BROADSTAIRS FolkWeek

Pete Shaw's

JOHN CLARE workshop material

JOHN CLARE was a very exceptional man.

Early life

Clare was born in 13th July 1793 in Helpston, near Peterborough, then in Northamptonshire. His father was a labourer and wrestler who could not read, but could remember the words to over 100 songs.

John Clare became an agricultural labourer while still a child; schooled in Glinton church until he was 12. In 1806 at 13, he became a potboy in the *Blue Bell* public house and fell in love with Mary Joyce; but her father, a prosperous farmer, forbade her to meet him. Subsequently, he was a gardener at Burghley House. He enlisted in the militia, tried camp life with Gypsies, and worked in Pickworth, Rutland as a lime burner in 1817. In the following year he was obliged to accept parish relief. Malnutrition stemming from childhood may have been the main factor behind his five-foot stature and have contributed to his poor physical health in later life.

Early poems

Clare had bought a copy of James Thomson's *The Seasons* and began to write poems and sonnets. In an attempt to hold off his parents' eviction from their home, Clare offered his poems to a local bookseller named Edward Drury. Drury sent them to his cousin, John Taylor of the publishing firm of Taylor & Hessey, who had published the work of John Keats. Taylor published Clare's *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* in 1820, so popular that it ran to 4 editions in the first year. This book was highly praised, and "There was no limit to the applause bestowed upon Clare, unanimous in their admiration of a poetical genius coming before them in the humble garb of a farm labourer." *The Village Minstrel* was published the following year.

Middle life

In 1820, he married Martha ("Patty") Turner. An annuity of 15 guineas from the Marquess of Exeter, in whose service he had been, was supplemented by subscription, so that Clare became possessed of £45 annually, a sum far beyond what he had ever earned. Soon, however, his income became insufficient, and in 1823 he was nearly penniless. *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) met with little success, which was not increased by his hawking it himself. As he worked again in the fields his health temporarily improved; but he soon became seriously ill.

Clare was constantly torn between the two worlds of literary London and his often illiterate neighbours; between the need to write poetry and the need for money to feed and clothe his children. His health began to suffer, and he had bouts of severe depression, which became worse after his sixth child was born in 1830 and as his poetry sold less well. In 1832, his friends and his London patrons clubbed together to move the family to a larger cottage with a smallholding in the village of Northborough, not far from Helpston. However, he only felt more alienated there.

His last work, the *Rural Muse* (1835), was noticed favourably by Christopher North and other reviewers, but this was not enough to support his wife and seven children. Clare's mental health began to worsen. As his alcohol consumption steadily increased along with his dissatisfaction with his own identity, Clare's behaviour became more erratic. A notable instance of this behaviour was demonstrated in his interruption of a performance of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Clare verbally assaulted Shylock. He was becoming a burden to Patty and his family, and in July 1837, on the recommendation of his publishing friend, John Taylor, Clare went of his own volition (accompanied by a friend of Taylor's) to Dr Matthew Allen's private asylum High Beach, in Epping Forest. Taylor had assured Clare that he would receive the best medical care.

Clare was reported as being "full of many strange delusions". He believed himself to be a prize fighter and that he had two wives, Patty and Mary. He started to claim he was Lord Byron. Allen wrote about Clare to *The Times* in 1840:

"It is most singular that ever since he came... the moment he gets pen or pencil in hand he begins to write most poetical effusions. Yet he has never been able to obtain in conversation, nor even in writing prose, the appearance of sanity for two minutes or two lines together, and yet there is no indication of insanity in any of his poetry."

John Clare wrote poetry and prose all his life, including many poems, essays, journals and letters about love, corruption, politics, environmental and social change, poverty and folk life. He is especially known for his unhappiness of the pastures being ploughed up and the common land enclosed in England's agricultural revolution – the Enclosure Act hit Helpston in 1809. His descriptions of the plants, birds, animals and insects of his countryside rivalled those of the Victorian 'collectors' many years later.

Later life and death

During his first few asylum years in High Beach, Essex (1837–41), Clare re-wrote famous poems and sonnets by Lord Byron. In 1841, Clare absconded from the asylum, to walk some 90 miles (140 km) home, believing that he was to meet his first love Mary Joyce; Clare was convinced that he was married to her and Martha as well, with children by both women. He did not believe her family when they told him she had died accidentally three years earlier in a house fire. He remained free, mostly at home in Northborough, for the five months following, but eventually Patty called the doctors in. Between Christmas and New Year in 1841, Clare was committed to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum (now St Andrew's Hospital). Upon Clare's arrival at the asylum, the accompanying doctor, Fenwick Skrimshire, who had treated Clare since 1820, completed the admission papers.

(Clare's entire family probably lived in the right 25% of the above cottage).

To the enquiry "Was the insanity preceded by any severe or long-continued mental emotion or exertion?", Dr Skrimshire entered: "After years of poetical prosing." He remained here for the rest of his life under the humane regime of Dr Thomas Octavius Prichard, who encouraged and helped him to write. Here he wrote possibly his most famous poem, *I Am*.

He died on 20 May 1864, in his 71st year. His remains were returned to Helpston for burial in St Botolph's churchyard. Clare's gravestone (which bears the inscriptions "To the Memory of John Clare The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet" and "A Poet is Born not Made") and the modern John Clare Society holds a village festival in Helpston on the weekend nearest his birthday each year.

Violin

Clare himself says "As I grew up a man I mixed more in company, and frequented dancings for the sake of meeting with the lasses... At these feasts and merrymakings I got acquainted with the gipseys and often associated with them at their camps to learn the fiddle of which I was very fond. The first acquaintance I made was with the Boswells Crew as they were called a popular tribe well known about here and famous for fiddlers and fortunetellers...

I used to spend my Sundays and summer evenings among them learning to play the fiddle in their manner by the ear and joining in their pastimes..." and "As I began to be a decent scraper we had a decent round of merriment for a fortnight sometimes going to dance or drink at the camp & at other times at the publick house."

The songs and tunes he heard were what everyone would have had on their iPods at the time, had there been such things. The latest hit tunes or songs got around the country, sometimes by printed music or by individuals. Printed music was common, although the poorer end of the community, like Clare, probably copied out from someone else's notebook, or by ear, more than buying it.

Some of the 263 tunes in Clare's two music Manuscripts are song tunes. The likely provenance of these is covered in depth by George Deacon's book "*John Clare & the Folk Tradition*" (see below), which contains all the (unedited) music.

The majority are fiddle tunes. Many tunes came from published tunebook sources. Three tunes he wrote out in his first Manuscript look as though they may have been taken from *Preston's Twenty Four Country Dances for the year 1793*, almost identical, and in the same order. Many tunes appear to have been copied down by ear.

In one Clare manuscript there is a march "*Battle of Prague*" and a jig, "*Quickstep in the Battle of Prague.*" Tunes under this title were popular both sides of the Atlantic by Clare's day, following publication in Dublin in 1788 of the sonata by one Frantisek Kotzwara. Now there is a man who attained immortality in 1791 as the first recorded case in British history of death by autoerotic asphyxiation, (Google him).

Why did Clare write them down? Ask any fiddle player. You hear it once, like the tune and ask the player to repeat it again so you can write it down to learn later. Or, with the co-operation of a friendly bookseller, you might be able to copy it out of a publication without buying. Or maybe Clare was collecting material to publish books of music as well as poetry?

The nationally available tune books tell us what we know might have been available to Clare, but the papers in his own hand tell us what was actually being played, almost certainly by him, in his little village in Northamptonshire in the early 1800's – 80 years before Cecil Sharpe and the leisured classes who collected as a hobby.

Not only is Clare valuable as a source of English tunes, but also as a historical record, alongside more nationally known manuscripts like those of the Hardy family in Dorset, William Vickers in Northumberland and Michael Turner in Sussex.

With the passage of time, the songs are now mainly regarded as "folk" and the preserve of folk song clubs and the professional and amateur singers who sing them. The tunes, however have a different life, and are played up and down the country every weekend barn dances, and also in the English Traditional Music sessions springing up in pubs.

The Irish and Scots have always made their strands of music from this era a part of their culture. The English lost this link in the industrial revolution and afterwards, but the music is still there, just harder to find. People are now becoming more interested in their English musical roots, and the manuscripts Clare left behind are a valuable source.

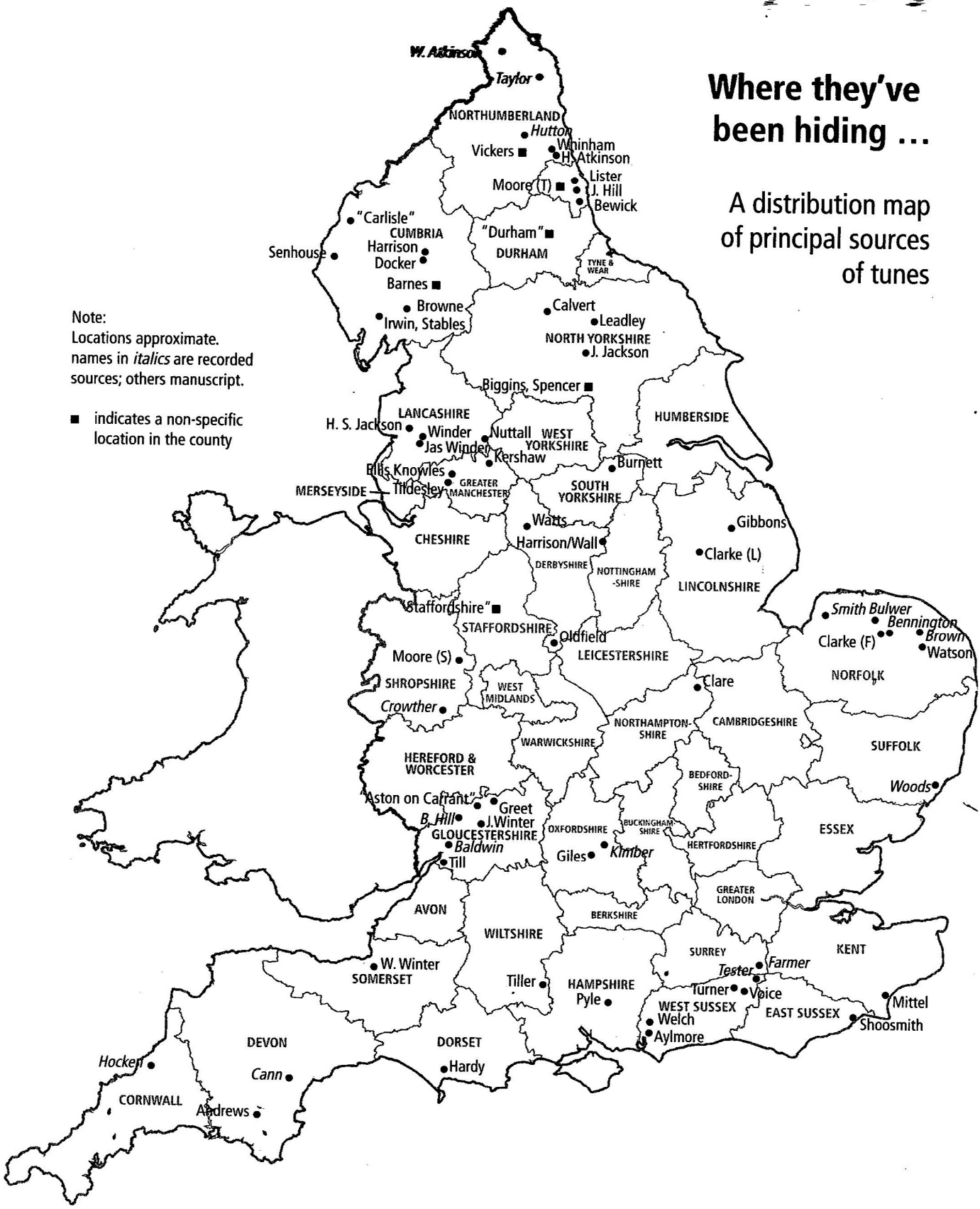
George Deacon's excellent book "*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*" is available in hardback for £20 + p&p, signed by the author, at http://johnclareandthefolktradition.zohosites.com You can get the tunes, edited for playing, and in a music stand-friendly version from http://www.camelmusic.co.uk/John_Clare.html at £8 +p&p for Book 1 (30 pages of music) and £12 + p&p for Book 2 (60 pages of music). The collection is also available, in .pdf and ABC, at http://www.village-music-project.org.uk

For some edited tunes with accompanying instrument lines & chords, buy *The Village Band Book Volume 2* for £8.00 + p&p from https://www.davetownsendmusic.com/shop For some edited tunes with chords: "*English Fiddle Tunes*" ISBN 1-902455-57-6 or £9.83 from http://www.petecooper.com/englishfiddletunes.htm For lots of info about traditional tune sources (& 300 tunes), get "*Hardcore English*" from http://www.efdss.org for £15 +p&p.

This article by Pete Shaw – the first Secretary of the John Clare Society, and a fiddle player.

Where they've been hiding ...

