

Exploring the Magic and Themes of Scottish Folk Songs



LANGUAGE LEARNING

The Scottish English Podcast – Episode 17

Transcript & Upper-intermediate and Advanced Vocabulary Guide

Below is the transcript with all selected B2, C1, and above vocabulary and phrases **bolded and underlined**. After the transcript, you'll find a table with definitions, British English pronunciation, and useful collocations/idioms for each highlighted word or phrase.

Transcript (Key Words Highlighted)

Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine you're standing on a hillside in the **Scottish Highlands**. The heather brushes your ankles, the wind carries the scent of pine and peat. Off in the distance, you hear something, soft at first, then clearer. A voice. No instruments, just a human voice, raw and beautiful.

It's an old song passed down through **generations**. A story wrapped in a melody.

That's the **magic** of **Scottish folk songs and ballads**. They've filled kitchens, fields, and gatherings for centuries. They've carried stories of **heartbreak**, hope, love, and **rebellion** across time.

Today we're going to **explore** what these songs are all about, what they mean, what themes they **explore**, and what **impact** they've had on music around the world.

Welcome to the Scottish English Podcast, the show where we **explore** Scotland's **culture**, history, and accents, all while helping you improve your English.... And remember, if you want to follow along with this episode a little bit more easily, check out the link in the description where you'll find the transcript of this episode. And subscribe so that you know when the next episode of the Scottish English Podcast comes out.

Let's begin with a simple question. What is a **folk song** or a **ballad**? In Scotland, folk songs and ballads are part of an **oral tradition**, meaning they were passed down from person to person, often by memory, hundreds of years before they were even written down.

A **ballad** is usually a **narrative song**, a story told in verse. A **folk song** might tell a story too, but it might **express** feelings about love, work, politics, or even the land.

These songs weren't written by **famous composers**. They came from **ordinary people**. People with jobs like shepherd, weaver, sailor, or soldier. And they often talk to the heart of Scottish life. Its joys, its **tragedy**, and its fierce pride.

Common **themes** in Scottish folk songs.... Let's have a look at some of the most common **themes** in these traditional songs.

1. Love and loss.

Love, especially **unfulfilled love** is everywhere in Scottish ballads.

Songs like the **Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond** speak of lovers who are separated by war or death.

You might know the line, 'ye tack the high road and I'll tack the low road'.

This is thought to be sung by a soldier condemned to die, who thinks his spirit will return to Scotland before his living **comrade** does.

2. **Tragedy** and **superstition**.

Many Scottish ballads are dark and **eerie**. Take the **Twa Corbies** or the 'Two Crows'.

Here two birds discuss what's left of a dead knight.

Or the **haunting** tale of **Tam Lin**, a young man who's captured by the queen of the fairies and has to be rescued by his lover.

These songs reflect the mix of Christian and **pagan beliefs** in old Scotland, full of spirits, witches, and the **supernatural**.

3. **Rebellion** and **patriotism**.

Scotland's **turbulent history** also plays a big role. Ballads like '**Ye Jacobites By Name**' or **The Skye Boat Song**, talk about the **Jacobite uprisings** and the fight for independence.

These songs gave people a sense of **identity**, and they still do today. They carry the emotions of loss, longing, and **resilience**.

4. Work and daily life

Some folk songs are about everyday life: fishing, farming, and weaving.

'The Work of The Weavers' is a **humorous** song that celebrates the skill of cloth makers.

Songs like these were often sung while working, keeping time with the **rhythm** of the job.

The **language** of folk songs.... Now you may have noticed that lots of Scottish songs are written in **Scots**, a language which is very closely related to English. For learners, this can be a bit of a challenge, but it can also be an **opportunity**. Here's an example from the song '**Auld Lang Syne**', written by **Robert Burns**. 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind?' This line means should all friendships be forgotten?

It is **poetic, nostalgic**, and it's sung all over the world on New Year's Eve, or as we like to call it, **Hogmanay**.

Scots words like '**wee**' for small, '**bonnie**' for pretty, and '**ken**' for know appear really often in these songs. Listening to folk songs can help you understand the **rhythm** of Scottish English, and it could even help you improve your listening skills.

Influence beyond Scotland.... Scottish folk music didn't just stay in Scotland. When Scots **emigrated**, especially to North America, they took their music with them. You can hear **echoes** of Scottish ballads in American country music, bluegrass and **Appalachian folk**.

Even famous artists like **Bob Dylan** were **influenced** by Scottish and Irish folk songs.

And today? Scottish folk music is still alive and well.

Groups like **Capercaillie**, **the Corries** and **Julie Fowlis** have brought these ancient songs to modern audiences.

Some sing in **Scottish Gaelic**, some in Scots, and some in English, but they all keep the **tradition** going.

