

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 101:  
THE BIRTH OF ENGLISH SONG**

## EPISODE 101: THE BIRTH OF ENGLISH SONG

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 101: The Birth of English Song. In this episode, we’re going to look at the oldest surviving songs composed in the English language. These songs first appeared in the early to mid-1200s around the current point in our overall story of English. Even though the Anglo-Saxons composed songs in Old English, we don’t have any of the surviving music from that period. We just have lyrics. But now, in the early 1200s, we have an early form of sheet music to accompany the lyrics. So we finally get the melody that goes along with some of those old songs. And that allows us to sing those songs today in much the same way as they were performed 800 years ago. So this time, we’ll explore the birth of the English song.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can sign up to support the podcast at [Patreon.com/historyofenglish](https://Patreon.com/historyofenglish). And as always, you can reach me by email at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com)

Now this time, I want to explore the earliest surviving examples of songs composed in the English language. And I want to begin this story in the north of England in Yorkshire on July 25 of the year 1225. That may seem like a very specific time and place to begin a story about such a broad topic, but something happened on that date which deserves a quick mention at this point. We’re about nine years into the reign of King John’s son, Henry III. This was around the time that Henry was getting to be old enough that he could rule England without a regent or guardian. And in the summer of 1225, a group of royal judges held an assize or inquest in Yorkshire.

Now the word *assize* is a French word meaning an inquest or judicial proceeding. It was sometimes shortened to just *size* – spelled S-I-Z-E. And over time, *size* came to mean an ordinance or regulation issued by an assize or by the government. It then came to mean any kind of fixed standard or quantity. And that gave us the modern word *size*. But again, the original version of the word *size* was *assize*, and it meant a judicial proceeding or inquest.

Now this particular inquest held in Yorkshire in 1225 was typical in that it heard disputes and issued fines and punishments for criminals. The records of this inquest still survive, and the documents indicate that one of the cases brought before the judges concerned a man named Robert Hod. He owed a significant debt to the local abbey and church which means he was probably a tenant of the church. At the inquest, he was called to answer for the debt, but he failed to appear. So he was deemed a fugitive, and in later records an outlaw. He was fined thirty-two shillings and a sixpence, and his property was confiscated. The fine was recorded in the records of the Exchequer, and we know that he remained a fugitive for a while because subsequent inquests in later years continued to list him as a fugitive and an outlaw. In some years, his names was listed as “Robert Hood.” And in one year it was listed as “Hobbehod,” which could have been a nickname or it could have been a misspelling.

By now, you might have noticed where I'm going with this story. You've certainly heard of Robin Hood – the outlaw who lived in Sherwood Forest. And some scholars think the legend actually has its origins in Yorkshire. So for historians who have tried to determine if legends were based on a real person, this Robert Hod of Yorkshire is a prime candidate. Scholars have poured over old records and have found quite a few people with names similar to Robin Hood. But this Robert Hod of Yorkshire is the only one which appears in those old records as a fugitive and an outlaw. Unfortunately, we don't know anything else about this real-life fugitive. And we don't know if he had anything at all to do with the later legends of Robin Hood. But I wanted to mention him here because he lived during this period of the early 1200s.

So what does Robin Hood have to do with the birth of English song? Well, it confirms that the common people of England sang songs and ballads to each other in English even when English writing was still rare. The oral tradition continued though songs and ballads even though English itself wasn't considered fit for writing or formal education.

The earliest recorded reference to the legend of Robin Hood took place about a 150 years later in a famous Middle English poem called *Piers Plowman*. In the poem, a lazy priest named Sloth is described as a man who prefers 'idle tales' to the word of God. The poem says that he doesn't really know his Lord's Prayer, but he does know the 'rhymes' of Robin Hood. There are no surviving songs about Robin Hood prior to this reference, but this poem confirms that stories about Robin Hood were being told through rhymes and songs well before they were finally put into writing a few decades later. A couple of decades after this first reference to Robin Hood, we have a surviving sermon from a priest who complained that people in his congregation would rather hear 'a tale or a song of Robyn Hood' than listen to a sermon.

So the legend of Robin originated and passed through songs. But Robin Hood was not the first folk hero to be immortalized in English song. In an earlier episode of the podcast, I mentioned a leader from East Anglia who led a resistance movement against the Normans shortly after the Conquest. His name was Hereward the Wake. He became a bit of a folk hero, and several books composed in Latin the 1100s mention him. Three of those books (*Gesta Herwardi*, *Book of Ely*, *Pseudo-Ingulf*) mention that many people – including peasants – sang songs about Hereward, which annoyed his enemies. A later account of his life was composed in Latin. And that Latin text says that it was based on an earlier English text that had been badly damaged. So the author says that he had to rely upon the oral history of Hereward to fill in the gaps and complete the story. So again, it appears that his legend was spread through song by the English-speaking peasants.