A distribution map of principal sources of tunes



Tunes & Songs in John Clare's Manuscripts

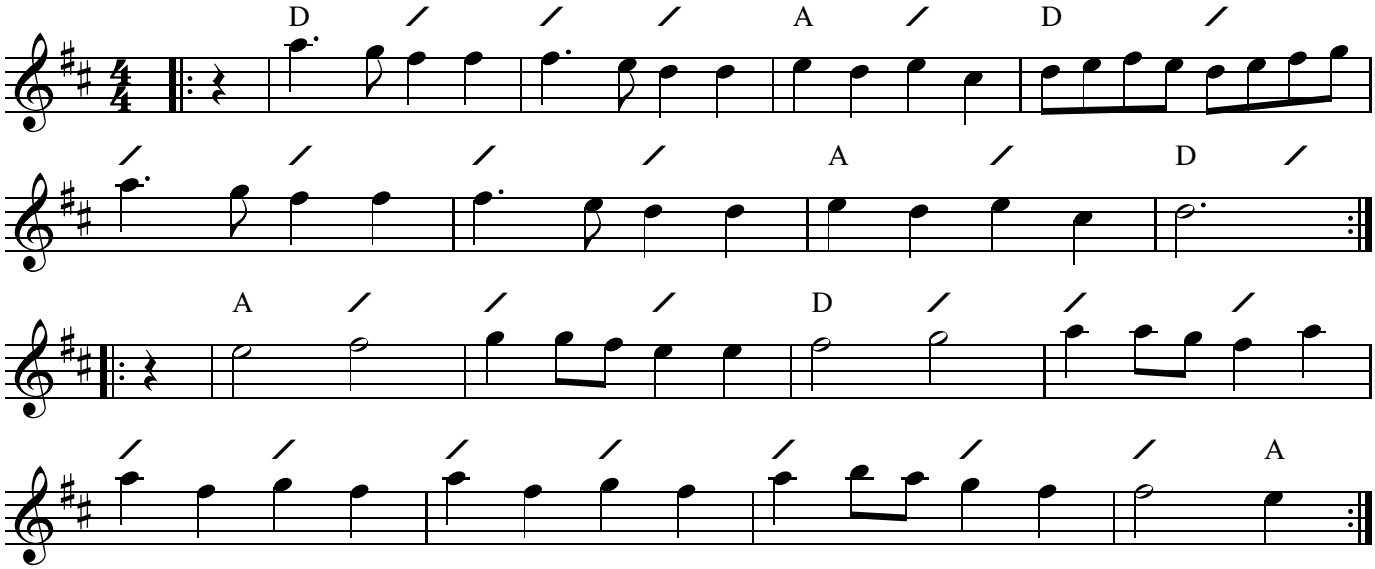
Adieu my native land
All around the maypole
Alldivaloch
Archer's Dance
American Hornpipe
As[h]ley's Hornpipe
Ashleys Rides
Bacons Hornpipe
Bang Up
Bards Legacy
Bath Waltz
Battle of Prague
Bedford Races
Bedfordshire March
Beef Stake [Beefsteak] Hor
Beggar Girl, The
Belentines March
Bell, The
Betty Browne
Black Ey'd Susan
Bobbing Joan
Bonny Lasses
Briars, The
Brighton Camp
Bugle Horn, The
Burdett, The
Captn MacKintosh
Casson, The
Charley over the Water
Cheltenham Waltz
Cherry Cheek'd Patty
Christ Church Bells
Cleggs Hornpipe
Colledge Hornpipe
Come to the Bower
[Coming Through the Rye]
Coolan
Cornwallis March
Corporal Cazy [Casey]
Cosy Olwen [Garryowen]
Cuckoo, The
Cuckoos Nest
Daniels Hornpipe
Dansomanic, The
Devil among the Taylors
Devils Dream
Disconsolate Sailor
Dorset Shire March
Downfall of Paris
Downs' The
Dukes Hornpipe
Dull Care
Dusky Night
Dusty Miller

Egg Hornpipe
Englands Glory
Ere around the huge oa
Evening Hymn
Fairy Dance
Fa lal la
Favourite Hornpipe
Female Drummer
Flower of Edinbourough
Fowler, The
Gardengate, The
Gee O'Dobbin
George 2nd
Green grows the Rushe
Grinders, The
Handels Gavot
Haste to the Wedding
Hearts of Oak
Heaving of the Lead
Highland Plaid
Hornpipes [unnamed,7
I'll be married on Sunda
India Queen
Irish Girl
Irish Union
Irish Washer Woman
Italian Minefreda
Jack in green
Jacksons Morning Brus
Jem of Aberdeen
Jennys Bawbee
Jockey to the Fair
Kempshot Hunt
Kingsbridge Assembly
Kiss my Lady
La Bel Jean
Lady Comptons Whim
Ladys Breast Nott
Lass of Richmond Hill
Lincolnshire March
Lincolnshire Rangers
Logerian Fancy, The
Lord Cathcart
Lord Fitz Williams Marc
Lord Vincents Hornpipe
Lovly Nancy
Lullaby, The
Maid of Skylight
March in Ladaiska
March in Scipio
Marfull Hornpipe
Marionets
Marquis Wellinton
Mary No More

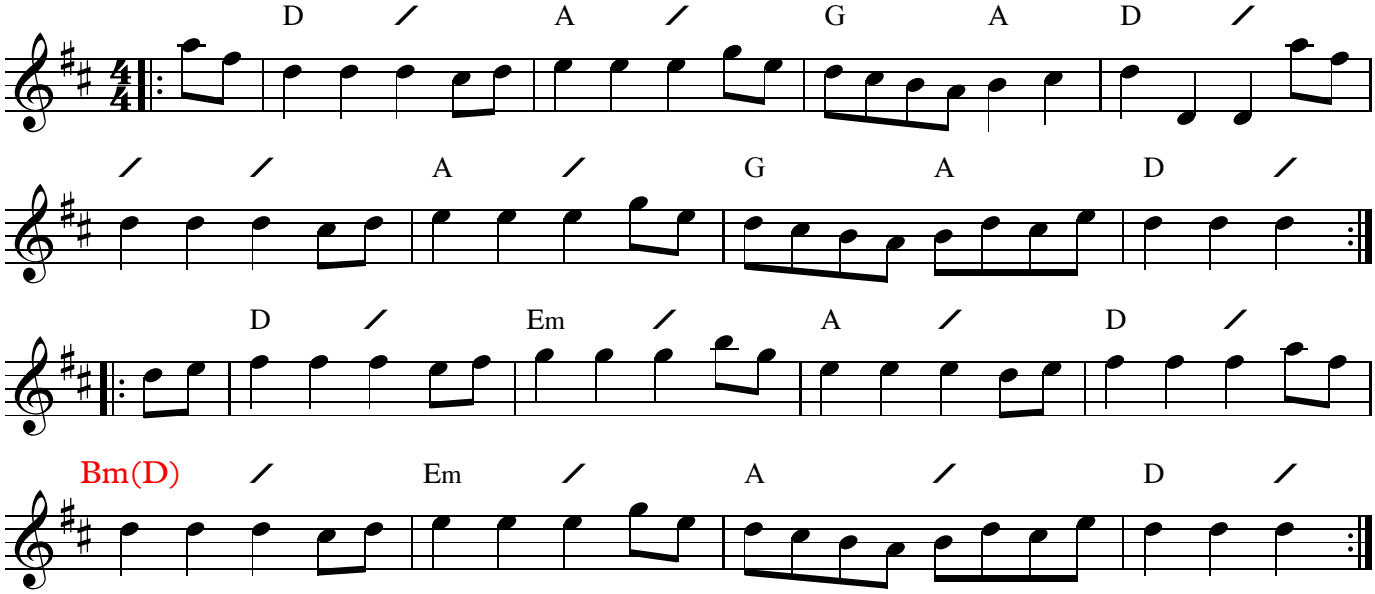
Michael Wiggens
Miss Bacons Hornpipe
Miss Crioux's Reel
Miss Douglas Moncrief
Miss Freers Delight
Miss Hills Favourite
Moll I' the Wad
Money Musk
Montrose's Reel
Mont Vida
Morgan Rattler
Morgiana
Morgiana in Ireland
Morgiana in Spain
Morning Fair Hornpipe,
Mother Goose
Mozarts Waltz
Mrs Casey
Muses, The
Neptune
New Drops of Brandy
New German March
New London Hornpipe
New May Day
New Rigg'd Ship, The
Nightingale, The
Nottingham Races
Novelty, The
Novey Gallows
Off she goes
Oh dear, what can the
Old Through the Wood
O.P., The
Opera Hat
O thje days when I was
Oyster Girl, The
Pddy Carey
Paddy Wack
Palladines March
Paties Mill
Peggy Band
Persin Ricardo
Ploughman, The
Polka
Poor Soldier
Portugal Dance, The
Portuguese, The
Primo A Hornpipe
Queens March
Quickstep in the Battle
Rakes of London
Rakes of Mellow
Recovery, The

Red Lyon Hornpipe
Red Pettycoat Horn
Regents Fete
Roast Beef of Old E
Roodalum Irish, The
Rowley
Rule Britannia
Russian, The
Sadlors Balloon
Sailors Journal, The
St Davids Day
St Sebastion
Savage Hornpipe
Savourys Hornpipe
Saxe Coburg
Says Plato
Scarlet & Green
Sea, the open sea,
Secilian, The
Self, The
Sham Peter
Sharp keys, Flat ke
Shooters Hornpipe
Sicilian Dance, The
Sleepy Maggy
Smash the Window
Soldiers Cloak
Soldiers Life, The
Speed the Plough
Sprig of Shillelah
Stonet Step Hornpi
Tank Teneriff
Thro the wood Lado
Tickeli
Tink a tink
Toast, The
Tommy Jenkins
Top sail shivers
Trip to Holland
Turks March
Turnpike Gate
Untitled [3 of]
Valiant Soldier
Wandering Girl
Wars Alarms
Washerwoman
Way to get married
Welsh Jigg
White Cockade, Th
Woodpecker
Woods Hornpipe
Wounded Huzzar, T
Yanky Doodle
Young Parker

