2008; Hemming, 2009; Irwin, 2005 Wood, 1999).

**4. A beleaguered identity.** Rather than presenting Englishness as something passively lost or forgotten, for some involved in the resurgence Englishness is an identity that is actually suppressed or obstructed, be that by contextual circumstance or by specific cultural policies. Factors such as pro-multicultural legislation and American-led globalisation are all implicated within this construction, although the most common explication points to the perceived perpetuation of the English folk arts' widespread ridicule by ill-informed public figures and the national media. Those who believe that English traditional culture is refused the respect afforded to other cultural groups within Britain recognise that belief to be politically controversial, open to misconstrual as potentially racist; it is therefore not regularly expressed directly by folk artists and audiences (the vast majority of whom are supporters of a tolerant, inclusive, multicultural society). Exposition often takes the indirect form of comparative discussion, that questions "our" own denigration of "our" cultural heritage by citing those cultures within Britain that celebrate theirs. A belief that cultural policy makers do – to some extent – play a role in the institutionalising of this denigration is, however, privately held by a significant proportion of folk artists and activists.

**5. A discrete partner within a multicultural Britain.** This construction of Englishness equates the performance and value of the English folk arts with that of all other cultural traditions celebrated in Britain. Here, Englishness is offered as a discrete, distinct and bounded element within a mosaic of diverse cultural identities, occasionally essentialising Englishness as an ethnicity, but never claiming predominance over the traditional practices of other groups (indigenous or immigrant). This construction is often cited as a comparative justification for motivations behind the performance of English folk arts, and is regularly presented as aspirational rather than realistically descriptive (i.e. 'The English *should* celebrate their cultural traditions just as other ethnic and cultural groups in this country *do* celebrate theirs'). This aspiration – that English folk arts should share equal status and support with the plethora of other traditional arts performed in Britain – is publicly held by every folk artist encountered during the research.

**6. A hybrid, multiethnic identity.** This construction offers an alternative view of Englishness as an identity that is, in itself, pluralistic, and to be shared, celebrated and shaped by people of multiple ethnic backgrounds and cultural genealogies. In this "melting pot" construction, acknowledgement is given to the influence of global markets and migrations to the shaping of a contemporary England, and the influences of non-indigenous cultures on (historically) indigenous traditions is celebrated. This discourse is particularly strong in the output of *The Imagined Village*, where musicians of very different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are brought together to combine their musical styles in a celebration of their Englishness.



## The Politics of Englishness

As noted in the previous section the performance of English folk arts frequently asserts a 'traditional' English identity that is rooted in a particular version of the English past. The performances of Englishness that are being made in the English folk resurgence are not, however, made in opposition to, or denial of, multiculturalism. Rather, there are often attempts to bring this idea of a 'traditional', historically rooted English identity, into harmony with contemporary multiculturalism. The hybrid version of Englishness seen, for example, in *The Imagined Village*, or embodied in the Anglo-Turkish musical identity of Dogan Mehmet, goes even further in presenting, visually and aurally, a strikingly plural and multi-ethnic vision of Englishness.

There is one tendency within contemporary English folk that espouses a position which can be characterised as 'radical patriotism' (Aughey, 2007): this is seen most clearly in the work and writing of Billy Bragg, which expresses a desire to reclaim for the political left the ideas of Englishness and of patriotism. English folk is mobilised to this end by, for example, Bragg's involvement in *The Imagined Village*, although it should be noted that Bragg's position is presented there as a voice within a debate around Englishness and not as a unified position held by all members of the band. Such radical patriotism is a minority, if a significant, strand within the political landscape of contemporary English folk.

Most practitioners of English folk emphatically do not see their folk practice as an expression of English nationalism. This was highlighted during the course of the research project, when English folk became something of a political battleground. Ongoing attempts by the British National Party to appropriate folk for their far-right nationalist agenda were highlighted by a number of folk artists and resisted in various ways. The BNP's activities included: the selling of compilation CDs, including tracks recorded by English folk artists, on the BNP website, and the suggestion in the *Activists' and Organisers' Handbook* (British National Party, no date) that its members get involved in the folk scene. Early attempts by individual musicians to resist such claims on their cultural practice were soon consolidated into a more unified campaign, 'Folk Against Fascism' that was launched in 2009 and which rapidly gained widespread support within the folk community; by the time of writing the majority of high profile folk artists of the resurgence have demonstrated their support for the campaign.

The vast majority of English folk practitioners see their practice not as an expression of nationalism, but as an expression of an English *cultural* identity. The dominant position is one that aspires to keep politics out of folk music, but the support for Folk Against Fascism has also shown that there is a vehement desire to resist the appropriation of English folk for a nationalist agenda.

## Why is the Resurgence Happening Now?

The research has highlighted a number of key factors explaining the current resurgence of interest in the English folk arts; these factors come both from within and outside of England's participatory folk culture.

