Folk Education Network
Folk Education Development Day

University of Sheffield, Room LT 02, Arts Tower
Bolsover St, Sheffield S3 7NA
Wednesday 13 November 2024

Spotlighting interesting folk music and dance learning and participation practice in Sheffield and the surrounding region. Presented by the English Folk Dance and Song Society's Folk Education Network in partnership with Access Folk at the University of Sheffield.

Review by Marilla Homes



Photo: Rosie Butler-Hall and Rosie Hodgson, presenting Soundpost's Forge and Fledge project. © EFDSS, by Jen Cox

The Folk Education Development Day held in sunny Sheffield on 13th November 2024 was co-hosted by Access Folk at the University of Sheffield. This was my first introduction to the Folk Education Network, and first time participating at a Development Day. It was held in a downstairs room at the Arts Tower, part of the University of Sheffield. Being a nervous first timer and not in the best of energy health, it was a challenging room to walk into, despite knowing some lovely people there.

We were all welcomed very warmly by **Esbjörn Wettermark (Access Folk)** and **Kerry Fletcher (EFDSS Folk Education Network Co-ordinator)**. Kerry's bubbly excitement was infectious, and helped settle my nerves. I had no idea what to expect, but I was obviously surrounded by people who are passionate about their fields and craft.

The first session was from the tutors of **Forge and Fledge**, the adult folk groups for singers and instrumentalists run by **SoundPost** in Sheffield. **Rosie Hodgson** runs the new voices group which started up this year. It has already had 50 people through, and another introduction course is scheduled for January 2025, with a follow on course. Participants are gaining in confidence and skill, and new organisers of folk events have come out of the groups. Rosie then led us in a short physical and breathing warm up with which she starts all her classes. **Rosie Butler-Hall** is the adult instruments tutor, nurturing new and experienced adult musicians. She emphasised the need for safe places for adults to continue to learn new things. As a student in her class, I can definitely agree with all the positive feedback she shared from other participants. I have started learning an instrument from scratch with no other lessons other than these classes, and have been able to do a first public performance and join in some (slow) sessions, while connecting to a great group of people, all learning at our own pace and style. **Forge and Fledge** is offering a new beginner adult instrument class to complement the original group.

The co-host organisation for the day was the **Access Folk** research organisation at the University of Sheffield. **Professor Fay Hield (Lead Researcher)** and **Dr Esbjörn Wettermark (Research Associate)** gave an update on the research so far, exploring ways to increase and diversify participation in folk singing in England. These include Folk Singing Survey findings, consulting groups, the Ask A Friend about folk singing, and resources developed to help folk organisers improve access and participation. The Action Research has provided small grants to 12 projects so far, and reached over 250 participants around England from 2022-2024. Access Folk have engaged with individuals, folk clubs, venues, national folk arts organisations in England, wider UK and in Europe, and academic institutions. They are looking at finding solutions to issues raised by the research and aim to provide more resources to help us learn from each other, available at https://accessfolk.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources

We were then introduced to the first of three Roma women in academia presenting at this event. **Terezia Rostas** is founder of **Care for Young People's** Future, and introduced us to the **Welcoming Cultures – Caravan Showcase in Sheffield**, part of the **Migration Matters Festival** in Sheffield 2024. Welcoming Cultures project is dedicated to preserving folk heritage, promoting inclusivity, and fostering intercultural understanding. Terezia talked of local demographics and folklore, the podcast **Connecting the Dots**, the festivals and exhibitions the community have created recently including ROMFEST; Yorkshire Integration Festival; Meadowhall Cultural Fashion Show; and the Millenium Gallery Migration Matters, and the more than fifty Community Cultural Champions who have been trained so far. She spoke of Radical Belonging and her experience of how where you come from affects where you can go, the challenges in maintaining folk traditions, and research in decolonising music and music education. Her key advice for folk educators is to engage communities in meaningful partnerships, to develop inclusive educational content and to encourage intergenerational learning to bridge gaps. "Together, we can create spaces where all folk traditions are valued and celebrated."

Next we met **Dr Rosa Maria Cisneros**, a Spanish Jitana/Roma and Serbian academic. She is the Midlands Dance Consultant and Co-ordinator for the **Dancing Dialogues** network project, Associate Professor (research), **Coventry University's Centre for Dance Research**, dancer, Romani studies Scholar and peace activist. Rosa spoke of the similarities and differences in Spanish folk dance, flamenco and ballet; the influence of tourism and stereotypes on dance evolution and development; the history of Spanish dance, and the hierarchy of singing, playing and dancing. She emphasised the castanets are an example of confusing stereotypes – they are traditionally part of Spanish folk dance which is very different to flamenco. She shared some videos of traditional folk dancers in Seville, and taught us all some clapping rhythms and some lovely flowing dance shapes with arms, hands and wrists, so when we go to Seville we can join in the dancing! I particularly liked the belief she shared from her culture that the older dancers and musicians are highly valued, as the older you are, the more you have to give. More can be found on **Dancing Dialogues** at https://dancing-dialogues.net