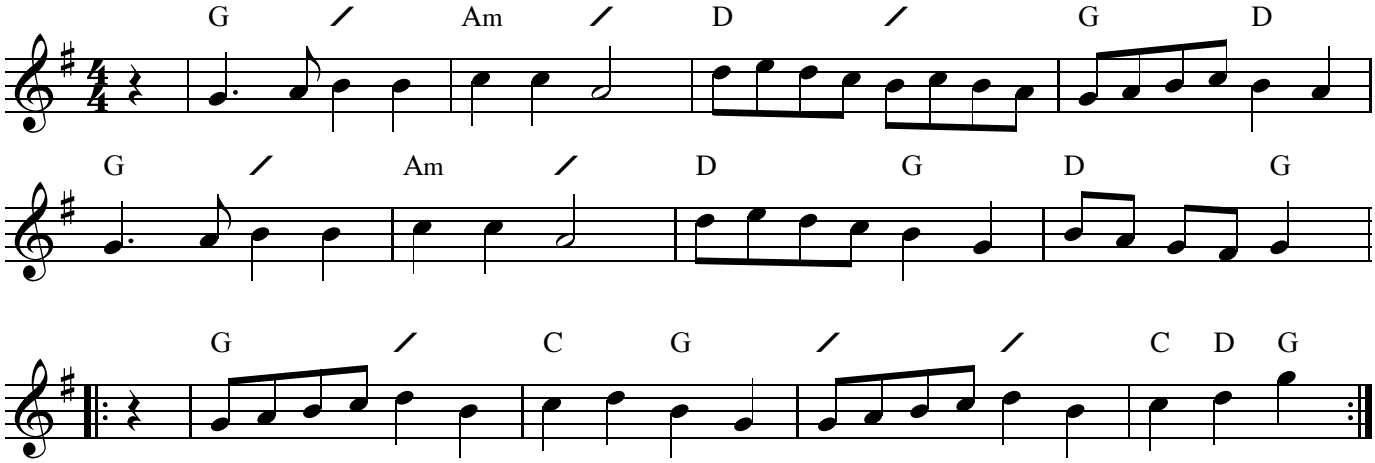
Quickstep in the Battle of Prague - D51



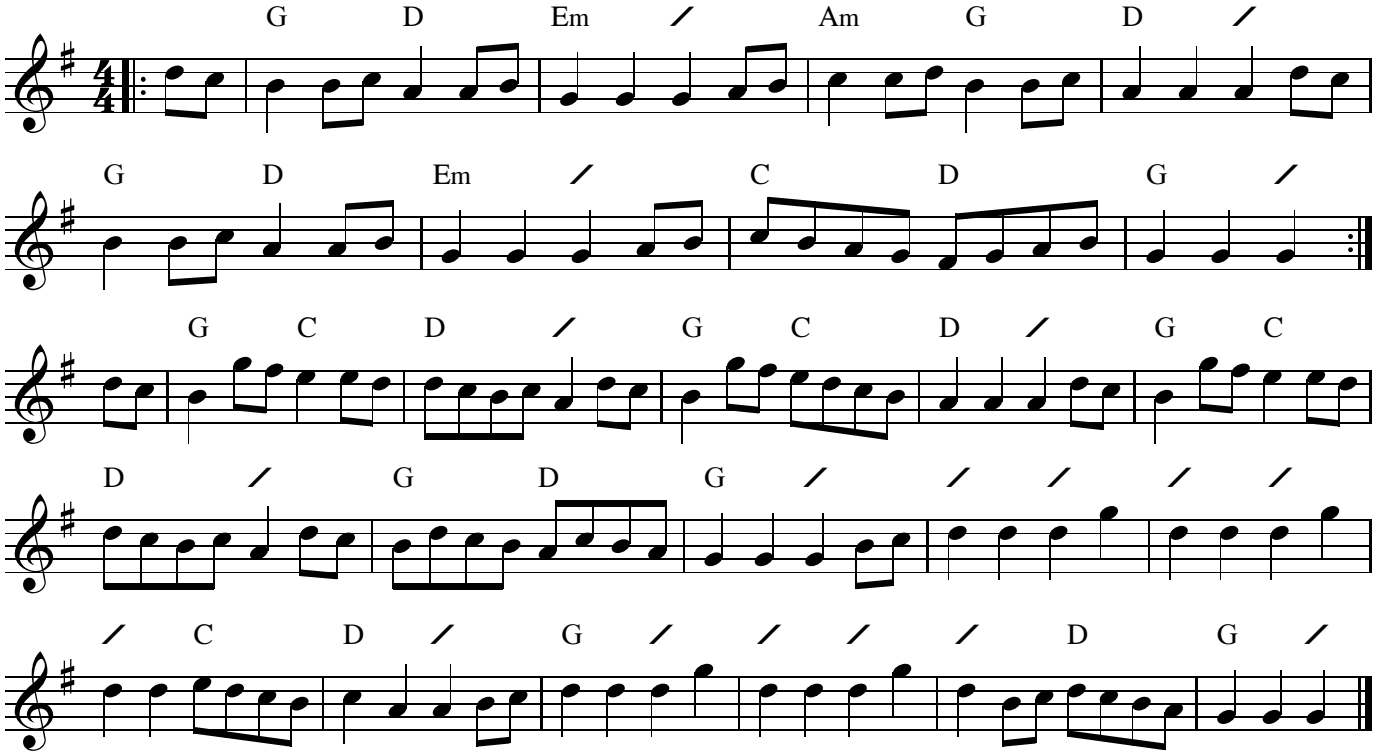
Ashleys Rides - D1



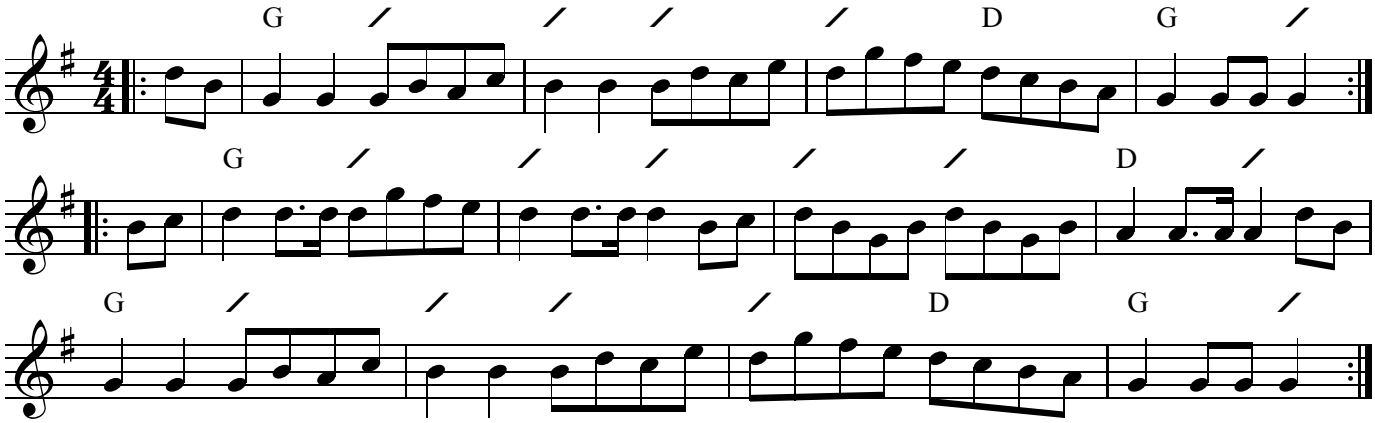
La Bel Jean - D28



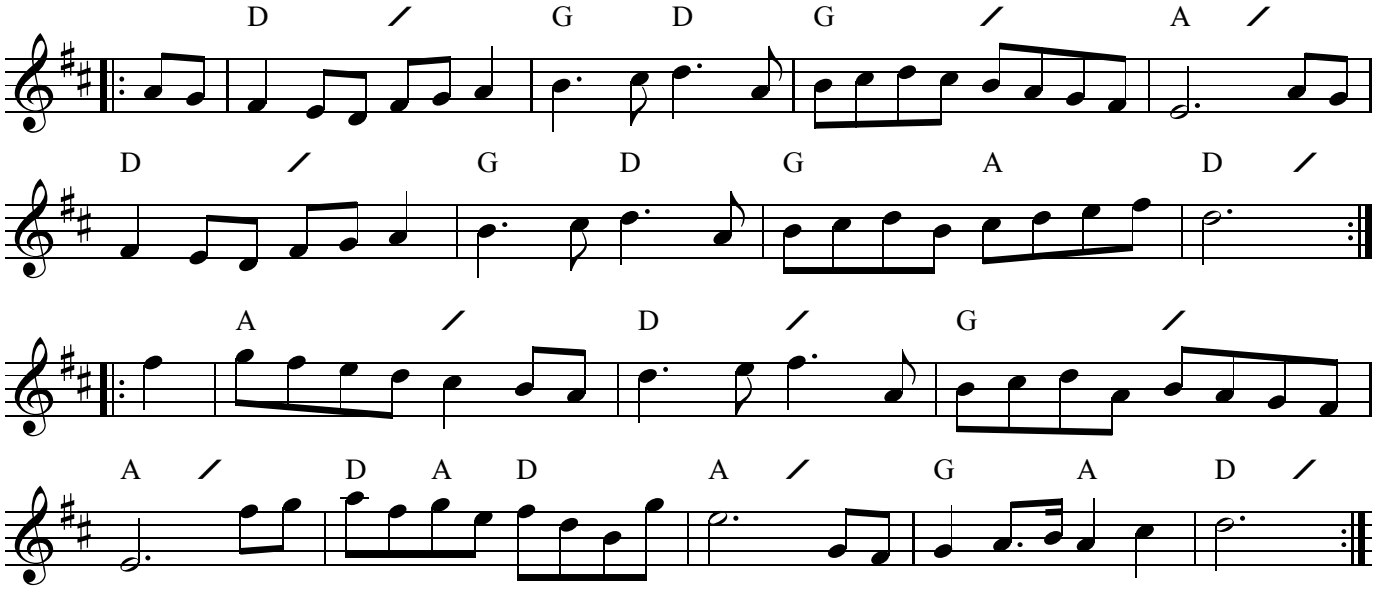
Persian Ricardo - D88



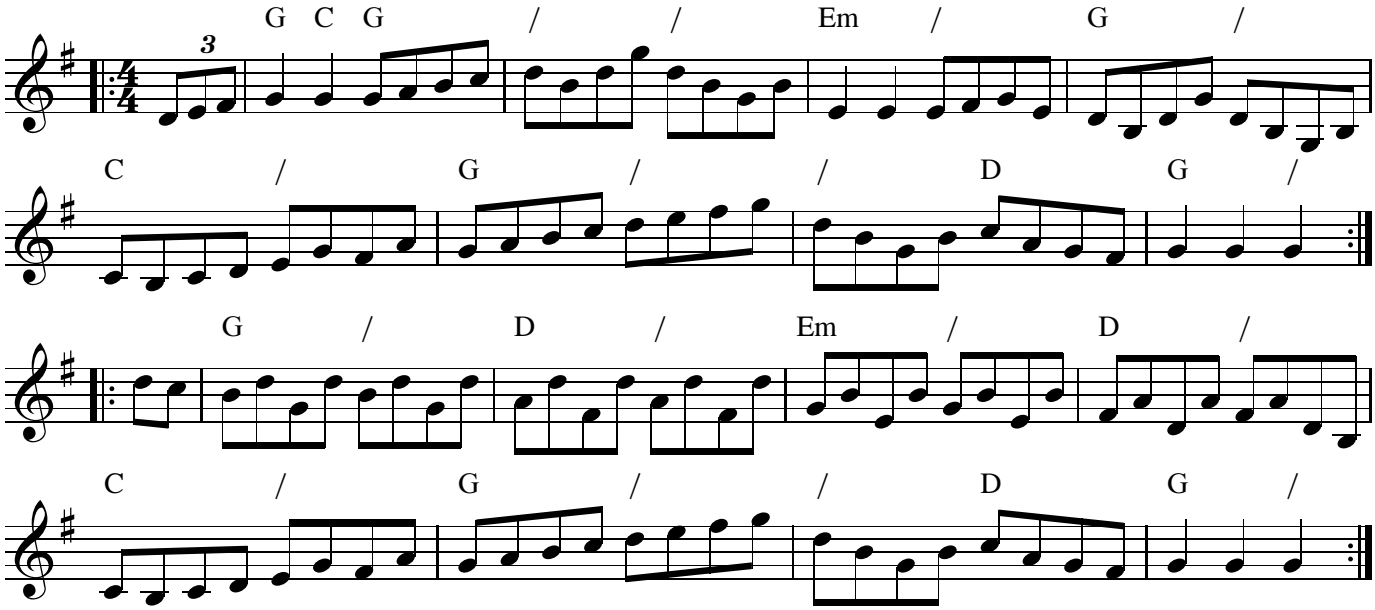
Lord Fitzwilliam's March - D90