### Wider interest in Englishness

As noted earlier in the report, there has been a considerable growth in the profile and political significance of debates surrounding the wider issue of English national identity during – and directly preceding – the resurgence. These debates come in the context of four contemporary political and cultural issues:

**UK devolution.** With devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there has come a bout of questioning around issues of English identity, its cultural expression and political implications for England (see Hazell, 2006). Since the referenda of 1997 that progressed devolution, the “West Lothian Question” has received a great deal of media coverage. In the context of this debate comes, within England's folk culture, an awareness of the celebration of national identity in Scotland and Wales – through cultural and tourism-led activity in Scotland, and through promotion of the Welsh language in Wales - and a growing feeling that English cultural tradition should be in receipt of similar attention.

**Perceived European federalisation.** For very similar reasons to those stated above, it can be argued that the perceived growth of the European Parliament's involvement in British legislation has raised the desire amongst the English to explore and assert a distinctive national identity. It is important to acknowledge that this topic is rarely cited as a direct motivation or concern amongst folk artists or audiences, but is nonetheless in receipt of much media coverage, and forms part of the discursive context for the resurgence.

**Immigration.** As the extent of immigration in England is perceived to rise, so too are the cultural effects of that immigration seen by many as necessitating a clear and direct identification of – and support for – those cultural activities that represent and celebrate an ‘indigenous’ English identity. Specifically, it is felt by many within the English folk culture that the cultural traditions of other ethnic groups in England command greater respect – particularly from key policy makers and funding agencies – than that afforded the English folk arts. However, the matter of cultural policy with regards to this issue is gaining in profile within public political discourse more generally.

**Globalisation.** There continues to be an underlying awareness of the globalised (predominantly American-controlled) economic marketplace as a partial factor in the ambiguation of English national identity. Within the specific context of English

folk culture, this awareness has been regularly rehearsed as an indictment of globalised popular culture. An example of this position can be seen in Colin Irwin's sleeve notes for the CD 'Looking for a New England': 'It was as if, almost imperceptibly at first, a generation decided that enough was enough and started to rebel against the homogenised pap it was being force-fed by the unholy coalition of mainstream radio and major record labels.' (Irwin, 2009)

### *Developments within English folk culture*

Specific internal developments within the English folk culture can also be seen to contribute to the current successes of English traditional music and dance. These are often the first contributing factors to be cited by artists involved in the resurgence.

**A new folk generation.** A considerable number of those figures involved in the current resurgence are individuals in their 20s and 30s who come from families involved in the second revival period of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Whether the offspring of parents with high profiles as performers (as with Benji Kirkpatrick or Eliza Carthy), or the relations of grassroots practitioners (e.g. the Askew Sisters, John Dipper, Dave and James Delarre), these key figures have simultaneously reached a stage in their respective careers where they are both youthful enough to be attractive to a young audience and benefitting from sufficient performative skill and experience (owing to family-based enculturation) to maintain new and existing audiences.

**Supportive institutional frameworks.** The resurgence has witnessed – and is often partially attributed to – a considerable growth in the institutionalisation of folk arts activities in England. This includes both the increased influence and profile of large-scale national agencies such as FolkArts England, Folkworks and the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and the consolidation of smaller-scale local folk development projects such as Ryburn 3 Step and Wren Music.

**Increased willingness to engage with the “mainstream”.** As discussed on page 9, the growth of a folk industry in England has been a major feature of the resurgence; the willingness of English folk music culture to engage with professionalisation, mainstream aesthetics, production values and marketing infrastructures (and to positively celebrate that engagement) can also be seen as a strong contributory factor for the extent and longevity of the resurgence. This is regularly cited by English folk artists as an important causative development, particularly by younger artists involved in the resurgence.

## Conclusions

At a time when processes like devolution and globalisation are prompting debate about Englishness, English folk music and dance is a significant site for contemporary negotiations around English national and cultural identity. It is a place where people are, in their everyday lives and through their artistic and cultural practice, actively working out what it means to have an English identity now. They are attempting to negotiate the place of history and tradition in a contemporary English identity and they are forging new kinds of Englishness, negotiating their place within a multicultural Britain and in relation to a globalised cultural landscape.

The research demonstrates clearly that the folk arts in this country have considerable potential to be used as political material. Folk music and dance has, since its crystallisation as a cultural concept in the late eighteenth century, played central roles in the consolidation of politically extremist ideologies. At one end of the political spectrum, the possibility of constructing a notion of “the folk” as “the people” of a nation has afforded the folk arts the ability to instil and strengthen a unifying proletariat identity, a property exploited in different ways by Communist regimes throughout the twentieth century. At the other political extreme, the possibility to essentialise an indigenous identity through the differentiation of national “traditions” means that the folk arts have the ability to successfully support and reinforce nationalist sentiment. This potential has been exploited to varying extents by every far-right regime in European history, most notably in Franco’s Spain, Salazar’s Portugal and Nazi Germany (see Perez, 2000; Castelo-Branco & Toscano, 1988; Steinweis, 1993), and is the reason for the BNP’s attempts to appropriate and identify with the English folk arts today. The English folk arts continue to hold strong appeal for the far-right, which is motivated to exploit any historically bound references to nostalgic constructions of England as a pre-industrial (white) idyll.

