

Modern Ballads & Broadsides

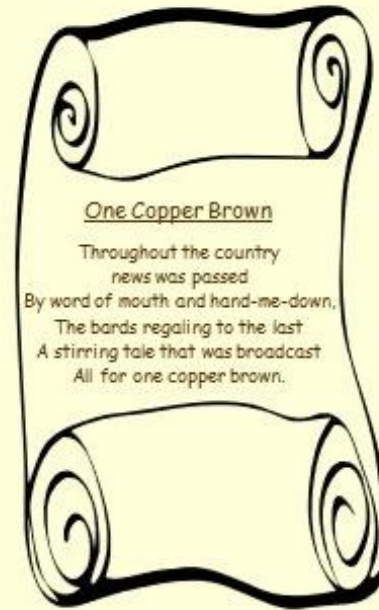
- 1 The Poacher (3.36)
- 2 Hunting for Glory (5.08)
- 3 Gourmet Food for Us (4.04)
- 4 The Red Flag (4.27)
- 5 Mad King George (4.21)
- 6 The Alchemist and the Devil (4.46)
- 7 The Decision (3.20)
- 8 Timour the Tartar - Revisited (2.47)
- 9 The Signal Box (3.59)
- 10 One Copper Brown (3.12)
- 11 The Old and Venerable Bede (3.34)
- 12 When Mr Slater Sadly Moved Away (4.18)
- 13 Father's Footsteps (3.46)
- 14 What if....? (4.12)

All songs written by J & C Clachan

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Modern Ballads & Broadsides



One Copper Brown

Throughout the country
news was passed
By word of mouth and hand-me-down,
The bards regaling to the last
A stirring tale that was broadcast
All for one copper brown.



John Clachan & Friends

Modern Ballads & Broadside

Welcome to another selection of self-written songs. This CD includes a mix of new material and some older songs not previously recorded by the band.

This time, there is a slight theme running through many of the tracks. I have always been fascinated that bards and song carriers, in an age before newspapers and mass media, brought news of events to towns and villages via 'broadside' that were written for the purpose. I wrote 'One Copper Brown' to celebrate this but then realised that many of the other songs can be seen in a similar light, which inspired the CD title 'Modern Ballads & Broadside'.

My thanks to **Chris** who, once again, proof read the insert and helped finalise the songs after the first drafts were completed. As always, thanks to my 'band' of friends who do so much to make these songs come alive.

John Clachan & Friends are:-

John Clachan - Vocals, Bouzouki, Keyboard & Recorder

Mark Campbell - Bass & Electric Guitar

Ben Hickman - Violin

Dave Shires - Accordion, Acoustic Guitar & Spoons

Martin Wayne - Percussion

Thank you for buying the CD - we hope you enjoy it.

Best wishes to you all - John Clachan August 2026

1 - The Poacher

This is the second time I've written a song about poaching; please don't think it's something I secretly aspire to! I simply sat down and wrote the first line that came into my head, which was - 'When there is no food at home...' and the song unfolded before my eyes - it's not always quite that easy!

G Am

When there is no food at home, to place upon the table,

D G D

And when there is no money left to buy the things we need,

In the black of night I leave my bed, I'm off to do some poaching -

Rabbits for the cooking pot, the family to feed.

I set my snares upon the Squire's land, down at Potter's Warren;
They're camouflaged and hidden well and, when they're all in place,
I lie in wait in silence and there soon comes a commotion;
To my delight, I check the traps and find I've caught a brace.

F C G
 Now some they call it stealing and threaten deportation,
F C D
 And some would like to see me strung up high.
G D F C
 But when you want for nothing and you see my desperation,
F C D
 You might find some understanding if you try -
D7 G/D/C/D x2
 Find some understanding if you try.

 While moving through the undergrowth, there's a flurry of confusion,
 A pheasant sounds a loud alarm and woodland life awakes.
 I grab my bags, my traps and snares and set off in a hurry
 And pray that God will see me home before the daylight breaks.

 Now just because the rabbits built their warren in your woodland
 And pheasants stay upon your land because they're being fed
 And the law it says you own them but where they're free to roam,
 Then a common man should have the right to keep one step ahead.

2 - Hunting for Glory

I read an emotive article about a small 'base camp hut' set up by Scott's
 Antarctic expedition in the early years of the last century. The hut still
 stands and is kept as a museum, just as it was left when Scott set off on
 his ill-fated attempt to reach the south pole.

Although it was the imagery inside the museum that triggered the song,
 I was soon drawn into writing about the tragedy that unfolded beyond
 the hut as Scott's disastrous expedition reached its sad conclusion.

A D A A D A
 On a cold Antarctic ice shelf there stands a wooden hut,
D E
 Abandoned in 1917.
D A D
 Many years have come and gone since Captain Scott's explorers
A E
 Used it for their sad, ill-fated dream.

 Tins and boxes of provisions, from the late Edwardian times,
 Line the shelves, their colours slowly fading.
 Books and maps can still be found, spare clothing lies around,
 Low temperatures have kept them from decaying.

