

## The Bastard English session: James Bell



It began in late 2008 (I think) out of a desire to have an English folk session in Oxford, which at the time had a very healthy Irish session, a Breton session and a Scandinavian session (and maybe a Galician session too? I can't remember if it had started by then). There were and are strong English tune sessions and song sessions, but not in town.

Into that vacuum I wanted to start a session that added a particularly English twist: popular music. (In other words, not classical, not really folk, commercial, often urban, usually written down rather than learned through oral tradition.) Why? Because I felt that England had a much richer tradition of popular music than it had of folk music.

I also wanted something much less formal than the sessions I was used to – something irreverent, rough around the edges, even drunk and rowdy. But above all, I wanted it to be *welcoming*. I wanted it to be an event that a person could go to for the first time by themselves without knowing anyone, and by the end of the night feel that this was something that they were a part of.

I didn't want it to be a session where people felt they had to win the approval of whoever was running it. I didn't want anyone tutting, making snide comments and saying that 'that's not how the Tradition should be played'.

The purpose of this session was for people to get together and play music, sing, drink, occasionally dance (there is usually a bit of dancing at this session at some point) and have a good time. This was the purpose because I believed then and believe now that this was the *real* tradition behind this music.

It was about joy, community, friendship, humour, taking the piss a little but always in an affectionate way. Showing off what a technically accomplished musician you are is fine in small doses, but it very quickly makes a tedious evening out for anyone else in the room. I wanted something closer to a knees-up than a school recital.

I knew I wanted it to be on a Friday night (so those with day jobs could go late and drink), and I found a venue: originally the Half Moon pub on St Clements, but it got too crowded on a Friday night and we needed somewhere we could breathe, so we moved to the Isis Farmhouse pub, down by the river. A much larger pub, but pretty far out of the way (the nearest car parking space is about 10 minutes walk away), although that's an advantage as well as a disadvantage, as it means that if people can be bothered to get out there then they can probably be bothered to stay all night, and to enjoy themselves.

All I needed was the name. It needed to be something specific, because this was a folk session that wasn't really folk, with predominantly English music but with any other music from anywhere else allowed. It needed to incorporate tunes and songs, old and new, and it needed to be what session regular Calum Mitchell describes as 'scruffy egalitarianism'. Seeing as I was basically bastardising a folk session format, I named it the 'Bastard English Session'.

And it still runs, on the second Friday of every month (although sometimes we shift it around in August, because people are often away on holiday). It starts at 8pm and finishes at midnight. You can find it on Facebook by clicking [HERE](#). If it sounds like something you might enjoy, do come along!