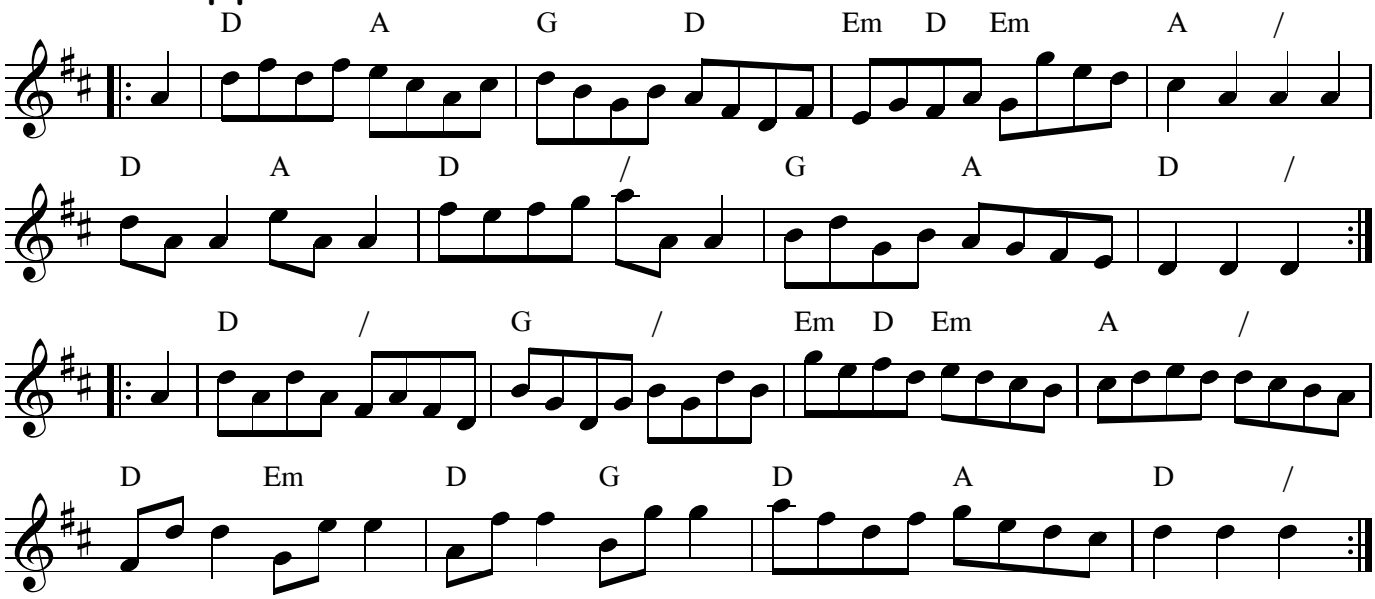
Patie's Mill - D219



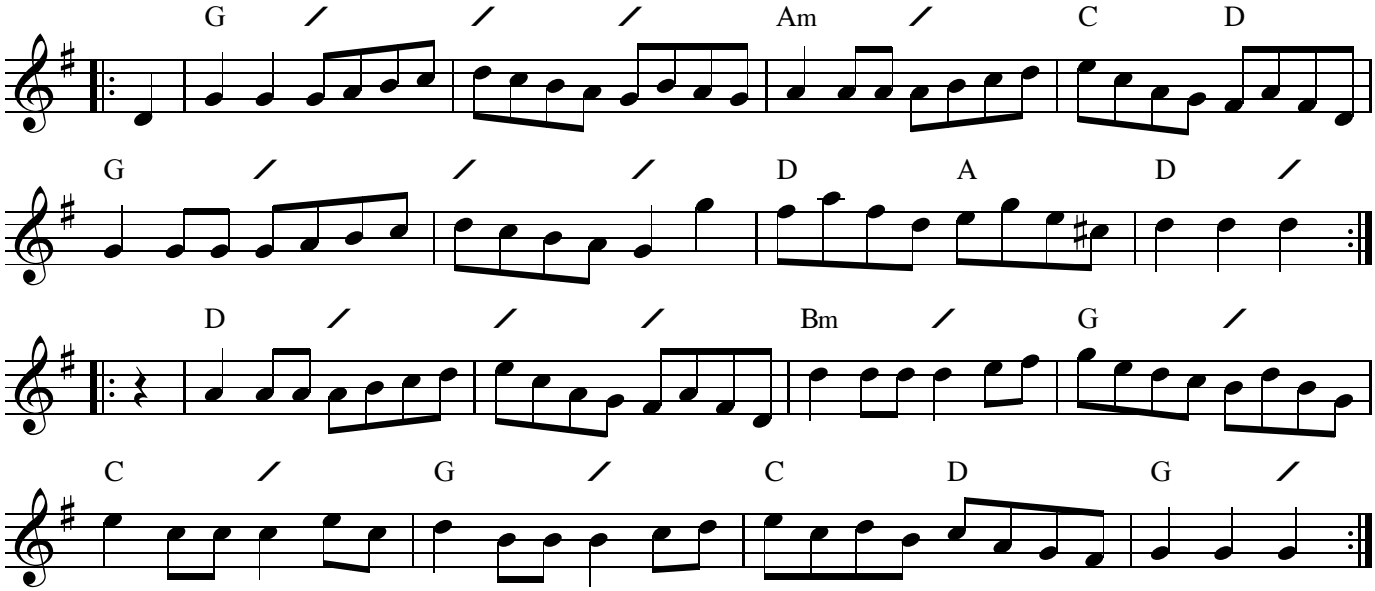
Savage Hornpipe - D110



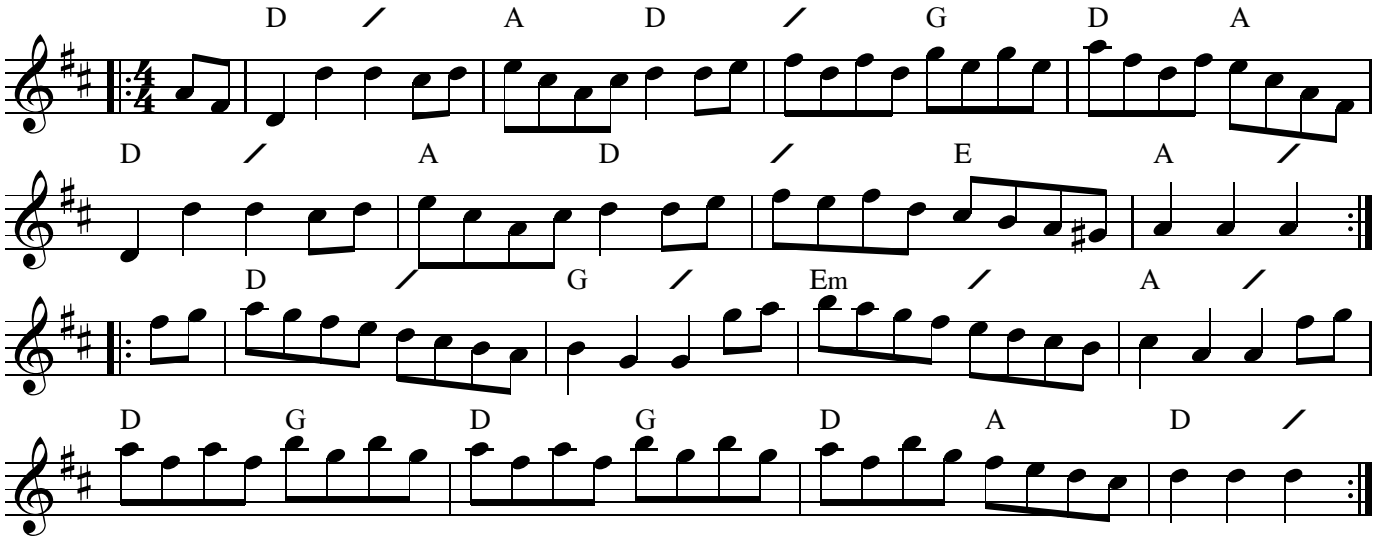
Duke's Hornpipe - D254



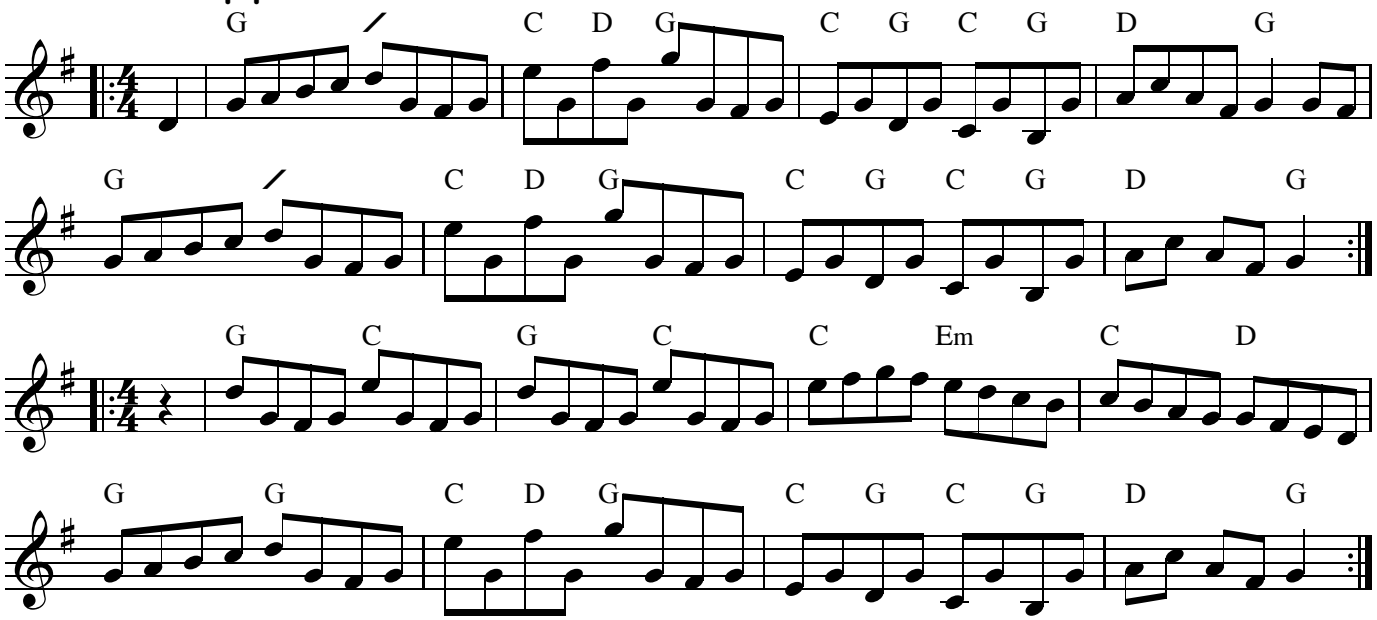
Shooters Hornpipe - D109



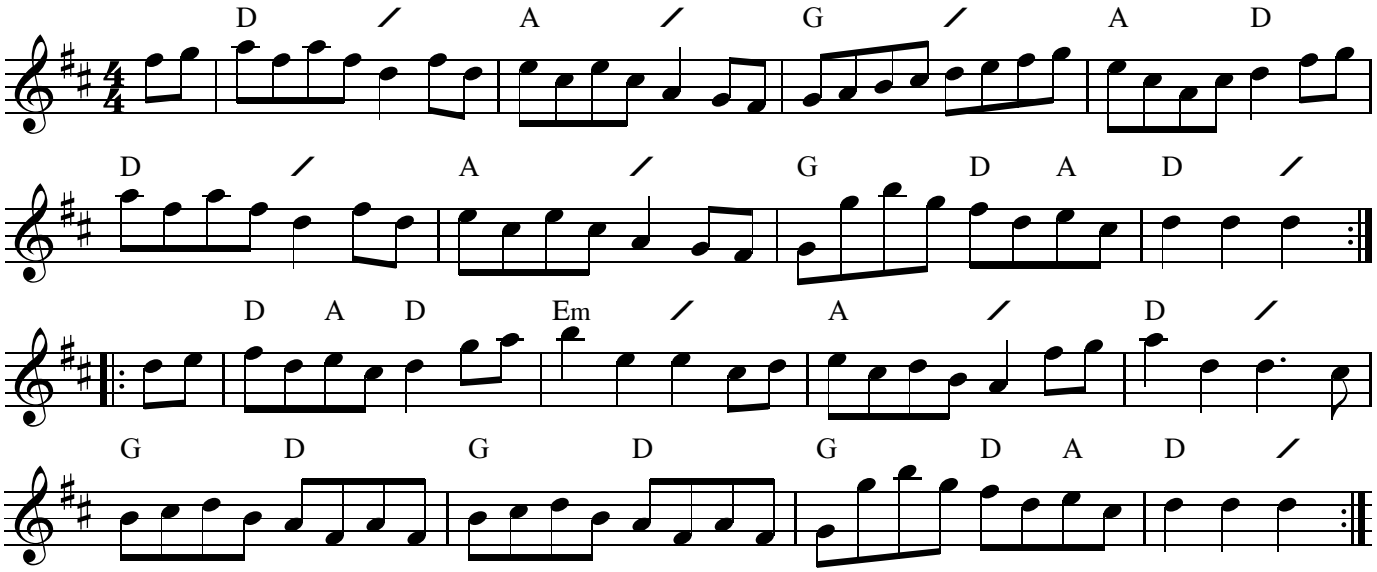
Savoury's Hornpipe - D133



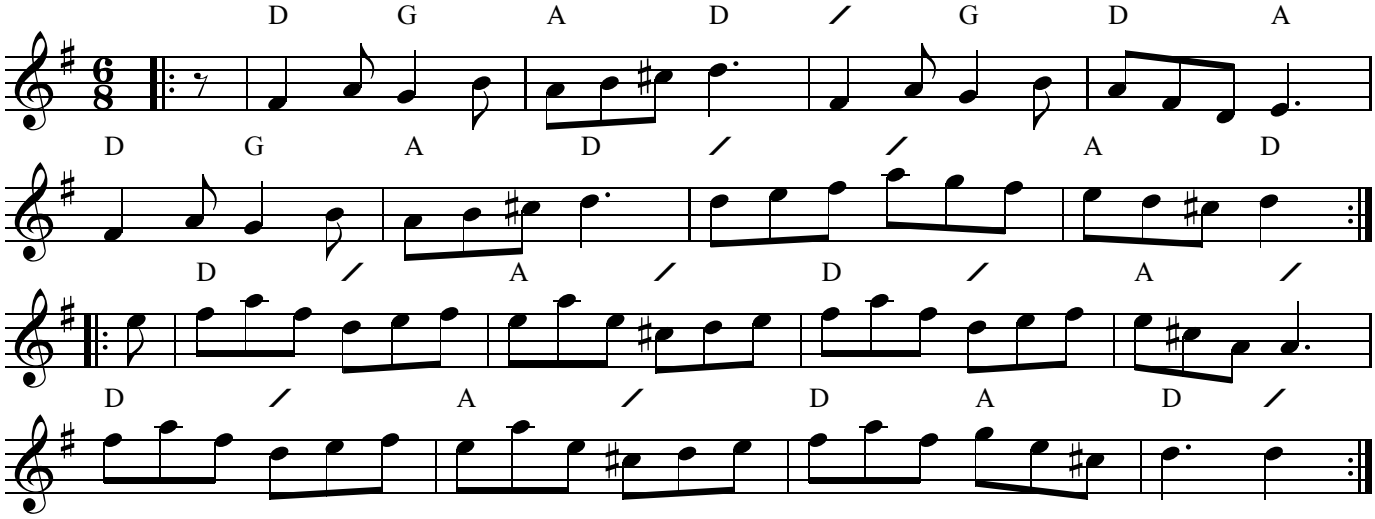