The lunch break was a welcome opportunity to get outside into sunshine and fresh air. I was very fatigued (recovering from illness) by this stage, so my note taking in the afternoon was not as detailed, my apologies to the presenters, who were great! Overall I found the day to be jam packed full of interesting information,

Following the break we had an update from the **English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS)**. **Hannah Mears-Young (Programme Manager, National Youth Folk Ensemble)** gave an update on the NYFE auditioned youth music group, and shared a video of a recent performance. Auditions open in January and close in June 2025. **Rachel Elliott (Education Director)** talked about developing the cross cultural folk dance event that became the Bhangra Ceilidh – drawing together musicians and dance callers from the Indian and English traditions and creating something new and exciting. The videos and images from the event looked like a lot of fun. **Jen Cox (Dance Development Manager)** added to the update with information about mini grants that have been awarded, and that are available, upcoming dance projects including a course at the People Dancing Summer Intensive at De Montfort University 22nd to 24th July 2025, and U-Dance Festival in Sadler's Wells 26th to 27th July.

The next presenter was **Laura Fullwood** from **Orchestras For All (Youth Leadership Coordinator)**. Orchestras For All (OFA) have recently moved to their new home in Sheffield. Laura spoke very passionately about how her involvement with OFA has progressed through the organisation from participant to leader. There are three programmes: National Orchestras For All (NOFA), which is a non auditioned orchestra for 11-18 year olds across the UK, and is free to participate. It is also a charity. Modulo is the school ensembles part of the organisation. OFA are currently redeveloping their Music Leadership Training, the third programme OFA runs. Laura is a fine example of someone who has benefited from the life changing experience of making music.
www.orchestrasforall.org

Rachael Sutcliffe, the **Academic Manager** from **Leeds Conservatoire** was our third proud Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) presenter of the day. She updated us on the Music Degree in Folk, Roots and Blues and their very commendable aim to have their students earn a living from music after studying with Leeds. I can assure you that would have been a refreshing attitude to have come from the institution I studied music at!! The students on the degree range from 18 years old to those in their 70s. It is a practice based course, with two thirds practical assessment. Many of the tutors will be known to people in the UK folk scene.

Ian Naylor from the **Sheffield Music Hub**, talked about the recent restructure to what is now called the **South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority Music Hub** which incorporates Rotherham, Barnsley, Doncaster and Sheffield. With the 42% cut in finance from HM Government, they are facing more challenges. It is a hub-lead organisation. They have been working with local steering groups, regional partner strategy groups to improve youth engagement activities.

The final presentation for the day was from **Folk Factory**, the **Soundpost** youth-lead ensembles. **Nicola Beazley (Founder)**, **Cathy Bennett** and **Robyn Wallace** are the main tutors, and invited two of the young participants, Florence and Lucy Mulhall to come and tell us about their experiences as part of the Folk Factory ensembles. The young people were very eloquent and evidently really enjoy the opportunities that have opened up for them. Repertoire is chosen by both the educators and young people, with a focus on English folk music, exploring folk styles from within the UK and linking them to the tradition and function. The musical arrangements are often led by the young people, building the element of trust between educators and young people, and they often teach each other. “We equip young people with a toolbox of style, repertoire, and musical knowledge – they then make the music their own.” Pattern based learning is employed with an emphasis on learning by ear with applied theory. The groups are open to any ability and instrument for children within the age range, and there are performances every term. The ‘Folk Lore’ developed by the young people was very insightful on how they wanted to be treated by and treat others within the group, including staff. There is plenty of involvement in the wider community, and several new bands forming from within the alumni. **Robyn** then led us in a short step dance workshop which could be done sitting or standing.

The day ended with a group discussion facilitated by **Esbjörn Wettermark**. I found this to be a very useful discussion, with plenty of food for thought. Groups talked about sharing across boundaries and what is appropriate regarding terms, context etc; retention of people including young folk; the opportunity to network and connect; and the community we have that is filled with projects, sessions and events. This was the first time I had a structured opportunity to meet other people, and I would like there to have been some at the beginning of the day to get to know people too.

The round up and farewell from **Esbjörn** and **Kerry** was just as warm and friendly as the welcome. Thank you for an interesting day and plenty of information.

Marilla Homes is a singer, teacher, and performance and movement specialist based in Sheffield. She has been involved in folk festivals in Australia from 2010, and has lived in England since 2014. Marilla has performed at many festivals in Australia and the UK over the years, and is about to release her fifth album before going on tour in Australia (again). She often runs voice and Feldenkrais workshops at festivals she is performing at in both hemispheres, and also teaches internationally. Marilla is a remedial massage and lymphatic drainage therapist and Feldenkrais Practitioner. She is passionate about educating people to understand themselves better, through movement, music and connecting with others.

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