Choirs Together from Cullercoats Festival

Songscape: A Love Letter to the North East Coast 18 April 2026

Penny Kempson, our Musical Director, says:

Songscape is a love letter to the North Sea. It features a mixture of songs, from rounds inspired by the coastline to capstan shanties. From local songs written in admiration of our seaside towns, to historical songs telling stories of the North East. Songscape doesn't present a narrative as it moves through these melodies, rather it takes a step back to paint a picture of the coastline, with a deep fondness for the towns and landscapes that make it up.

To me, a round is one of my favourite ways of honouring the sea – like the waves rolling against the shore, the different sections split off and lap against each other, creating resultant harmonies which shift and change as the music moves. Songscape includes several rounds I've written, all inspired by the North East coast – from Cullercoats Bay to the sun rising over Whitley Bay, to the rugged rocks of Cove and the wild surf on Longsands.



There are many folk songs inspired by the coast, with their authors lost to the seas of time, that are known and loved in the North East, perhaps none more famous than Waters of Tyne, a poignant love story. Here's the Tender Coming and Captain Bover are two songs telling the hardship of the press gangs, and what it's like for those left behind. Here's the Tender Coming is a well-known local song, but Captain Bover is just a fragment of a song collected from a street singer which I discovered in the John Stokoe book Songs and Ballads of the North East. There are also some spookier tales, such as I drew my ship – a classic ghost folk song from the North East coast.

North Shields had an instrumental role in the development of the Capstan shanty – the call and response shanty that most people recognise. In 1832, Thomas Dobinson and Benjamin Tyzack invented the Brake Windlass, which took several men to operate in a double-heave action. This two-part action of the brake windlass, along with its later counterpart the vertical barrelled capstan, gave birth to shanties with two refrain lines like Santiana and Low Lands.

Songscape also taps into a rich tradition of 19th and 20th century poets and composers praising the virtues of our coastline. Folks O Shields, while no composer's name has survived, is a fond look at the humours of the coastal people, while Edward Corvan's Cullercoats Fish Lass romanticises the hard-working fish wives of Cullercoats. In David Leitch's Cliffs of Old Tynemouth and Jack Robson's Cullercoats Bay you can sense a deep affection for the familiar coastline, one shared by many people from the North East. The Sturdy Sons of Wear by Alex Strachan is a song that resurfaced recently from a book of poems, and the bold melody it is set to was written by the inimitable Sinead Florece Livingstone, a local singer and community choir leader.

When I moved to Newcastle in 2016, I was instantly drawn to the coast and the music of the shore, as well as the fierce cold of the sea itself. I spent the next decade living and working as a musician based in Newcastle, but always returning to the sea – through community shanty groups, teaching traditional music in primary schools around County Durham, collaborations with local choir leaders, and workshops based on local North East songs. I grew up singing folk songs, and one of the first songs my Cornish grandmother taught me was Loving Little Sailor Boy. In many ways, Songscape feels like a culmination of the last decade's work – a return to the sea, to the songs which I come back to again and again, which always feel like home.



St George's Church in Cullercoats is a local and regional icon. The magnificent building rises up from the famous Longsands beach on the north-east coast, and is a landmark for miles around. The Church, with its superb broach spire rising 180ft, was designed by J. L. Pearson and dedicated in 1884. Grade 1 listed, it boasts magnificent stained glass as well as the organ built by T. C. Lewis in 1885 and restored by Harrison & Harrison in 1987. Visitors are very much welcomed to St George's.

Tim Hone is a former Organ Scholar of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and has held appointments at Leeds Parish Church and Coventry Cathedral. He became Organist and Master of the Music at Newcastle Cathedral in 1987. In September 2025 the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral awarded him the honorary title of Organist Emeritus, in recognition of his dedication from 1987 to 2002 and his wider contributions to church music. In 1995, he was the first English player to take part in the distinguished recital series in Hamborn, Germany, and in 1996 he gave the RCO recital in Glasgow. In 2002, he was appointed as Head of Liturgy and Music at Salisbury, while also working as Secretary to the Liturgical Commission and National Worship Development Officer at Church House in Westminster. He moved to York Minster in 2015 as the Music and Liturgy Manager and since his retirement in 2023 he has been Organist and Director of Music at St George's, Cullercoats.

The Sarah Morgan Foundation was founded in 2013 to honour the memory and continue the work of inspirational choir leader and musician Dr Sarah Morgan - fostering and developing the community choir and promoting English traditional/folk song. We are very grateful to the Sarah Morgan foundation for providing a grant to enable this project to happen.

Sarah Morgan was a powerhouse of traditional English harmony singing, renowned through the country for her harmony workshops at folk festivals and with vibrant community choirs in Winchester and Andover, which still sing today. She ran well-attended conferences on community choirs at the folk arts centre Cecil Sharp House in London, as well as at Winchester University. The foundation was formed to continue her legacy and honour her deep love of community singing. We hope she would enjoy Songscape and the singers it has brought together.

Singers are from Choirs including Northern Proud Voices, Ouseburn Folk Choir, Gosfolk, Linskill Community Choir, Roker Community Choir, Seaton Sluice Community Choir, Newcastle Choral Society, Rock Choir, Lovely Nellys, Watch House Shanty Crew, Whitley Warblers, Whitley Women, Mouths of the Tyne, South Shields Sings, Boozy Choir, Can't sing Choir, and Tynemouth Choral Society

Soloists: Paul Godfrey, Tim McElwaine, Barry Henderson, Maya Walker, Gemma Jackson, Ally Avery, Mary Whiting

The arrangement of Songscape and Penny Kempson's songs are copyright. If you or any group you sing with are interested in performing or learning Songscape, please contact Cullercoats Festival at cullerfest@gmail.com.