Daniel's Hornpipe - D144



Favourite Hornpipe - D208

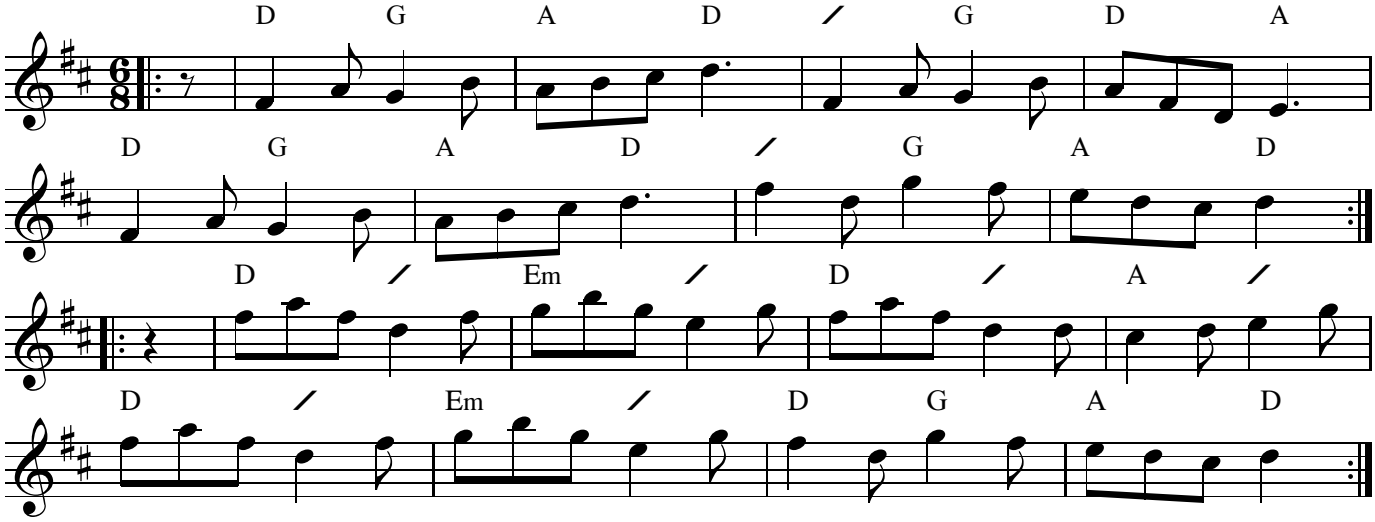


Off She Goes - D262

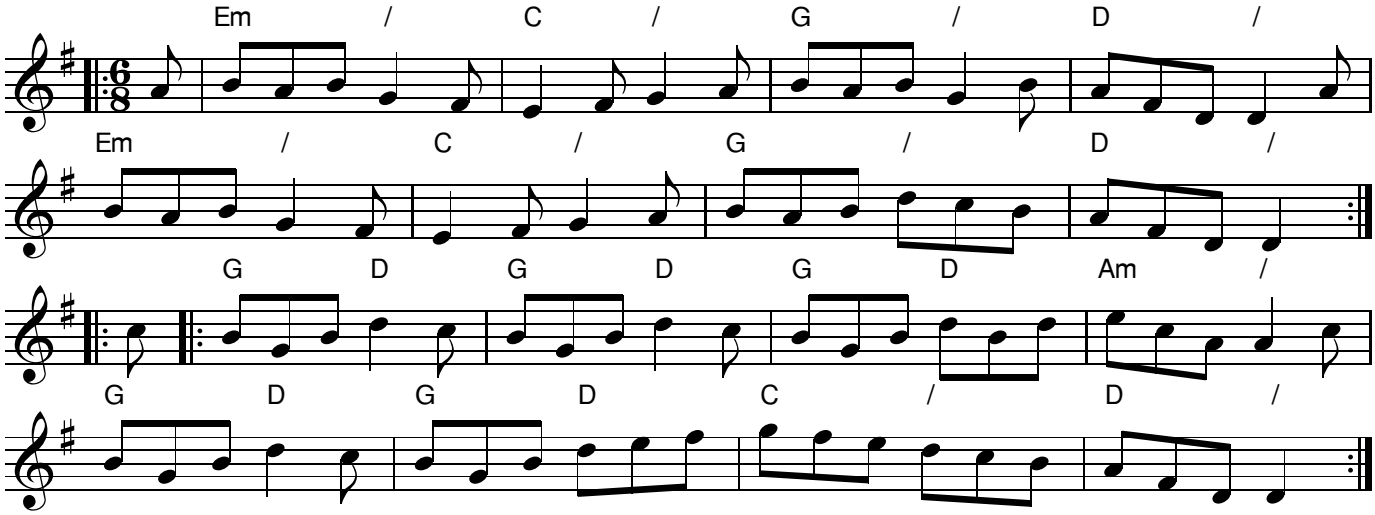


Off She Goes

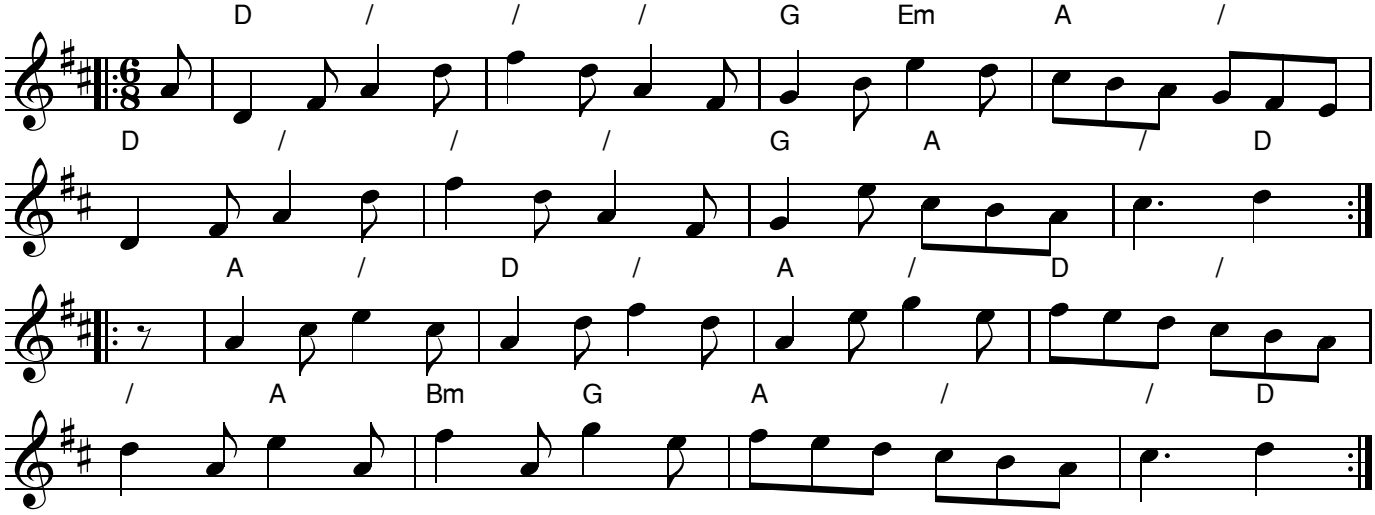
ordinary (non John Clare) version



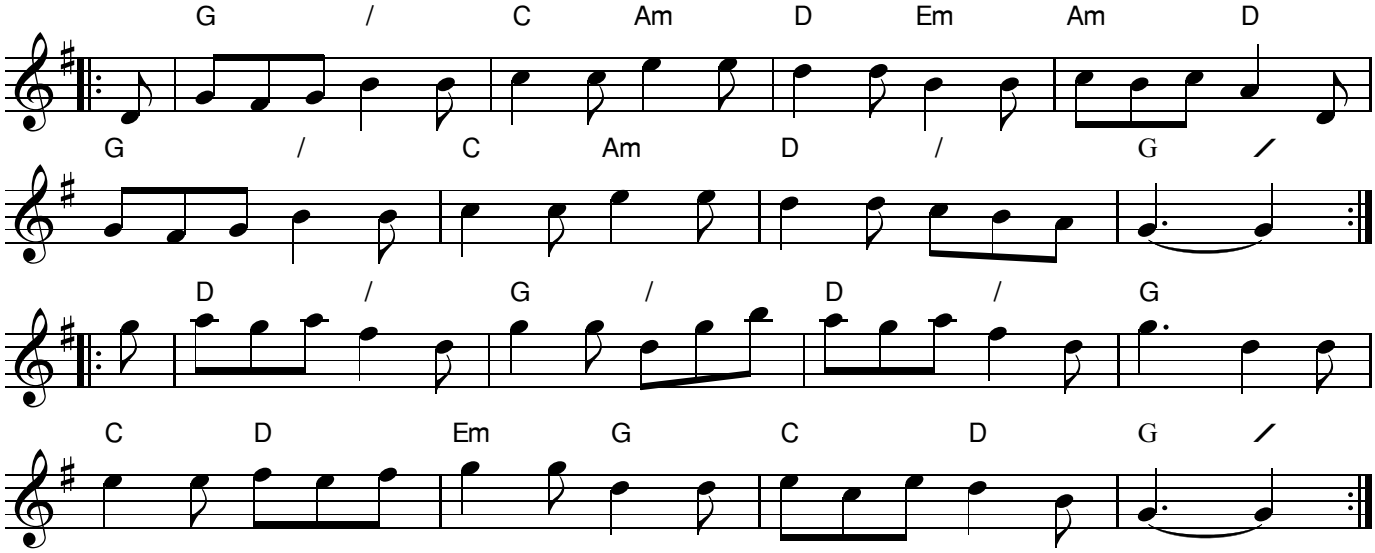
Moll in the Wood - D5



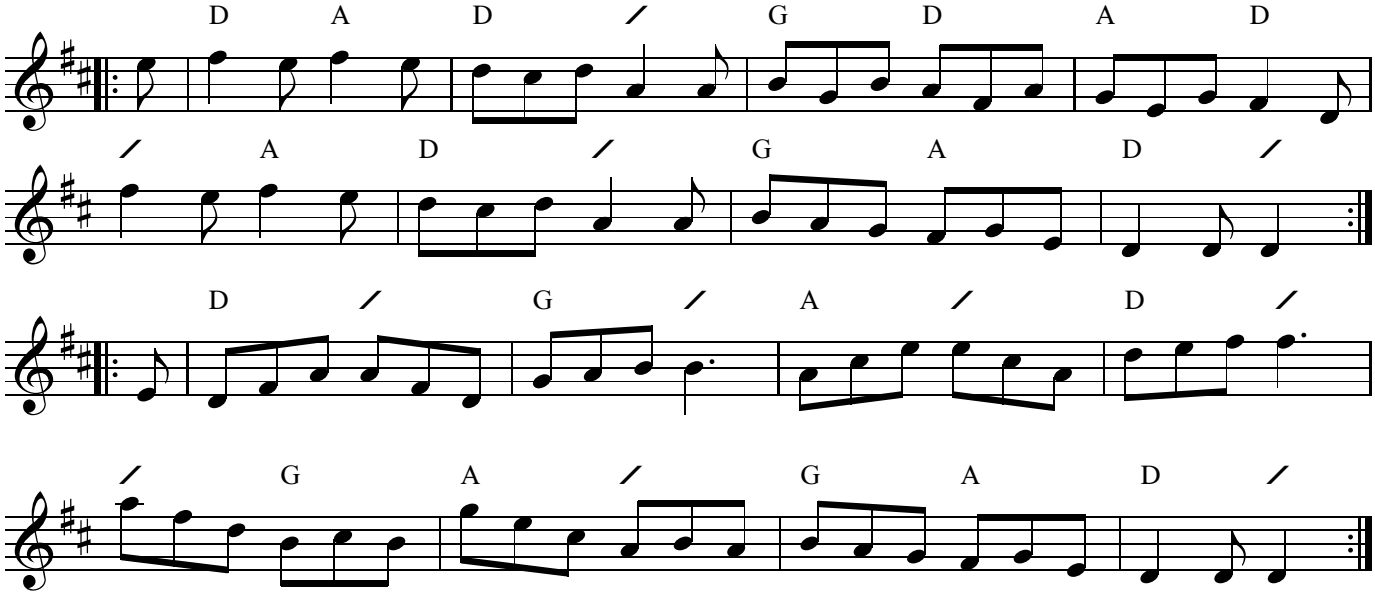