How to **explore** Scottish folk songs.

If you're interested in **diving deeper**, here are a few tips. Start with the Corries. Their version of **Flower of Scotland** is **iconic**. Listen to Julie Fowlis, especially if you're curious about Scottish Gaelic. And use **subtitles** or **lyric videos** on YouTube to help you follow along with the words.... Scottish folk songs and ballads are more than just music. They're **windows into the past**. They tell us how people lived, what they feared, what they loved, and what they fought for.

And they do it in a way that still **moves us** today.

Thanks for joining me on this **musical journey** through Scotland's tradition of folk song.

If you have enjoyed this episode, please do subscribe and share it with your friend who may be interested in music or Scotland or both.

In the show notes, you'll find a list of all the songs that I mentioned in today's episode, along with links to versions that you can listen to online.

Thanks again for watching the Scottish English Podcast. I'll see you next time.

Advanced Vocabulary & Expressions Table

Word / Phrase	Definition (British English)	Pronunciation	Useful Collocations & Idiomatic Usage
Scottish Highlands	Mountainous region in northern Scotland	/ˈhaɪ.ləndz/	Highland scenery, Highland games
generations	All of the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively	/ˌdʒen.əˈreɪ.jənz/	for generations, across generations
magic	A special, mysterious, or enchanting quality	/ˈmædʒ.ɪk/	the magic of, magical moment
folk songs and ballads	Traditional songs and narrative poems, often passed down orally	/fəʊk sɒŋz ənd ˈbæl.ədz/	sing a ballad, folk song tradition

heartbreak	Overwhelming distress, especially from loss or disappointment	/ˈhɑːt.breɪk/	heartbreak and loss, cause heartbreak
rebellion	Organised resistance to authority or government	/rɪˈbel.jən/	rebellion against, lead a rebellion
explore	To examine or discuss in detail	/ɪkˈsplɔː/	explore a theme, explore an idea
impact	The strong effect or influence something has	/ˈɪm.pækt/	impact on, lasting impact
culture	The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society	/ˈkʌl.tʃər/	cultural heritage, culture shock
oral tradition	Cultural material and traditions passed down by word of mouth	/ˈɔːrəl trəˈdɪʃ.ən/	oral storytelling, oral tradition of
ballad	A narrative poem or song, often of folk origin	/ˈbæl.əd/	sing a ballad, traditional ballad
narrative song	A song that tells a story	/ˈnær.ə.tɪv sɒŋ/	narrative structure, narrative tradition
express	To convey a thought or feeling in words or actions	/ɪkˈspres/	express emotions, express yourself
famous composers	Well-known people who write music	/ˈfeɪ.məs kəmˈpəʊ.zəz/	classical composer, famous composer
ordinary people	Regular, everyday people	/ˈɔːdɪ.nə.ri ˈpiː.pəl/	ordinary life, ordinary folk
tragedy	A very sad event or situation	/ˈtrædʒ.ə.di/	personal tragedy, tragic story
themes	The main subjects or ideas in a piece of writing, music, etc.	/θiːmz/	recurring theme, central theme
unfulfilled love	Love that is not returned or realised	/ˌʌn.fʊlˈfɪld lʌv/	unfulfilled dreams, unfulfilled desire

Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond	Famous Scottish folk song	/ˈbɒn.i bæŋks əv lɒx ˈlɒ.mənd/	sing Loch Lomond, Loch Lomond lyrics
comrade	A companion who shares one's activities or is a fellow member of an organisation	/ˈkɒm.reɪd/	loyal comrade, comrade in arms
superstition	A widely held but irrational belief in supernatural influences	/ˌsuː.pəˈstɪʃ.ən/	old superstition, belief in superstition
eerie	Strange and frightening	/ˈiə.ri/	eerie silence, eerie feeling
Twa Corbies	Traditional Scottish ballad	/twaː ˈkɔː.biːz/	sing Twa Corbies, Twa Corbies lyrics
haunting	Difficult to ignore or forget; evocative	/ˈhɔːn.tɪŋ/	haunting melody, haunting beauty
Tam Lin	Legendary figure in Scottish folklore and ballad	/tæm lɪn/	Tam Lin story, Tam Lin ballad
pagan beliefs	Religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions, especially pre-Christian	/ˈpeɪ.gən brɪˈliːfs/	ancient pagan beliefs, pagan festival
supernatural	Attributed to forces beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature	/ˌsuː.pəˈnætʃ.ər.əl/	supernatural powers, supernatural event
patriotism	Love for or devotion to one's country	/ˈpeɪ.tri.ə.tɪ.zəm/	sense of patriotism, display patriotism
turbulent history	A history full of conflict, disorder, or confusion	/ˈtɜː.bjʊ.lənt ˈhɪs.tər.i/	turbulent times, turbulent period
Ye Jacobites By Name	Scottish Jacobite ballad	/jiː ˈdʒæk.ə.barts baɪ neɪm/	sing Ye Jacobites, Jacobite song
The Skye Boat Song	Famous Scottish folk song about the escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie	/skaɪ bæʊt sɒŋ/	Skye Boat Song lyrics, Skye Boat Song meaning