All of this points to the fact that the oral tradition was alive and well in England in the wake of the Norman Conquest. And even during the darkest days of English, when English writing ceased to exist, people still told stories and sang songs in English. So the language was being kept alive in song. And when English writing started to reappear around the current point in our story, some of those songs started to be written down preserved for the first time.

All of this is very similar to what happened in Greece about 2,000 years earlier. As you may recall, Greek writing also disappeared during the so-called Greek Dark Age from around 1100 BC until

around 800 BC. But during that period, people continued to pass along stories and legends about the Trojan War in the oral tradition. And when the Greek alphabet was adopted around the year 800 BC, writing started to re-emerge. And some of those stories and legends were put in writing for the first time. The result was *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

I mentioned the Greeks because they play an important role in this story. In fact, the birth of English song can really be traced back to the Greeks. So I want to revisit the Greeks for a moment. And then I'll take the story of song and music forward from there up to the current point in our story.

Now, Classical Greece was a very musical culture. The Greeks loved to play music and to listen to music. They were fascinated by it. But they didn't just enjoy it as entertainment. They also studied it. They examined the structure and composition of music. And not surprisingly, most of our words associated with music come from the Greeks. That includes words like *melody*, *harmony*, *rhythm*, *chord*, *chorus*, *symphony*, *orchestra*, *hymn* and *anthem*. They're all Greek words. And it shows how the Greeks loved to analyze and study music.

The Greeks also gave us the words for the two essential parts of any song – lyrics and music. As we'll see, it was easy to write down lyrics and save them for history, but it was much harder to write down music.

The Greek word *lyric* reflects the fact that Greek poetry was usually performed to music. The lyre was a popular stringed instrument. And singing while the lyre played was called *lyrikos*. And that gave us the word *lyric* – literally meaning the words sung to the accompaniment of the lyre.

And as I noted, the Greeks also gave us the word *music*. And again, the word *music* reflects the connection between music and poetry. The Greeks believed that all poets were inspired by goddesses called *Muses*. Traditionally, there were nine different Muses, and Greek poetry could not be composed or performed without the assistance of the Muses. They inspired poets to compose their verses, and they helped singing poets to remember and improvise their lyrics. They were essentially the goddesses of poetry and song.

Today, we still use the term *muse* to refer a person (usually a woman) who inspires an artist. And that word *muse* is the ultimate source of the word *music*. *Music* began as an adjective, and it was a way of describing something associated with the Muses. Since the Muses inspired poetry, and since all Greek poetry was intended to be sung, those songs were *music* – meaning that they were inspired by the Muses. And that produced the modern sense of the word *music*.

Now you may have never made the connection, but the word *music* is closely related to the word *museum*. *Museum* is another word associated with the Muses. The Greeks sometimes built shrines to the Muses. Those shrines were called *mouseion* – or in Latin a *museum*. Those shrines were places where poets would gather to compose music and where students would gather to learn about music. From that sense, the word *museum* became associated with centers of learning, like the famous Library in Alexandria which was also called a museum. The word then fell out of use for several centuries, but it was revived in the 1600s to refer to a place where

objects were gathered and collected for observation and study. So the term was still associated with education, but no longer associated specifically with music. And of course, today it refers more broadly to a building that contains a collection of antiquities or other objects. But originally, people went to a *museum* to learn about *music* which was inspired by the Muses. So a lot of English words pertaining to music came from the Greeks.

Now as I said, it was easy to write down the words or lyrics to a song. And in fact, many Greek poems that survive to this day were probably the lyrics to songs that were actually sung when they were performed. But it was much more difficult to transcribe the sound or melody of the music.

The Greeks experimented with musical notation. In other words, they came up with ways to write down the melody of a song. They weren't the first people to invent musical notation. Clay tablets with an ancient form of musical notation have been discovered in Mesopotamia – and those tablets date to around 2000 BC. And other cultures also tried to represent the way music sounded in writing. But the Greeks came up with their own system.

The Greek system actually used letters of the Greek alphabet above the words to represent the tone and melody to be used. Now this system largely died out with the decline of Classical Greece. And the early Romans didn't really have a good way to represent music in written form, at least not one that has survived the centuries. So in the early 500s, a Roman scholar named Boethius compiled a text that laid out a new system for musical notation. His text also required the use of letters to identify specific musical notes. It is believed that this system was derived from that earlier Greek system which also used letters. And that is the origin of our modern system of using letters as the names of musical notes – like A sharp and B flat.