Sadler's Balloon - D96



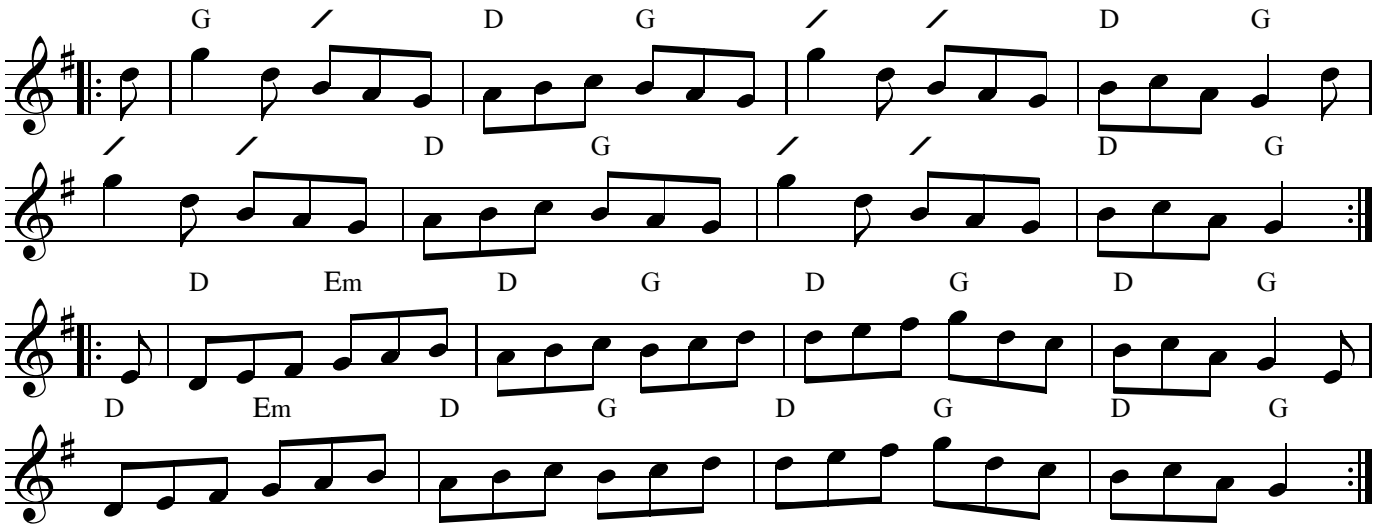
Archer's Dance - D19



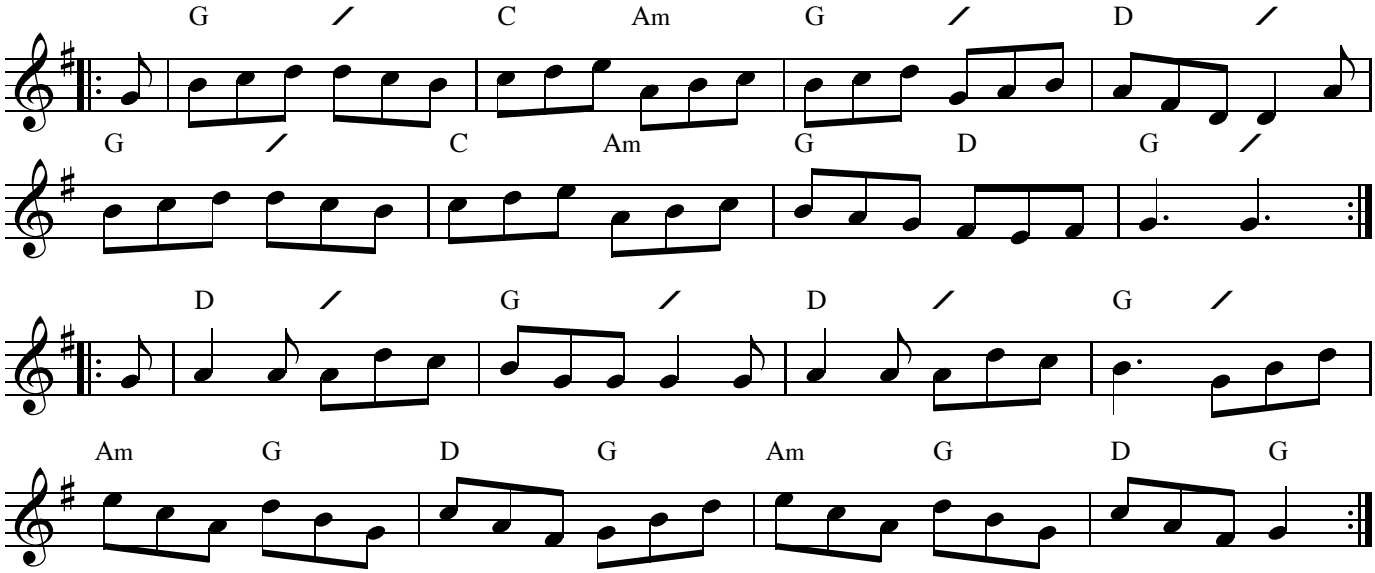
Kingsbridge Assembly - D241



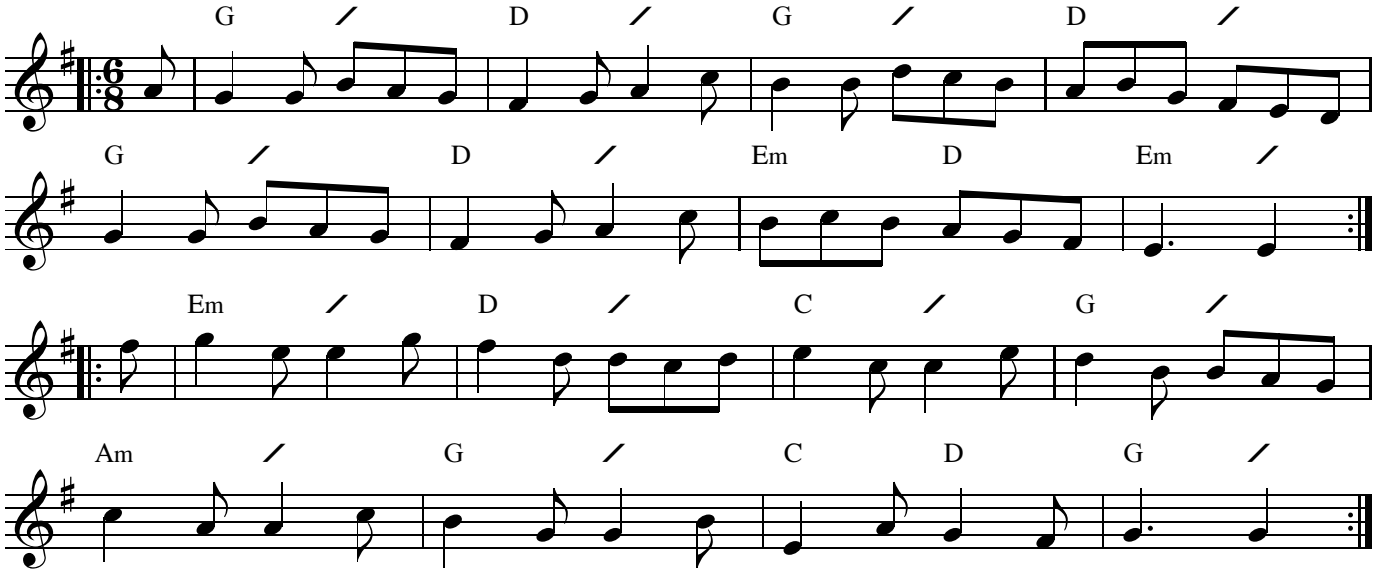
Bedford Races - D86



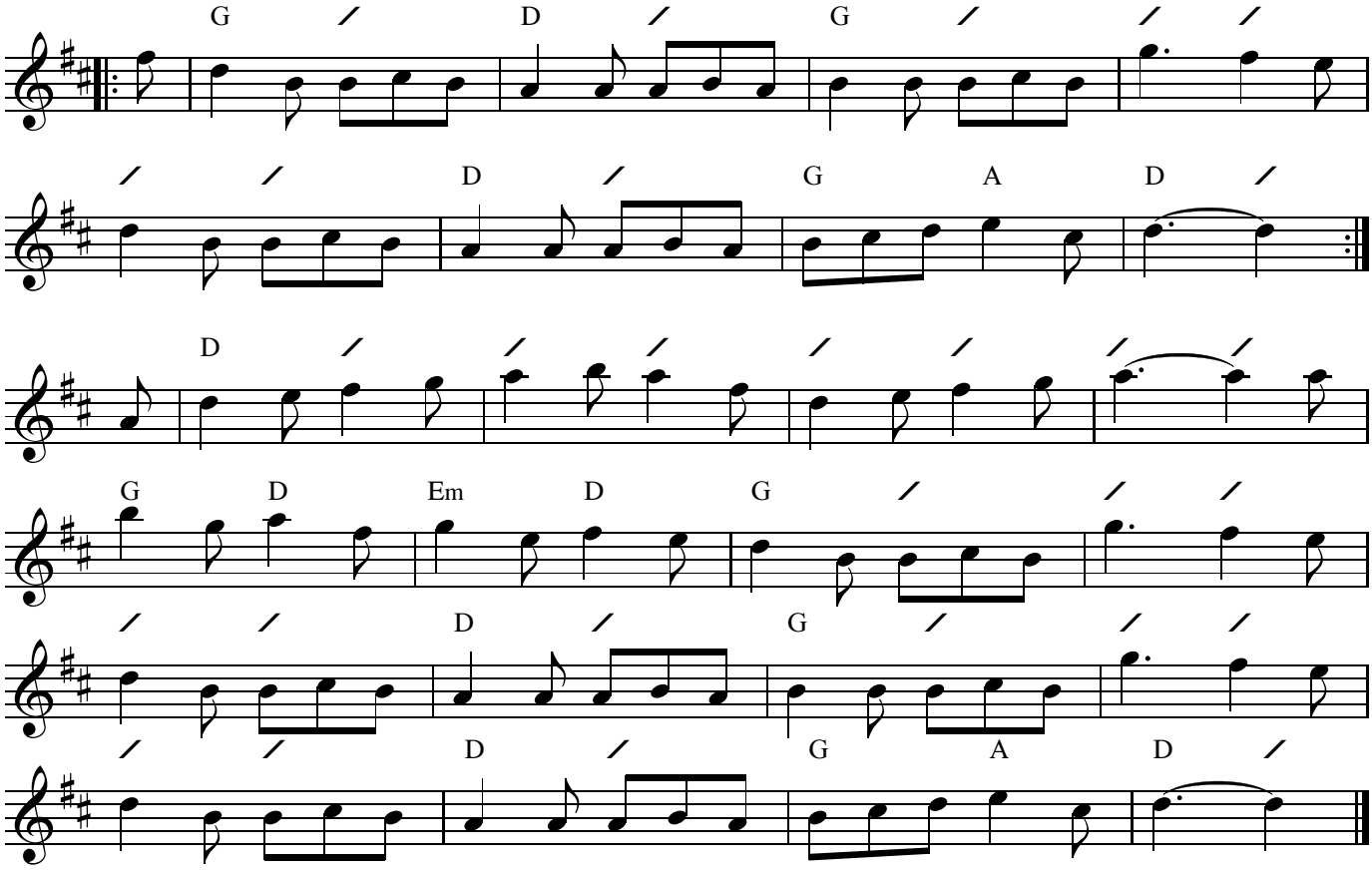
Tommy Jenkins - D220



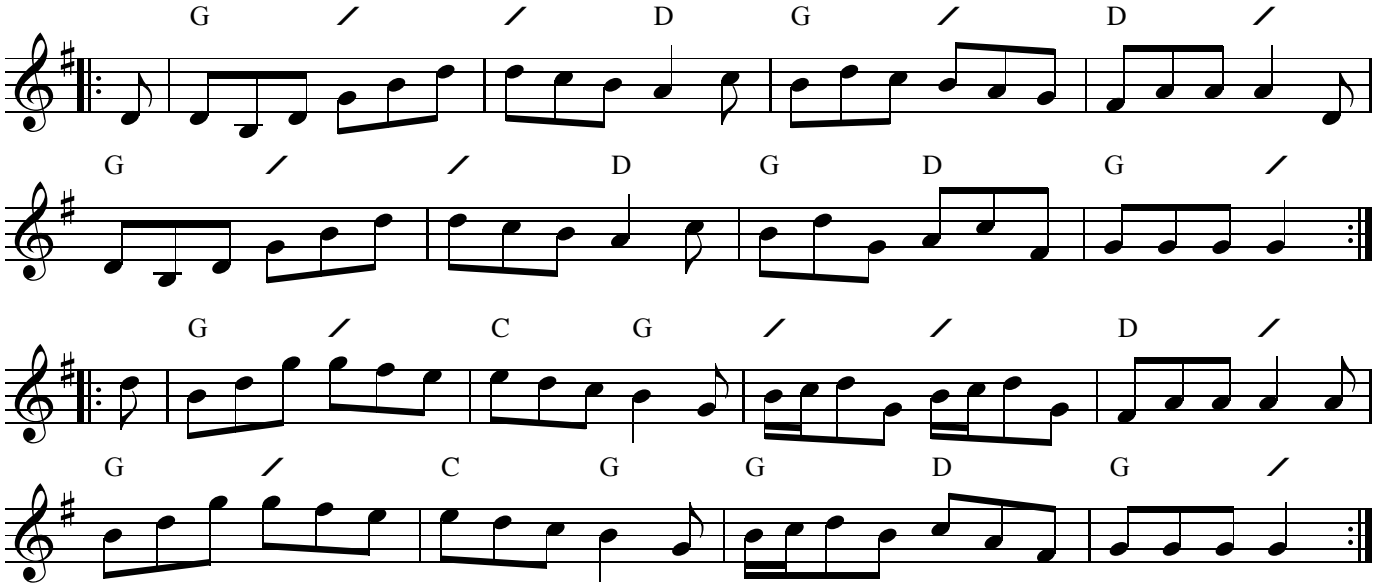
Lady Compton's Whim - D240



