

It is morning. Opening the window of your caravan, you are greeted with a sea of tents, caravans, campervans, teepees, and awnings. A pot lid clangs from a large marquee at one end of the field. You open the caravan door, slip on your Wellingtons, and follow the smell of bacon and fried eggs. It's another day at Folk Camp.

Formally Folk Camps Society Ltd, Folk Camps runs several camp sessions throughout the year and around the UK. These can be short bank holiday weekend self-catered camps or weekends specifically designed for singers or musicians, but the highlights of the year are two four-week summer camps (in either a marquee or village hall, whichever most appeals) which run through July and August.

These camps aim to keep the practice of traditional folk music, song, and dance alive through choral workshops, cèilidhs, and communal performance opportunities.

A typical day at Folk Camp consists of:

8:30: Breakfast, cold or cooked by a team of fellow campers; porridge, cereals, or a full cooked breakfast.

9:30: Morning band session, run by staff musicians. Open to all regardless of skill level or instrument.

11:00: Coffee and cake. Afterwards there may be a choral workshop singing a range of genres.

12:30: Lunch. Usually a selection of cold meats, cheese, fruits and vegetables, and breakfast leftovers.

13:30 – 18:00: Afternoon workshops organized by campers and have ranged from clog dancing and rapper to friendship bracelet making, tie-dye workshops, and street dance.

18:00: Dinner. Different every night, with vegetarian and vegan options.

19:00: Early children's dancing.

20:00: Singaround: this is the chance to perform for the camp, who come together at the hall or marquee, sit in a circle and perform songs, dances, or tunes.

21:30: Evening cèilidh, played by the staff musicians.

23:30: PA turned off; campers can either go to bed or stay up for a late-night singaround, which is more intimate (this is also when the more bawdy songs make their appearance).

The week is as intense or relaxing as you make it; all activities are optional. But Folk Camps has a long history, with a tradition of acceptance towards new members and a huge sense of community. Every member of the camp is given a job for the week; this could be wiping down the tables after dinner or a day in the kitchen. Everyone pitches in to make the camp as enjoyable as possible, and this has been a theme since its conception.

Folk Camps had its beginnings in the early '60s, when a chance remark, made by Bessie Rye while faced with an expensive family trip to EDFSS-run summer dance weeks, struck a chord with Bill Rutter (then the SW Area Organiser for EFDSS): "*They should run something cheap like a camp for families.*" These camps were known as Family Camps; the first one ran in August 1961 in Bridport, Dorset. Promising to cater for people who wanted both the open air and a cheap holiday, the week-long camp cost £3.15 shillings!

From 1961, Folk Camps gained popularity the traditional way; word of mouth. By 1964 the number of attendees had tripled, and the length had been extended to four weeks. Veteran

camper Sue Malleson (née Ginn) describes those early years: *“It was so exciting to be singing and dancing with those early pioneer Folk Camps families. I learned many songs that first year, not from recordings, but from other singers. Perhaps most appealing of all was the freedom that Folk Camps afforded us teenagers, very much as it does for young people today.”*

Families have played a pivotal role in the evolution of Folk Camps. No need to leave young children at home; there are several activities catered for them and their families. Passing Folk Camps down the generations has become a staple part of Folk Camp life, as Sue Malleson states: *“Now we’ve retired we can sit back and watch the next generation, including our own children, become involved in running [Folk Camps]. It gives me an enormous sense of satisfaction to know that Folk Camps will continue for many years to come.”*

Although Folk Camp is catered largely towards families there is no need to worry if you are a single camper. The spirit of Folk Camp is in the community; many will say they have found another family in the people they camp with, especially when living in such close quarters. Relationships made at Folk Camp are meaningful like no other.

Folk Camps offers a chance to break away from the hustle and bustle of a world full of technology and complications. As well as promoting folk music, dance and song, Folk Camps exudes community spirit and shows us the incredible impact of selflessness and consideration.

Testimony from Gracie Brill, 24:

“There’s something about the miniature society created over a week at camp which forges strong connections between people, especially when you’re a kid. You have your own little tribe at camp and then don’t see each other for a year, but immediately snap back when you’re together again. My friends from camp (many of whom are among my closest friends) are people who I’ve only ever spent a few weeks with in my entire life, despite arguably knowing them for years. It’s like-minded people coming together; so much of the daft stuff people get up to is born from a shared appreciation for silly, whimsical humour.”