Boethius's textbook became a cornerstone of music education in the early Middle Ages. And in fact, music was one of the four subjects taught in the quadrivium which I've discussed in previous episodes. The four advanced subjects of the quadrivium were arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music. And it seems a little odd that music was included in that group, you have to understand that students didn't really study music in the way we might study music today. They really focused on the study of harmony, musical intervals and scales. So it was more of a mathematical study of music.

Again the precise forms of music notation that we use today didn't really exist during the early Middle Ages. The forms of musical notation that did exist at the time were very basic. So most music was passed down by from one person to the next by memory.

Knowledge of music and song was very important in the early Middle Ages. And a properly educated person was supposed to know how to play music, just as they were supposed to understand rhetoric and arithmetic and geometry.

And that takes us to the story of Caedmon the cowherd poet who I told you about at the beginning of the Old English period in the 600s. You might remember that Caedmon cared for the animals at Whitby Abbey in Northumbria. And during meal times, he would eat with the

monks. The monks would sing songs and pass around the lyre. But Caedmon always excused himself before the harp got to him because he wasn't able to sing or compose songs like the other monks. And then according to the famous legend, he received divine inspiration and composed a poem known as Caedmon's Hymn which is considered to be the oldest surviving poem composed in English. That story illustrates the important role of song in the early Middle Ages and also in the early Anglo-Saxon period. It also shows that music was to be treated with respect, and people without an education often lacked the ability to sing and compose music by the standards required at the time.

Again, we have the lyrics or words to Caedmon's Hymn, but we don't have the music. Music notation of any kind was still very rare during the early Middle Ages. So we don't know what the song sounded like when it was performed.

The lack of any surviving music from the Old English period is also due to the fact that music was part of a formal education – which meant a church education. So hymns and religious music were acceptable, but secular music was frowned upon.

In fact, Boethius and other writers in the early Middle Ages wrote about music as a corrupting force. Secular music was often thought to be inspired by the devil. So music was only acceptable if it had a divine purpose and motivation. And monks and other church scribes were responsible for copying and preserving manuscripts. That helps to explain why most surviving musical manuscripts were written in Latin and why most surviving pieces of music are hymns or religious music.

During this earlier period, in the 800s and 900s, the Gregorian Chant developed in churches and monasteries throughout central and western Europe. And over the next couple of centuries, it gradually replaced some older forms of chant. Here's an example of Gregorian Chant.  
(GREGORIAN CHANT EXAMPLE)

So this is Gregorian Chant. It is important to note that the word *chant* originally had a more of a sense of singing. The word was borrowed from French – but it was ultimately derived from the Latin word *cantare*. So this is another word where the Latin C-A – or /ka/ – sound shifted to a C-H sound in Parisian French. And that was the form that passed into English as *chant*. This also helps to explain the link between *incantation* and *enchant*. *Incantation* retains the original Latin C-A sound, and it means 'a chant or utterance that has magical power.' And 'to utter an incantation' – thereby putting someone under a spell – is to *enchant* using a Parisian form of the word. So *incantation* and *enchant* represent the Latin and Parisian forms of the same root word.

Of course, we also have the word *cantor* meaning 'a type of singer, especially one who leads the singing of songs in a religious service.' And that word reflects the original meaning of the Latin root word which was 'to sing.'

Modern French still has that word *chant* – pronounced today as (/shaw/). It's still spelled C-H-A-N-T in French. But it doesn't have the same meaning as the English word. In French, it means a song. The word *chasons* is another variation of the word that also means 'a song.' And we

actually have a variation of those words in English. We have *chanteuse* which is ‘a female singer.’

But in English, the word *chant* was borrowed at a time when it was closely associated with the rhythmic utterances used by monks like the Gregorian Chant. So in English, the word acquired a more limited sense. It came to mean ‘a repetitive utterance usually performed without musical accompaniment.’

This also helps to explain another term we have in English which comes directly from Latin – the term *a cappella*. *A cappella* means music performed without instruments using just the human voice. The Gregorian chant was a type of *a cappella* music.

And notice something about that Latin term *a cappella*. The second part is *cappella*, and we’ve actually seen that word before. Remember that the word *cape* comes from the Latin word *cappa* which also meant ‘a cape or a cloak.’ And St. Martin’s famous cape or cloak was housed in a shrine that came to be called a *cappella*, which later became *chapel* in English. So a *cappella* was a chapel or church. And *a cappella* music was originally the music performed in a church – like the Gregorian Chant. So *a cappella* literally means ‘in the chapel,’ and it refers to a type of chant or music that was performed without musical instruments.