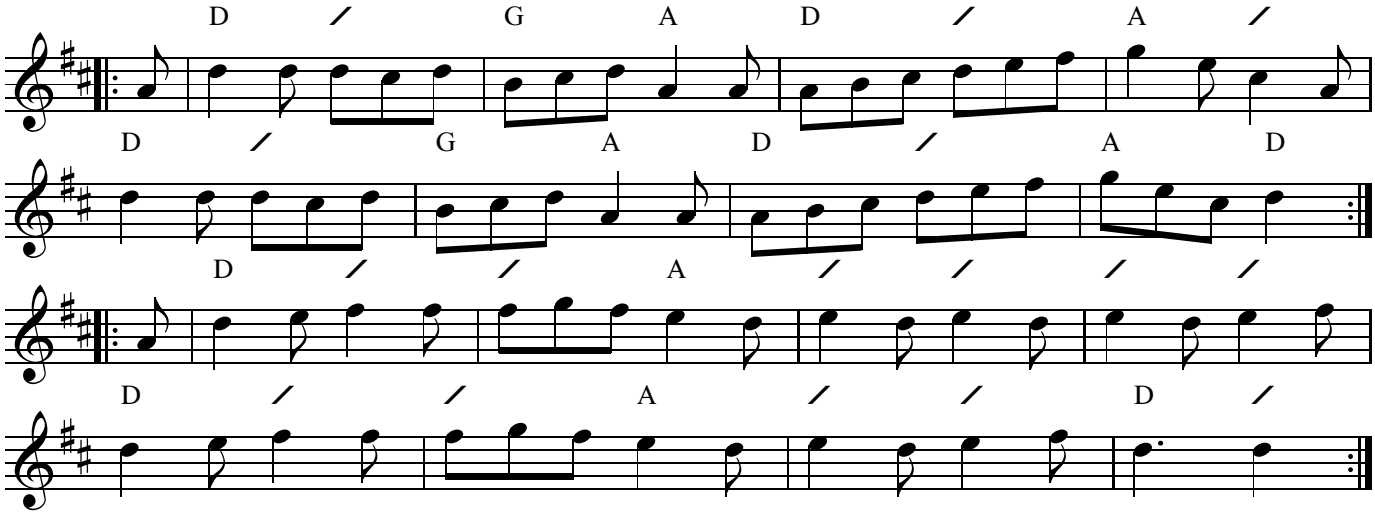
Mrs Casey - D22



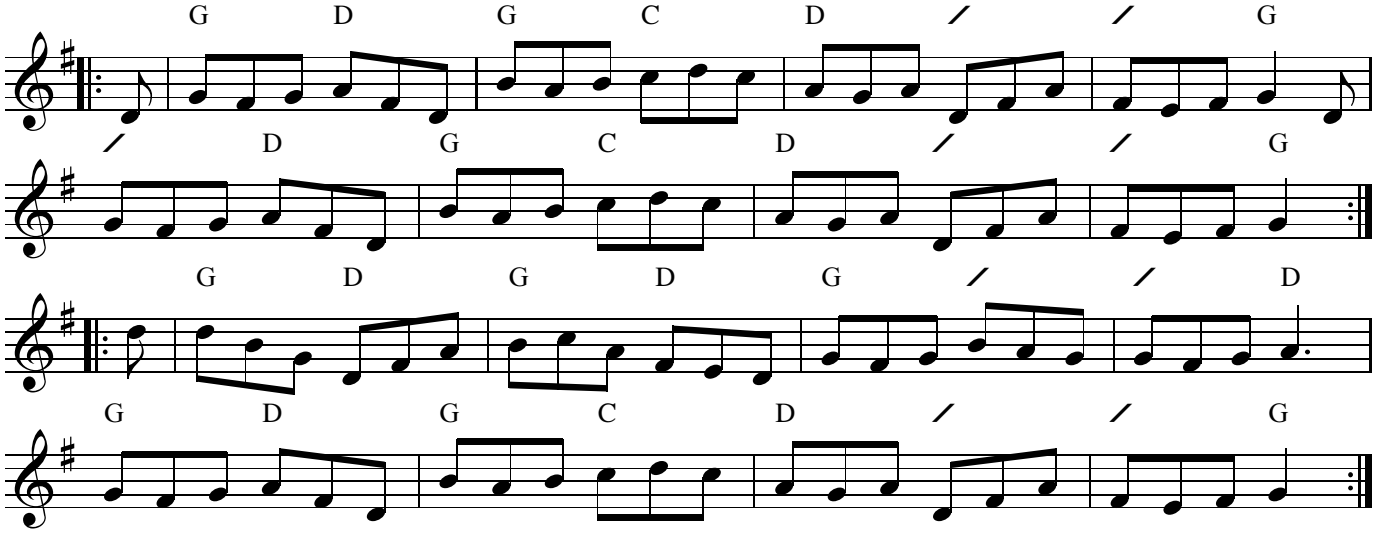
The Sylph - D43



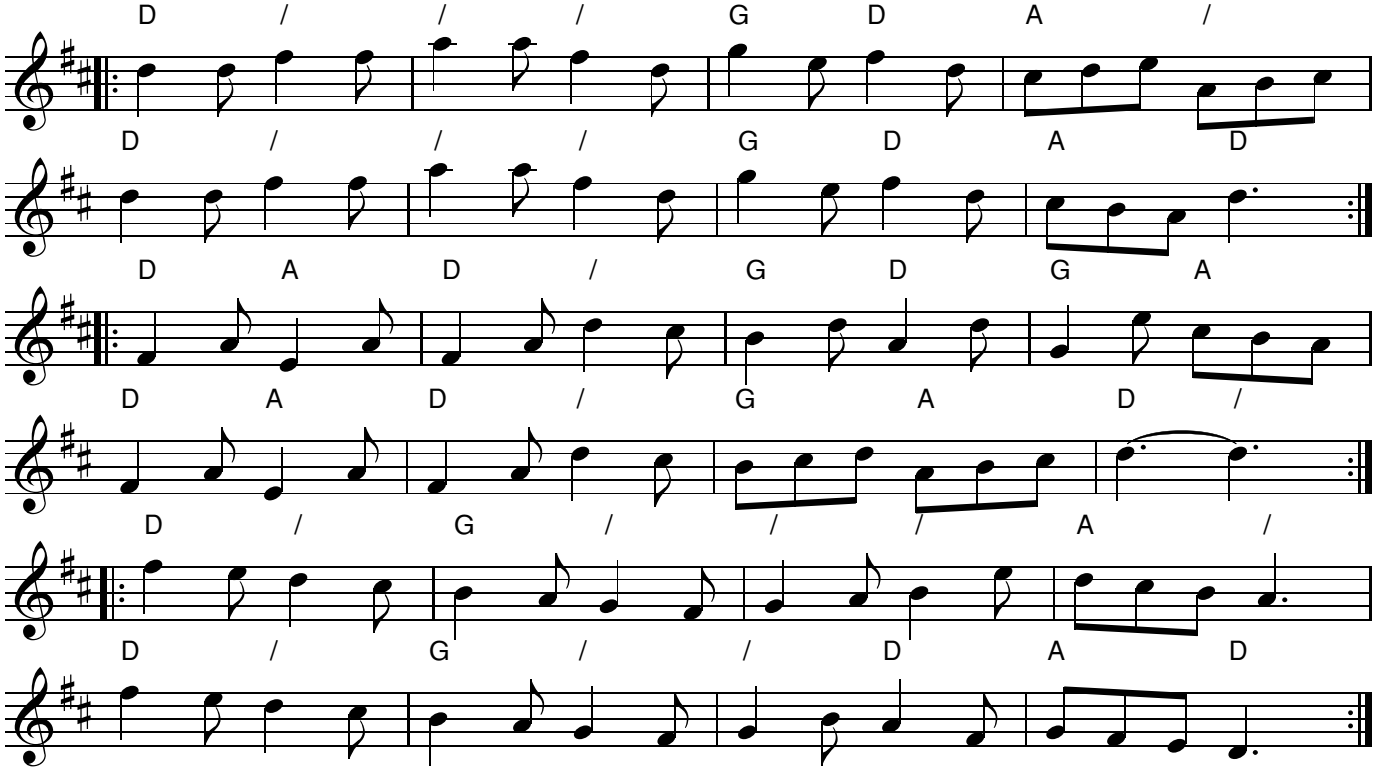
Tekeli - D41



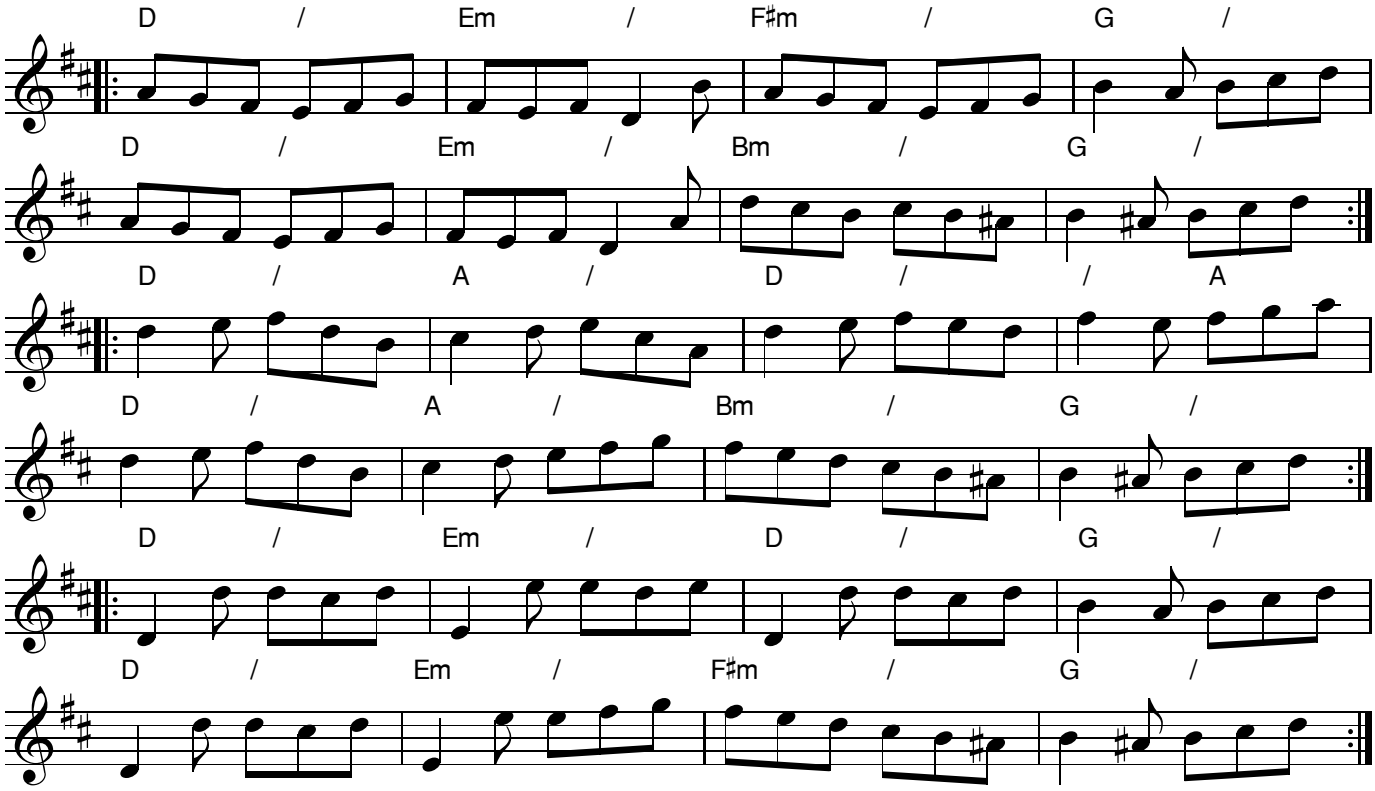
Wandering Girl - D259



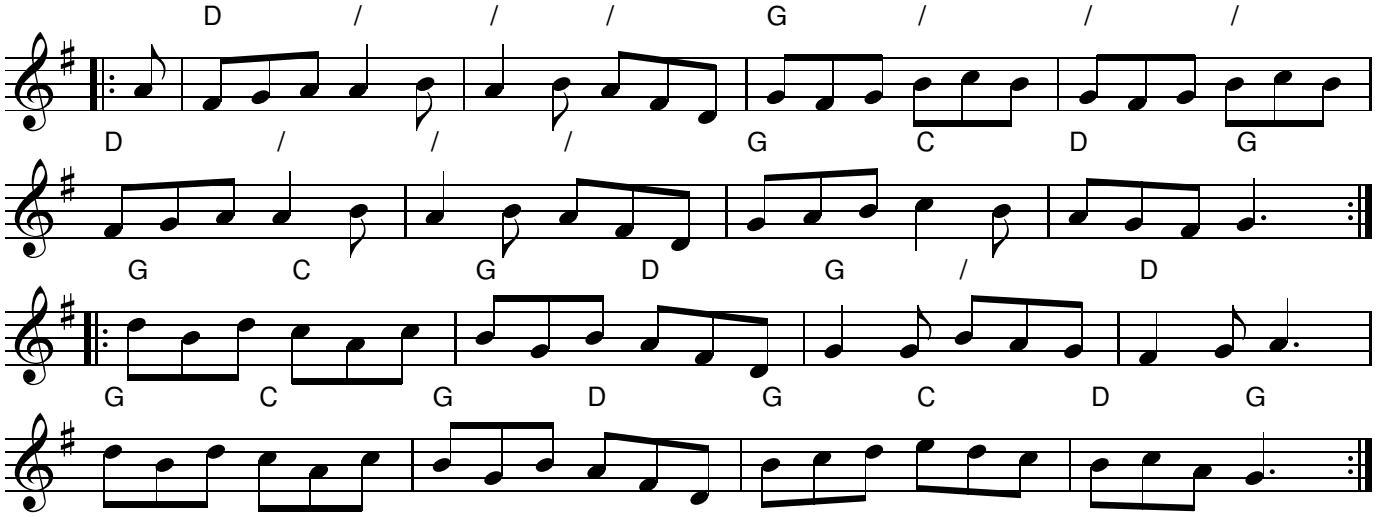
Bang Up - D92



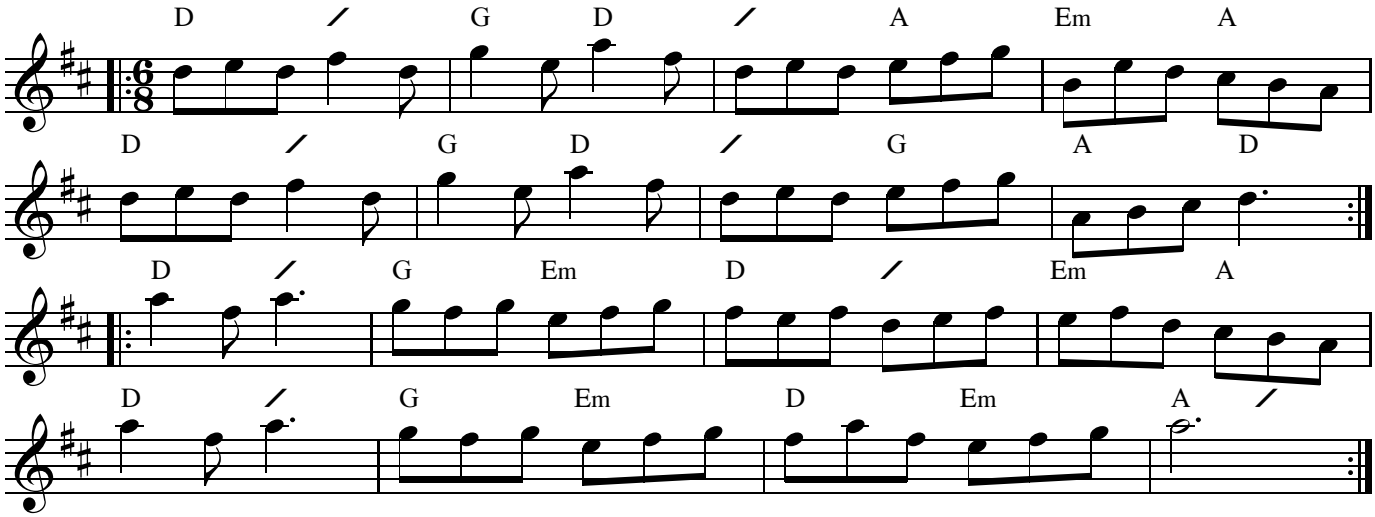
Morgan Rattler - D13



