

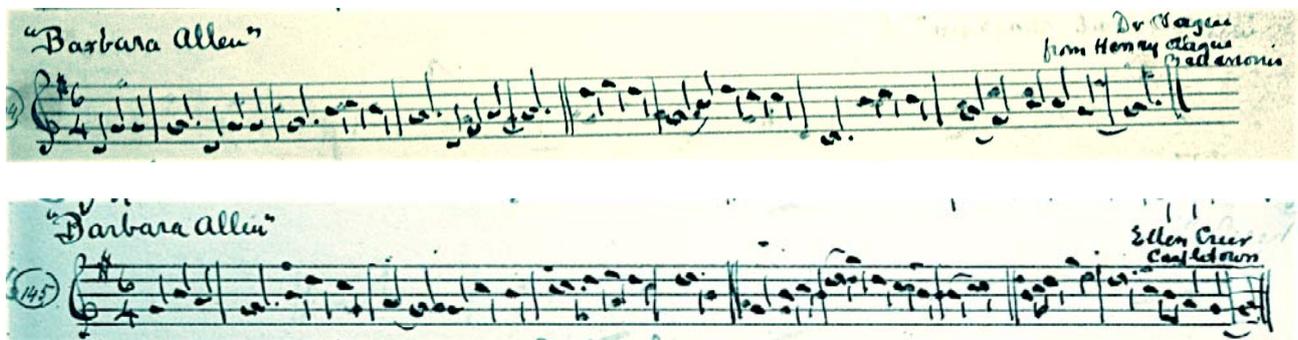
Histories and Mysteries – the secret life of traditional music in the Isle of Man

by David Speers

The tunes in the three manuscript music books that are part of the Clague Collection, held in the Manx Museum Archive, form the bulk of the traditional music recorded in the Isle of Man in the 1890's. They have not been arranged or changed in any way and are the best record of how the music sounded when it was collected.

This is the fifth in a series of articles that sets out to explore some of the links between the traditional music collected in the Isle of Man and that found in Ireland and Britain, to discover some of the hidden histories behind our traditional music, and to show that the Island has produced beautiful music to match any found elsewhere.

Barbara Allen



Two of the Barbara Allen ballad tunes from the manuscript music books (Copyright Manx National Heritage)

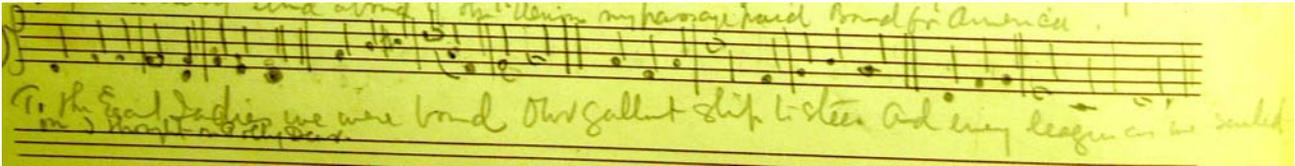
Barbara Allen was one of the most popular ballads in Britain, Ireland, North America and the rest of the English speaking world, so it is not surprising that two tunes with this name are found in the Clague manuscript music books (above).

These two tunes are both in 6/4 time and are both different from the most commonly known tune for Barbara Allen. This “common” tune is in 3/4 but its phrasing is the same as that of the two Manx tunes and there are some similarities, especially in the first parts, between all three tunes. All are major (ionian scale) tunes.

The first Manx tune (referred to here as tune 1) was collected from Henry Clague (a relation of Dr Clague) of Ballanorris farm near Castletown; the second (tune 2) from Ellen Creer, also of Castletown. Anne Gilchrist, writing in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* in 1924, said of tune 1: “this pretty air is distinct from all other tunes of this name that I recall”.

A variation of tune 1 appears later in the first Clague music book and an aeolian scale (minor) version of tune 2 was also collected by Mona Douglas in the early 20th century from a Mrs Shimmin of Foxdale. So, the Barbara Allen tunes, including their variations, appear traditionally four times in the Isle of Man, twice under other titles.

The Tune 1 variation appears under the title: *To the East Indies we were bound - Polly Dear*, collected from Tom Kermode of Bradda (also in the south of the Island). The title shows it was used for a nautical ballad and the first two lines are recorded in the second of the Clague music books:



The notes read as follows:

To the East Indies we were bound, our gallant ship to steer
And every league as we sailed on I thought of Polly Dear

These scribbled lines alongside a rough copy of the tune show where the second title, Polly Dear, comes from.

The Mona Douglas version of tune 2, collected some twenty years after those in Clague, has the title Yn Scollag Aeg (the young scholar), which seems to be a Manx ballad with no connections elsewhere. Apart from being a lovely variation, it shows how tunes can develop, in this case the same melody transposed from G major to E minor.

As already mentioned, Barbara Allen has been a very popular traditional ballad throughout the English speaking world, having many versions and most often sung to a “common” tune, perhaps with slight variations. Since the advent of the recording industry in the early 20th century, it also made its mark as a commercial popular song. Singers as diverse as: Burl Ives, Joan Baez and Simon, Garfunkel and (believe it or not) John Travolta, sold millions of records making it as successful as it was in earlier centuries for the ballad sheet publishers and sellers.

Why does the story in the ballad have such enduring appeal? Its common threads tell of a young man, most often William, or “sweet William”, who is dying for the love of a young woman, Barbara/Barbary Allen/Ellan. Briefly: she is summoned to see him on his deathbed; she leaves without accepting his love; he dies; she hears the funeral bell; she dies and is buried next to him; from his grave grows a rose and from hers a briar; they grow entwined with the rose around the briar.

It may sound melodramatic to our ears, but perhaps the tragic nature of the story, with its incomplete explanation of the lovers’ relationship and its vaguely supernatural resolution - the rose and briar symbolically joined after their death - created an image so striking that it kept many generations of listeners enthralled.

And the ballad does have a long history before it reached the Island. It was mentioned in Samuel Pepys’ diary in 1666 as being sung at a New Year party by “Mrs Knipp”. He mentions it as “her little Scotch song of Barbary Allen”, implying that it was not a new song, but known at the time.

The fact that Mrs Knipp, an actress, was the singer has led to speculation that it was originally written for a stage play and that it proved so popular that it was taken up by ballad printers and became traditional. Such a play would have been performed in London for Mrs Knipp to have known it, but the reference to it as a “Scotch” song could mean it was written for a Scottish character or, possibly, that the song was already known as a traditional Scottish song and used in the play, or even that it was known by Mrs Knipp and had nothing to do with a play. According to some sources, the Scottish versions collected give the most complete story, having other details such as a dying gift from William, and are therefore considered older. Perhaps its origins are even earlier than the 1666 reference by Pepys.

Barbara Allen has remained popular for more than 350 years. It has universal and emotional appeal, rather than the historical and local interest of the Thurot ballad and tune (looked at in the fourth of these articles). The two tunes it was sung to in the Island are similar but distinct from the most commonly known tune. And those tunes produced variations in the Island that were used for two other ballads, the first, Unto the East Indies we were bound, was known widely; the second, Yn Scollag Aeg, a Manx ballad.

Acknowledgments

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David Speers is the author of Manx Traditional Music for Sessions, which discusses history and revival of Manx traditional music and dance (available from the Manx National Heritage Bookshop, manxheritageshop.com).

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