Though most church music was performed *a cappella*, instruments were sometimes used – especially on feast days. A musician of this period could choose from a variety of stringed, wind, or percussive instruments. These included the lyre or harp. They also included horns made from carved wood or animal horn. Panpipes, flutes, bells, drums, and organs were all widely used in Anglo-Saxon England.

Though most of the surviving musical notation from this period concerns church music, we know that secular music was also very popular even if the music itself wasn’t written down. Of course, traveling minstrels had performed at royal courts for centuries. And the troubadours were famous for their love songs in the south of France. But those songs mostly survive as poetry. Most of the actual music was lost to history.

This takes us to the year 1166 – exactly one century after the Norman Conquest of England. In that year, a monk at Ely in eastern England wrote down a song that was attributed to a king who had lived prior to the Conquest. The king was Canute. You might remember him. He was the Danish king who ruled England in the late Anglo-Saxon period. And this particular song is known as the “Song of Canute.”

Now the story goes that Canute paid a visit to Ely during his reign. And he was being rowed on a boat in the river that passed by the monastery there. As Canute passed by the monastery on the boat, he heard the sound of the monks chanting or singing inside. Supposedly, Canute demanded that they stop the boat so that they could listen to the singing. And according to legend, he composed a short song on the spot. This was the song that the monk wrote down over a century later in the year 1166. And the monk who recorded the song wrote that “This is sung in chorus among the people to this day.” But again, as was common for this period, the monk only wrote

down the words – not the music. In fact, he didn't even give us all the words. He merely wrote that this is how the song 'began.' So we got the first verse. Here is what he wrote – first in Modern English, then in the original English of the monk:

Sweetly sang the monks in Ely  
as King Canute rowed by.  
Row, men, nearer the land  
so we can hear these monks sing.

Merie sunge the munecheës binnen Ely,  
Tha Cnut ching rew ther by.  
Roweth, cnihtës, noer the land,  
And herë we these munechës sung.

Now I should note that modern scholars doubt that Canute actually composed that song. It was written down in 1166 – more than a century after his death. But apparently, it had been sung for many years and was quite well known. And this is more evidence that there was a vast world of English song and secular music that has been lost to history.

And again, even with this song, we only have the words. No music was written down. So we can't really call this the oldest surviving English song. We need music for that.

But by this point, it was possible to write down that music in a very precise way. About a century earlier in Italy, a Benedictine monk named Guido d'Arezzo was teaching music to his students. And he had the bright idea of drawing a line on the page, so that notes can be placed with a fixed pitch. He began by using a single red line which he labeled with a specific note. And that was the starting point. Additional notes were then written down – either on the line or above it or below it – to show the relative pitch of the notes. Over time, he added more lines and different colors. For the first time, sheet music could accurately reflect the pitch and rhythm of the notes. This was really the beginning of the modern system of musical notation that we use today.

And this allowed both religious and secular music to be preserved with accuracy for the first time in the Middle Ages. By the 1100s, we actually start to get some surviving manuscripts with songs that have their melodies preserved with this new method. Around the same time that the Song of Canute was written down, another manuscript was composed in the east of England, and that manuscript contained four songs with English lyrics and a melody preserved with this new form of musical notation. So these are the oldest songs composed in English where we have the complete song – the lyrics and music.

The manuscript was written by a monk named Reginald of Durham. And it is a biography of a man he knew in the mid-1100s named Godric of Finchale. Godric was an Englishman and had been a merchant and a sailor as a young man, but he experienced a religious awakening later in life. He made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and when he returned to England, he became a hermit. At some point, he met Reginald and they became friends. And after Godric died, Reginald wrote



a biography about him – about his travels and his life. And Reginald wrote that Godric composed four short hymns or songs with verses in English. Reginald’s manuscript includes the lyrics, but more importantly, it also includes the music.

According to Reginald’s text, one of the songs came to Godric when the Virgin Mary came to him in a vision. Another was supposedly sung by Godric’s deceased sister when she also appeared to him in a vision.

Now Godric died around the year 1170, and Reginald’s biography was composed in Latin a short time later. So these songs date to the mid-1100s. And again, they are oldest surviving songs composed in the English language where we have both the lyrics and the music.

The most famous of the four songs is the song that supposedly came to Godric when he had a vision of the Virgin Mary. Here are the lyrics – first in Modern English, then Godric’s original lyrics:

Saint Mary, Virgin,  
Mother of Jesus Christ of Nazareth,  
Receive, shield, help your Godric;  
Receive, bring him on high with you in God’s kingdom.

Saint Mary, abode of Christ,  
Purest of maidens, flower of mothers,  
Wipe away my sins, reign in my mind,  
Bring me to joy with that same God.'