Jacobite uprisings	Series of rebellions in Scotland in the 17th and 18th centuries	/ˈdʒæk.ə.bart ˈʌp.raɪ.zɪŋz/	Jacobite cause, Jacobite history
identity	The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is	/aɪˈden.tɪ.ti/	national identity, sense of identity
resilience	The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties	/rɪˈzɪl.jəns/	show resilience, resilience in adversity
humorous	Funny or making you laugh	/ˈhjuː.mər.əs/	humorous story, humorous remark
rhythm	A strong, regular, repeated pattern of movement or sound	/ˈrɪð.əm/	rhythm of life, musical rhythm
Scots	A Germanic language variety spoken in Lowland Scotland and parts of Ulster	/skɒts/	Scots language, speak Scots
opportunity	A set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something	/ˌɒp.əˈtjuː.nə.ti/	seize an opportunity, opportunity arises
Auld Lang Syne	Traditional Scottish song by Robert Burns	/ɔːld læŋ ˈsaɪn/	sing Auld Lang Syne, Auld Lang Syne lyrics
Robert Burns	Famous Scottish poet and lyricist	/ˈrɒb.ət bɜːnz/	poems by Robert Burns, Burns Night
poetic	Having an imaginative or sensitively emotional style of expression	/pəʊˈet.ɪk/	poetic language, poetic imagery
nostalgic	Feeling affection for the past	/nɒˈstæl.dʒɪk/	nostalgic feeling, nostalgic memory
Hogmanay	The Scottish celebration of New Year's Eve	/ˌhɒɡ.məˈneɪ/	Hogmanay party, Hogmanay traditions
wee	(Scots) Small	/wiː/	wee lass, wee bit
bonnie	(Scots) Pretty, attractive	/ˈbɒn.i/	bonnie lass, bonnie banks

ken	(Scots) To know	/kɛn/	do you ken?, ken the answer
influence	The capacity to have an effect on the character or behaviour of someone or something	/ˈɪn.flu.əns/	influence on, influenced by
emigrated	Moved to live permanently in a foreign country	/ˈemɪɡreɪtɪd/	emigrate to
echoes	Repeated or reverberating sounds; reminders or traces	/ˈek.əʊz/	echoes of the past, echo through
Appalachian folk	Folk music from the Appalachian region of the US	/ˌæp.əˈleɪ.tʃən fəʊk/	Appalachian folk music, Appalachian tradition
Bob Dylan	Influential American singer-songwriter	/bɒb ˈdɪl.ən/	Bob Dylan songs, Dylan influence
influenced	Affected or changed by something	/ˈɪn.flu.ənst/	influenced by, heavily influenced
Capercaillie	Scottish folk band	/ˌkæp.əˈkeɪ.li/	Capercaillie music, Capercaillie band
the Corries	Scottish folk group	/ðə ˈkɒr.iːz/	the Corries songs, listen to the Corries
Julie Fowlis	Scottish folk singer known for singing in Scottish Gaelic	/ˈdʒuː.li ˈfaʊ.lɪs/	Julie Fowlis music, Fowlis Gaelic songs
Scottish Gaelic	Celtic language native to Scotland	/ˈɡæl.ɪk/	speak Scottish Gaelic, Gaelic song
tradition	The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation	/trəˈdɪʃ.ən/	keep the tradition, traditional music
diving deeper	Investigating or exploring something in more detail	/ˈdaɪ.vɪŋ ˈdiː.pər/	dive deeper into, deep dive

iconic	Widely recognized and well-established	/aɪˈkɒn.ɪk/	iconic song, iconic figure
subtitles	Translated or transcribed text at the bottom of a screen	/ˈsʌb.taɪ.təlz/	English subtitles, add subtitles
lyric videos	Videos displaying the lyrics of a song	/ˈlɪr.ɪk ˈvɪd.i.əʊz/	watch lyric videos, lyric video channel
windows into the past	Something that gives you insight into history	/ˈwɪn.dəʊz ˈɪn.tuː ðə pɑːst/	window on history, glimpse into the past
moves us	Affects us emotionally	/muːvz ʌs/	deeply moving, move someone to tears
musical journey	An exploration or experience involving music	/ˈmjuː.zɪ.kəl ˈdʒɜː.nɪ/	begin a musical journey, musical adventure