The innate cultural properties of the folk arts, in combination with their historical associations with extreme and divisive ideologies, prevent them from being completely depoliticised in contemporary England, although such an aspiration is shared by a large proportion of artists. Since the second, essentially socialist revival period of the 1950s 60s and 70s, English folk culture has remained broadly leftwing in its political allegiances, although these allegiances had become increasingly tacit through the 1980s and 90s; the activities of the BNP in recent years has forced acknowledgement by folk artists and audiences of the (unintended) availability of their activities for appropriation by the far-right. It is important to remember that the dominant ideological position underpinning the first folk revival period in this country (1890s-1920s) was one of rightwing nationalism, and that it is the material

(although *not* the politics) of that first revival that is receiving considerable, positive attention by English folk artists today (see page 8).

Materials that have proven most convenient for appropriation by the far right are those that (unintentionally) sustain a nationalist agenda by highlighting or reacting against the perceived comparative lack of support or respect for English traditions. Such claims – clearly expressed in the texts of songs like *Roots* by Show of Hands, a song the BNP attempted to use as a soundtrack to their 2009 party political broadcast – are born of exasperation; a belief that the English folk arts are not only ridiculed in the media, but have also been effectively suppressed by a succession of governments and subsidiary agencies. For many English folk artists and activists, the reported statements of Kim Howells MP during the debating of the Licensing Bill in 2001 ("For a simple urban boy such as me, the idea of listening to three Somerset folk singers sounds like hell,") demonstrated the successful institutionalisation of a cultural prejudice within mainstream politics.

Based on the research conducted for this project, the researchers believe that the issue of shaping and expressing an English national identity is likely to increase in profile and participant numbers. As well as the contextual conditions summarised on pages 17-18, the long-term effects of the continuing economic down-turn, and events such as the 2012 Olympics may also be contributing factors to an increasing importance of English national identity. It is probable that the folk arts, in their various forms, will play a significant role in the expression of this identity, and so increase in their cultural and political significance.

The attitudes and behaviours of mainstream politicians and political groups towards folk music and dance must then move in line with this ongoing cultural shift, if they are to limit the gains of the far-right, whose support for English cultural traditions will remain consistently strong. A 'normalising' support for the English folk arts by policy makers and media – within the context of a society that celebrates tolerance and diversity – could, therefore be instrumental in defusing political tensions over the issue of English national identity. There has been a significant increase in positive media interest relating to certain aspects of English folk (particularly music) and much has been done recently to lend financial support to cultural development projects in the English folk arts, such as Arts Council England's current work with English folk music. However, there is still much evidence to suggest that concerns remain at the grassroots level over the treatment of English folk by the dominant cultural powers. Founded or not, these perceptions must be acknowledged. By helping to normalise the presentation of English traditional culture (be it morris dancing, folk singing or ceilidh dancing), as a valued element within a multicultural society, policy makers may ensure that the far-right are not furnished with a powerful, tried-and-tested tool for the furthering of a fervent nationalist agenda.

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## Appendix

### Festivals included in fieldwork

Loughborough Folk Festival  
Chippenham Folk Festival  
Wychwood Festival  
Cambridge Folk Festival  
Towersey Village Festival  
Shrewsbury Folk Festival  
Whitby Folk Week

### Interviewees

Steve Heap (FolkArts England; Association of Festival Organisers)  
Chris Wood (Solo performer; English Acoustic Collective)  
Tom Besford (Smutt Rapper)  
Simon Emmerson (The Imagined Village)  
Roger Waton (Boka Halat)  
Pete and Sue Coe (performers, organisers and activists)  
Jim Causley (Solo performer; MawkinCausley)  
Alan Bearman (Alan Bearman Music)  
Laurel Swift (Gloworms; morrisOffspring)  
Emily and Hazel Askew (The Askew Sisters)  
Dave Delarre (Mawkin)  
Jon Boden (Solo Performer; Spiers and Boden; Bellowhead)  
Damien Barber (Solo Performer; The Demon Barber Roadshow)  
Jon Brenner (Gloworms)  
Tim Van Eyken (Solo Performer)  
Dave Leverton (Leader - National Youth Folklore Troupe of England)  
Sam Lee (London Links Officer - English Folk Dance and Song Society; The Magpie's  
Nest folk and acoustic club; Cut A Shine)



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