Now here are Godric’s original lyrics:

Sainte marie uirgine  
moder ihesu cristes nazarene  
onfo schild help þin godric  
onfang bring heȝilich wið þe in godes riche

Sainte marie xristes bur  
maidenes clenhad moderes flur  
dilie min sinne rix in min mod  
bring me to winne wið þe selfd God

Now if you’re curious what the song actually sounded like, here is the first verse performed by a vocal group called Ensemble Sequentia. This is part of a larger performance of Godric’s songs available on YouTube. Again, I’ll put a link to these clips on the website. (SOUND CLIP)

Before we move on, let me mention a couple of things about Godric’s lyrics. First of all, in those two short verses, he uses several Latin and French words. *Saint*, *virgin* and *flower* are all words that were borrowed from French and ultimately from Latin. *Saint* and *virgin* were closely associated with the Church, so it isn’t surprising to find those words in an English song from the

mid-1100s. But we also have *flower*. All three of those words were probably in the English language at the time. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the first use of each of those words in the late 1100s or early 1200s. But interestingly, the OED does not cite Godric's songs as the first use, even though those songs likely pre-date the sources mentioned in the OED.

Now as I noted, Godric's songs are the oldest surviving songs composed in English – where we have both the lyrics and the music, but they were not folk songs. They weren't songs sung by common people. These were hymns, and Godric composed them himself. And given that he was a hermit, we don't even know if anyone other than Godric and Reginald ever heard these songs during his lifetime.

But a few decades later, a couple of other English songs were preserved in writing. And those songs were very different. They were folk songs. They were secular, and it appears that they were widely known and sung by people who spoke English. Their author is unknown, and it's possible that they had been around for quite while before they were finally written down with this new system of musical notation. They both deal with similar themes, and they both are usually dated to the early 1200s. So these songs appear in writing for the first time around the current point in our story during the early reign of Henry III. The first is called "Mirie it is while sumer ilast" – or "Merry it is while Summer lasts." The other song is called "Sumer Is Icumen In" – or "Summer Has Come In." It is also known as the 'Cuckoo Song.' Now these songs are the oldest surviving secular or folk songs in the English language where we have both the lyrics and the melody.

Both of these songs deal with the joys of summer and springtime. And before we look at these songs, I should clarify the meaning of that term *sumer* – or 'summer' – that's used in both songs. During this period, the word *summer* was used very broadly to refer to the warm half of the year. So it also included what we know today as spring and summer. In fact, the word *spring* wasn't used to refer to a season of the year until the late 1300s. So even though these songs use the word *summer*, they're really referring to the period from springtime through summer.

And it makes sense that the oldest surviving folk songs in the English language have to do with that time of the year. That was a time for singing and celebration. I've noted before that in earlier periods of history, life was very difficult in the wintertime, especially for people who lived off the land – which was most people. In northern Europe, the weather was harsh in the winter. Crops didn't grow. And even if cows and goats could provide some milk and cheese, those animals also had to be fed. So people lived on the verge of starvation in the wintertime.

But when spring and summer came around, the weather got warm, flowers bloomed, crops were planted, and hopefully the harvests were plentiful. And most cultures had celebrations around the time that spring began. And they also tended to hold a celebration around the end of the harvest season in late fall and early winter to begin preparing for the harsh winter.

At the time I'm preparing this episode, it is the middle of October. So Halloween is quickly approaching. And Halloween has its origins in one of these celebrations held at the end of the harvest season. It was a Celtic celebration called Samhain. But unlike the joyous celebrations at

the beginning of spring, this end-of-harvest celebration had a darker tone to it – literally darker. The days were becoming shorter and colder. The nights were longer. There was unease and anxiety in the air because the people had to live on the stored harvest through the winter. And a poor harvest meant there was a very real prospect of starvation and death. So there was a morbid aspect to Samhain.

The Samhain holiday marked a transition from the light half of the year to the dark half of the year. And in Celtic mythology, there was a basic separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead. That separation was at its greatest in Spring, when the growing season began, when the days were becoming longer and warmer, and when optimism filled the air. But that separation became shorter as the growing season ended and winter loomed on the horizon. The realm of the dead got closer and closer. And it was believed that Samhain marked the point when that separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead was at its thinnest. In fact, it was so thin on that night that spirits of the dead could actual travel into the living world, and living people could wander into the realm of the dead. So spirits of the dead walked the earth on Samhain. And in the Middle Ages, the Church co-opted this Celtic holiday by moving a Roman holiday called All Saints' Day to this same general time period – November 1. English speakers called this Roman holiday 'All Hallows Day.' And the Samhain celebrations that were held immediately before All Hallows Day became known as 'All Hallows Eve,' or as we know it today – *Halloween*.