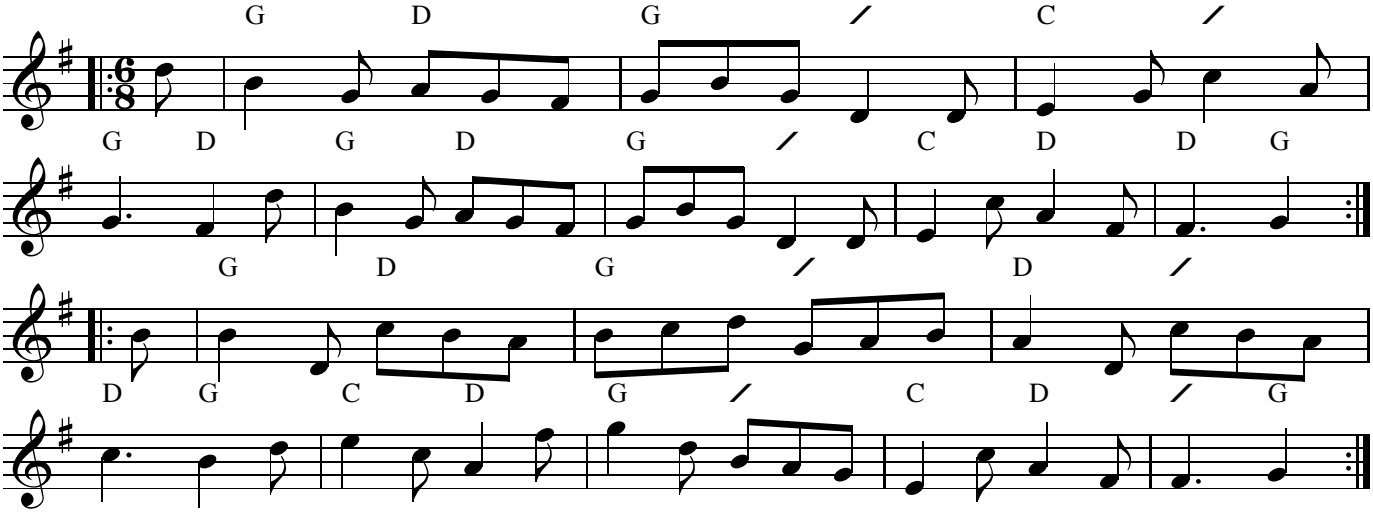
Welsh Jig - D25



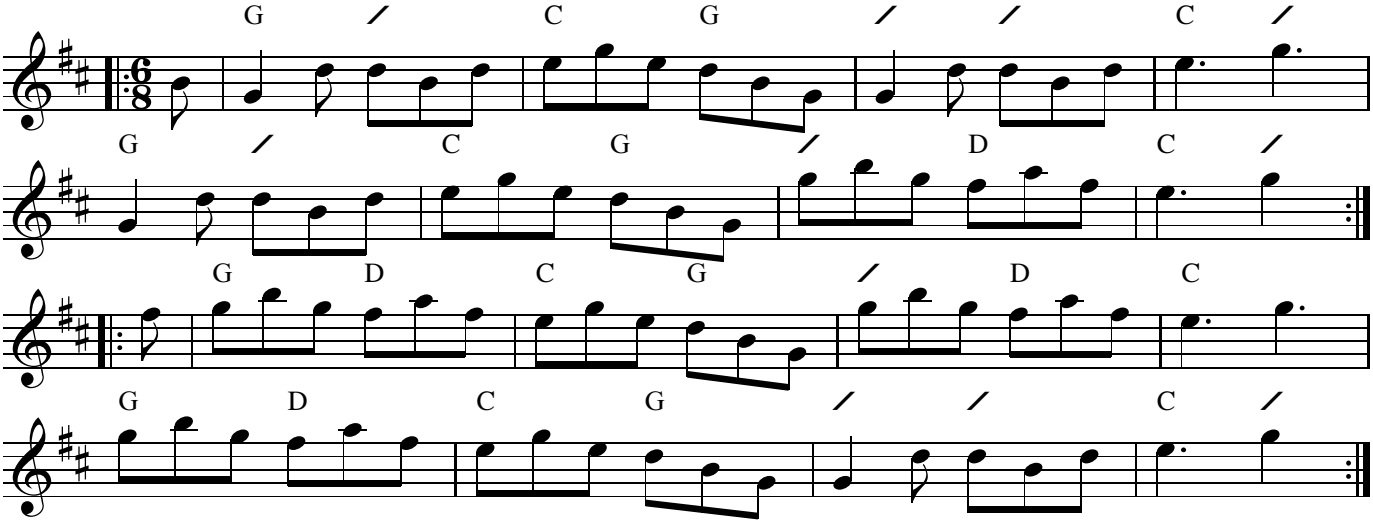
Turnpike Gate - D142



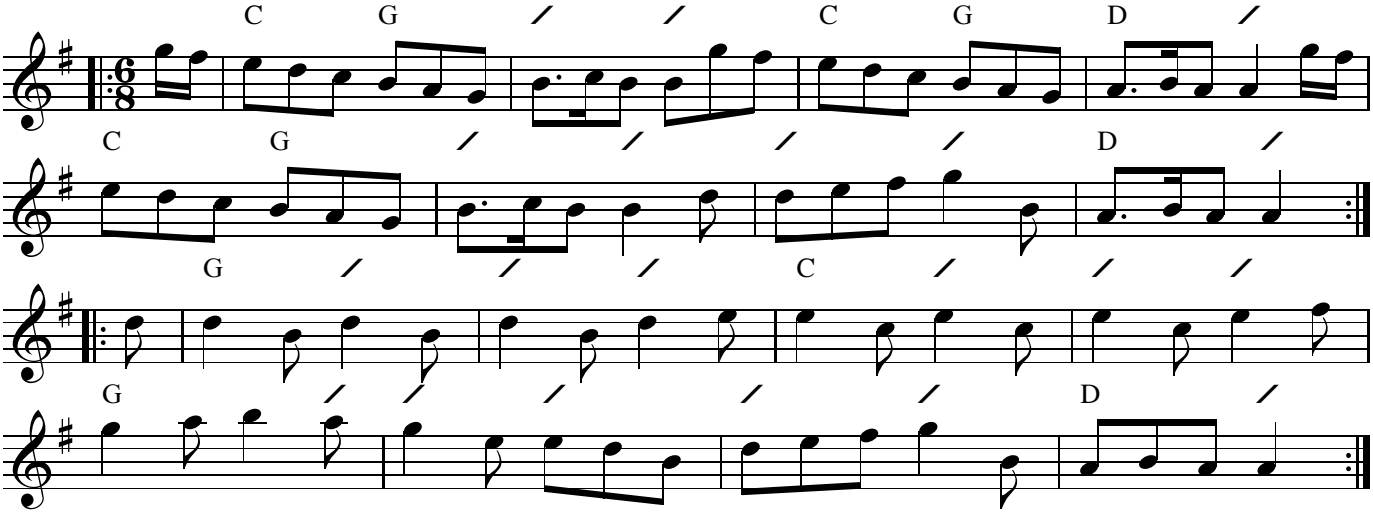
The Bell - D234



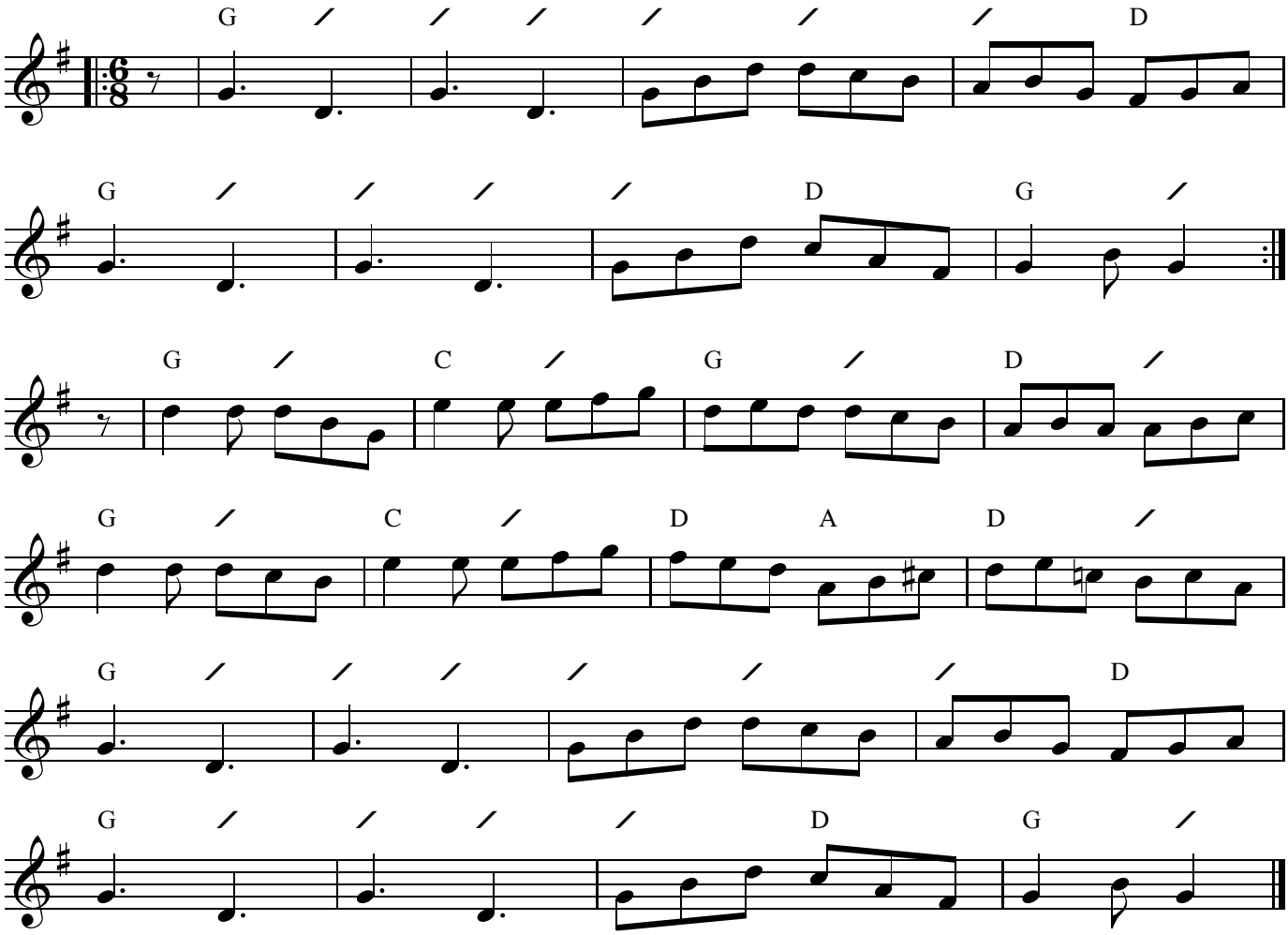
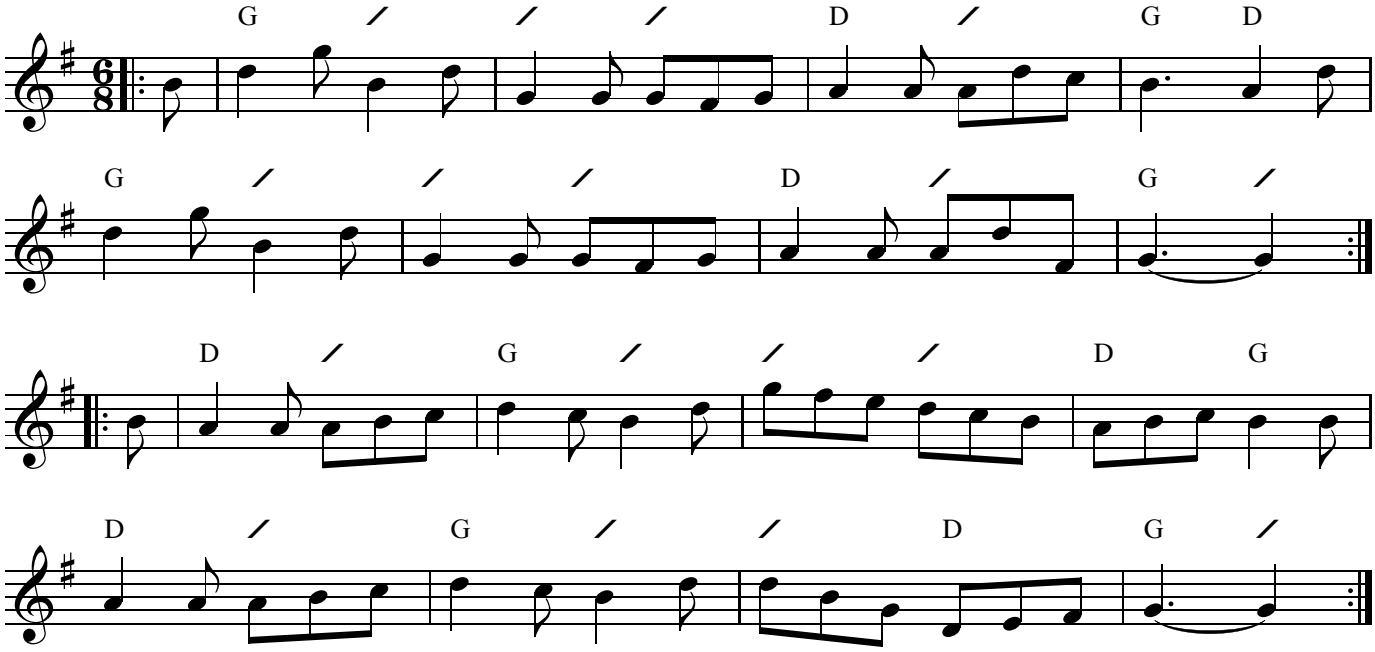
Charley over the water - D153



Cosy Olwen (Garryowen?) - D177



The O.P. - D93



Regent's Fete - D222