Now I realize that that was a bit of a digression, but I wanted you to see that Halloween is a descendant of these pagan festivals held at the end of harvest. And Halloween has an association with ghosts and ghouls and death because that was what people were thinking about when summer ended and winter was on the horizon. And that also helps to explain why people were so happy when winter finally came to an end, and the warm weather of springtime and summer arrived.

That joy was expressed through song, and some of those songs are the oldest secular songs recorded in the English language. And as I noted earlier, the first of those songs is known as "Mirie it is while sumer ilast" – or "Merry it is while Summer lasts." This song reflects the joys of spring and summer, but then it contrasts that joy with concern for the approaching winter.

The song was kept in a book that is known as the Book of Psalms. The book itself was compiled in the late 1100s, and it still exists today at Oxford. A few decades after the original book was completed, an unknown scribe added a single page to the front of the manuscript. That page contains the music and words to two French songs and this one English song. The page containing this song is dated to around the year 1225. So this song is usually dated to the year 1225, though it certainly could have been sung for many years before that. By the way, that year 1225 was the same year that those royal judges went to Yorkshire and held an inquest and deemed Robert Hod to be a fugitive for failing to pay his debts. So if Robert Hod was indeed an inspiration for the Robin Hood legend, then that legend has its origins in the same time period when the first folk songs were being written down in English.

Here are the lyrics – first in Modern English – and then in the original Middle English:

Merry it is while summer lasts  
Amid the song of the birds  
But now the wind's blast nears  
And hard weather.  
Alas, how long the night is  
And I, with much grief,  
Sorrow and mourn and [fast].

[M]Irie it is while summer ilast with fugheles song  
oc nu necheth windes blast and weder strong.  
Ei ei what this nicht is long  
And ich with wel michel wrong.  
Soregh and murne and [fast].

Now let me play you a clip of the song so you can hear the words set to the original music. This excerpt is performed by a vocal trio called Ensemble Belladonna. Again I'll put a link to this clip on the website. (SOUND CLIP)

Now let me break down the lyrics for you a little bit more. The first line is “Mirie it is while summer ilast with fugheles song.” The first word is *Mirie* – or *merry* – M-E-R-R-Y. In the song, the word is given three distinct notes, so that suggests that it was intended to be sung as three syllables – not two. So *Mirie* (meer-ee-ay). Merry it is while summer lasts “with fugheles song.” *Fughel* is an early version of the word *fowl* – F-O-W-L. So it meant ‘bird.’ And “fugheles song” meant the ‘fowl’s song’ or the ‘song of the birds.’ So ‘Merry it is while summer lasts with the song of the birds.’

All of those words are Old English words, including the word *song*. I haven't mentioned the etymology of that word yet. But *song*, as well as the related words *sing*, *sang* and *sung*, are all Old English words. As I noted earlier, we don't have very many native words related to music, but those are native words. In fact, those who like to look for comparisons between English and German often point to the conjugation of the verb *sing*. Where English has *sing*, *sang*, *sung*, German has S-I-N-G-E-N (/zingen/), S-A-N-G- (/zang/), and G-E-S-U-N-G-E-N (/ge-zoon-gen/). So even though the pronunciation is a bit different, you can see the connection in the conjugation and spelling of those words.

The second line of the song is “oc nu necheth windes blast and weder strong” – ‘but now nears the wind's blast and the weather strong.’ So winter is approaching. *Necheth* is just a variation of words like *near*, and *nigh*, and *next*. They're all closely related Old English words. So when the song says that winter's blast *necheth*, it means that it ‘draws near’ or ‘approaches.’

The next line is “Ei ei what this nicht is long” – ‘Alas, what this night is long,’ but it means ‘the nights are becoming long.’ Then “And ich with wel michel wrong, soregh and murne and [fast]” – literally translated as ‘And I with well much wrong, sorrow and mourn and fast.’

So here, where the song refers to “much wrong”, the sense is that the approaching winter will cause wrong or suffering, as well as sorrow and mourning. The last word is actually missing from the surviving text. But given the rhyming scheme, scholars generally agree that the missing word had to rhyme with *last* and *blast*, which were both used earlier in the verse. So it is generally agreed that the final word is *fast* – meaning that the singer is going to fast or go without food during the upcoming winter.

Again, assuming the last word is *fast*, all of the words in this song are from Old English. That suggests that the song might be much older than the surviving page that preserved the song. So even though this song is generally dated to around the year 1225, it may in fact be much older than that.

Now this is one of two songs about summer that appear for the first time in the early 1200s. The other song is a little more well-known. It is usually known as “Sumer is Icumen In” – or “Summer Has Come In.” It is also known as the ‘Cuckoo Song’ based on the refrain of the song.

First of all, let’s consider where this second song came from. It is also part of a larger manuscript, and this particular manuscript has been dated to the 1261 – give or take a couple of years. The manuscript was housed at Reading Abbey just west of London. And the book contains a variety of documents composed in Latin and French, including poems, fables and medical texts. But it has one document composed in English. And that document is the only surviving copy of this song.

Now even though the manuscript is dated to around the year 1261, the song itself is usually dated a bit earlier – often between 1225 and 1250. So this song was probably copied down around the same time as, or just after, the prior song we looked at – “Merry It Is While Summer Lasts.” That means that both of these songs were probably being sung around the same time in the early 1200s.

I should note that this second song is a rota or round. That means that it was intended to be sung by multiple people in succession. In this case, it was designed to be sung by six people. One would start, and then at a specific point, the second person would start, and then when the second person got to that same point, the third person would start, and so on. And on the page, there are actually specific instructions in Latin explaining how the song was to be sung in this manner. That makes this the oldest known rota or round in English, and it is in fact the oldest known rota in any language that uses six voices.

So I’ve talked enough about the background of the song, now let me read you the lyrics. First in Modern English, then the original lyrics in Middle English.

Summer has come in,  
Sing loudly, cuckoo!  
The seed grows  
And the meadow blooms,  
The wood springs now  
Sing, cuckoo!

The ewe cries out to her lamb  
The cow lows after her calf;  
The bullock prances; the buck darts or farts (*I'll come back to that*)  
Merrily sing, cuckoo!

Sing merrily, cuckoo!  
Cuckoo, cuckoo,  
You sing well, cuckoo,  
Don't ever stop.

Sing cuckoo now. Sing cuckoo.  
Sing cuckoo. Sing cuckoo now.

OK, so here's the original Middle English version:

Sumer is icumen in  
Lhude sing cuccu  
Groweþ sed  
and bloweþ med  
and springþ þe wude nu  
Sing cuccu

Awe bleteþ after lomb  
lhouþ after calue cu  
Bulluc sterteþ  
bucke uerteþ

murie sing cuccu  
Cuccu cuccu  
Wel singes þu cuccu  
ne swik þu nauer nu

Sing cuccu nu, Sing cuccu.  
Sing cuccu, Sing cuccu nu.

Now here's a performance of the song with its original melody. (SOUND CLIP)

So that's the Cuckoo Song. And just like before, I want to take you through the lyrics of the song. The first line is "Sumer is icumen in." So that's 'Summer is come in,' but it means 'Summer has come in' or 'Summer has arrived.'

Then, "Lhude sing cuccu" – 'Loudly sing cuckoo.' Of course, the cuckoo is the cuckoo bird.

"Groweþ sed and bloweþ med" – 'groweth seed and bloweth meadow,' but it means 'the seed grows and the meadow blossoms.' That makes a little more sense when we consider that the word *blow* had a secondary meaning in early English. Of course, it could refer to the moving wind or a moving hand or weapon, as when you strike a blow against another person. But it could also mean 'to bloom or blossom.' So think of it as 'to blow up' like a balloon. That's what flowers do when they blossom. And in fact, we still have the phrase "full-blown" which is derived from this sense of the word as 'bloom' or 'blossom.' It means 'fully mature.' And I should also note that *bloom*, *blossom* and *blow* are cognate. They come from the same root word. So 'The seeds grow and the meadow blows or blooms.'

The next line is "and springþ þe wude nu, Sing cuccu" – "and springeth the wood now, sing Cuckoo." This means that 'the wood or woods are springing forth,' so leaves are returning to the trees. And it is this sense of 'springing forth' that ultimately led to the word *spring* being adopted as a word for the season when leaves and flowers spring forth.

Then we have "Awe bleteþ after lomb" – 'The ewe bleats after the lamb,' but it means 'The ewe cries out to her lamb.' Of course, *ewe* – E-W-E – is a word for a female sheep. It's an Old English word. And here, the word is rendered as *awe*, which is just an earlier version of the word. And it says that the ewe *bleateth* after her lamb. *Bleat* is an old word that meant 'a sheep's cry.' It has largely died out of English, and has since been replaced with 'baaa.'

The next line is "lhouþ after calue cu" – 'loweth after calf cow.' Now if we work our way around that old syntax, and re-order the words to fit Modern English, we get 'Cow loweth after calf' – or 'The cow lows after her calf.' If you've spent much time on a farm, you probably know that when a cow makes a loud moaning sound, that's called *lowing*. If you're not from the farm, you might say that it is *mooring*. But it's basically the same thing.

Then we have "Bulluc sterteþ" – 'the bullock starts or jumps or prances.' *Bullock* means a young bull. And *sterteþ* is literally 'starteth' or 'start,' but it meant 'to jump or prance.' Now that may seem odd, but that was actually the original meaning of the word *start*. Think about the word *startle*. That's just a variation of the word *start*, and it has retained much of its original meaning. It still means 'to jump or jerk.' The modern sense of the word *start* as 'begin' didn't really emerge until the 1500s. Think about the term *jump-start* and you can get a sense of how the word evolved. When you're startled, you jump or jerk. You go from a state of sitting still to moving really fast. And that is what animals tended to do when you tried to get them to move really quickly. That would *start* in the sense of 'jumping,' but over time, the word *start* came to refer to 'the point when something first moved.' So when that movement began, it was said 'to start.' And that led to the sense of the word *start* as 'to begin.' So here, when the song says that the "Bulluc sterteþ," it simply means that the young bull jumps or prances around.

Then we have the next line – “bucke uertep.” Now this is one of the most debated lines in all of Middle English song. *Bucke* is an early version of the word *buck*. Now today, we think of a buck as ‘a male deer.’ But in Old and Middle English it could also refer to ‘a male goat.’ So the word can be read either way. And then we have that word *uertep*, which has caused a lot of debate among modern scholars.

First of all, that word isn’t found in any other documents in Old English or early Middle English. So it isn’t entirely clear what the word means. Scholars have proposed two theories. One theory is that the word is derived from the Latin word *vertere* meaning ‘to turn or overturn.’ We have that root word in modern words like *convert*, *divert*, and *revert*. And the simple word *vert* did enter English meaning to ‘turn up, or root up, or twist.’ So this theory proposes that “bucke uertep” means ‘the buck jumps and twists and darts about.’ The problem with this theory is that the word *vert* as a distinct verb isn’t found in any other English document until the late 1500s – over three and a half centuries later. And the song doesn’t have any other words from Latin or French. All of the other words are native Old English words. So it seems unlikely that this early English folk song would have an obscure Latin word stuck in it.

The other theory is the word *uertep* meant farteth – so the ‘buck farts.’ Now in prior episodes, I have mentioned that in the far south of England, people often pronounced the initial ‘f’ sound as a ‘v’. So *fox* was pronounced as *vox*, and that’s how we got the word *vixen* meaning ‘a female fox.’ So if this song was composed in that region, it would have been common to pronounce *fart* as *vart* – and *farteth* as *varteth*. And in fact, that ‘-eth’ ending is also a clue. In southern and central England, verbs ended in ‘-eth,’ where in the north of England, they ended ‘-s.’ So in southern and central England, people would say “he starteth,” but in northern England, people would say “he starts.” Obviously, the northern ‘-s’ form won out over time, and it eventually replaced the southern ‘-eth’ form. But the fact that this song uses verb forms like *stertep* and *uertep* with that ‘-eth’ ending means that it was not composed in the north of England. So that lends some credence to the theory that the song was composed in the south of England – in the old Wessex region where ‘f’s were often pronounced as ‘v’s. And therefore, *uertep* was simply a local way of pronouncing ‘ferteth’ – or ‘farteth’.

The Oxford English Dictionary accepts this theory, and it cites this song ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’ as having the first recorded use of the word *fart* in the English language. So there you go.

Now the final lines are pretty straight-forward. “Murie sing cucu” – ‘Merrily sing cuckoo.’ “Wel singes þu cucu” – ‘Well sing you cuckoo’ or ‘you sing well cuckoo.’ “Ne swik þu nauer nu” – ‘No cease you never now,’ but it means ‘Never stop, or do not stop now.’

So there you have it. The oldest surviving songs composed in English. Before I conclude, I did want to mention one more thing about ‘Sumer Is Icumen In’ or the ‘Cuckoo Song.’ Of all the songs I’ve discussed in this episode, it is the one that had the most enduring legacy. Not that you’re going to hear it on the radio or that you probably have it on your iPhone, but some school students do still learn that song today. And in fact, it is known far beyond the English-speaking world.



I mentioned that the song uses exclusively Old English words – assuming that *verteth* is not a Latin loanword. So it has a very Germanic foundation. Given that, it may not be surprising that the song also found an audience in Germany. In fact, in 1972, the organizers of the Olympic Games in Munich decided to use the song as part of the opening ceremonies for the games. The song was featured as thousands of German children performed a choreographed number. It was one of the first large-scale choreographed numbers at an Olympic opening ceremony – something that has become standard today. And in case you're curious, here is part of the audio of that performance from the 1972 Olympics. (SOUND CLIP)

So there you have it – the ‘Cuckoo Song’ – one of the oldest songs in English history, and it still lives on to this day.

Again, I'll post a link to all of these audio clips on the website – [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.