F#m A
 This vision haunts me, I see them leaving now.
F#m E
 This vision haunts me, I will forever wonder how
D A /D
 They thought they'd ever see the hut again.
E A /D/E /A/D/A
 Hunting for glory steals the minds of men.

A departing line of footprints, soon covered up with snow,
 Followed the compass set for the southern pole.
 Inclement weather threatened, minus thirty and below,
 Still many hundred miles to reach their goal.

Then a series of misfortunes, not easily foreseen,
 Meant none of those brave men would be returning.
 One by one their bodies weakened and the frozen waste took hold,
 The fire within their souls no longer burning.

Now the hut, it tells a story, a museum lost in time,
 Preserved forever in its frozen state
 Like a snapshot from a camera at the closing of the door
 When Scott fulfilled his destiny with fate.

3 - Gourmet Food for Us

Although money was usually fairly tight, my mum kept our family well fed
 throughout our childhood. The food was quite plain, as I suspect it was in
 many households in England throughout the fifties and early sixties, but
 we knew no different and sugar sandwiches would have been looked on as
 gourmet food for us!

We always ate kippers with our fingers, wiping the fat from our hands with
 screwed up newspapers as we ate; which was a strange custom as, by the
 time we'd finished our tea, our hands were black with newsprint - very
 healthy I'm sure... (no kitchen towels in those days!).

G D G
 Smoky kippers, more bones than meat, cooked in a pan of lard.
C G D
 Hands 'rough wiped' on newspapers – 'now scrub your fingers hard'.
G D G
 Cooking in front of Nan's coal fire, with the smell of burning toast,
C G D G
 Singeing hair on backs of hands as fingers start to roast.

D G C
 It was all we could afford and we dined without much fuss.
C G D G C/G/D/G
 But we ate what we were given then, gourmet food for us.

Fat from the daily cooking pan was collected in a pot.
This dripping smeared on crusts of bread was eaten cold, not hot.
Crunchy, sugar sandwiches, or sometimes strawberry jam,
Might follow our tea-time favourite meat - the local butcher's spam.

When the winkle man came round, we'd sit with a plate of pins
And a great big, dark brown paper bag our hands would all 'dip in'.
Washed down with 'non-brewed' condiment and followed by chunks
of bread;
I once had 'sea food' poisoning and I wished that I was dead!

A joint of meat for Sunday lunch, served cold on Monday night.
On Tuesday, all left-overs minced when money it was tight.
The Wednesday evening 'fry up', dad's favourite, 'bubble and squeak'.
On Thursday stew - then 'fish fingers' on Friday every week!

Many passing years have seen our eating habits change.
The cuisine's much more varied and the old meals seem so strange.
Now, Indian curries and Chinese food are the things we like to eat;
To think corned beef with spuds and peas were once a special treat!

4 - The Red Flag

I wrote this song for a Dorking Folk Club singers' night which had a theme of 'happy endings'. Unfortunately, I couldn't get along on the evening to perform it so it now sees the light of day on this CD.

It originally had the title 'The Black Flag' until Chris (my wife) did some research and discovered that, although the Black Flag meant piracy, the Red Flag was flown to let victims know that no mercy would be shown, so was feared even more than the Black Flag!

Dm C Dm
Down from the crow's nest comes a loud warning shout,

F G Dm
For on the distant horizon a boat turns about.

Dm C Dm
It bears a red flag, it's the worst of our fears,

F G Dm
And it's in our direction she steers.

F C
They sail with the wind and pull alongside,

Dm C Dm
Three 'twenty-four pounders' they fairly let fly.

F G
Our men wring their hands and for mercy they call,

F G Dm
Though they know they'll receive none at all.

F C
 A curse on all pirates who cost us our lives,
Dm C Dm
 They steal and they plunder, they widow our wives
F C
 And, after they take what they say is their due,
Dm Am Dm
 Will they scupper our ship and its crew?
 Our captain and mate take up cudgel and sword,
 To greet any pirate that may try to board,
 But over the railings climb thirty corsairs
 And to face them all, no one else dares.
 So the captain and mate are both quickly disarmed
 And a speedy surrender means no one's yet harmed.
 The pirates unload our small cargo of gold
 And quickly they empty the hold.
 But as we prepare for our watery doom,
 From far in the distance we hear a loud boom.
 A cannonball flies, and then many more,
 From a fine fully-rigged 'Man-of-War'.
 The pirates in panic depart in great haste
 But there's never a chance they will win in a race.
 We cheer from the deck, as the warship sails by;
 'Bring down the red flag' we all cry.

5 - Mad King George

By far the best-natured and likeable of the Georgian Kings, and the only one devoted to his wife (Princess Charlotte), George III spent the last years of his life in virtual seclusion with a mental illness; he also became deaf and blind towards the end.

Attempts to treat his illness would be considered quite barbaric these days and it's difficult to believe that a king of England, just over 200 years ago, could end up in such a desperate plight before he died.

F C F F Bb F
 The clouds drift over, the moon runs for cover,
F C
 The man at the window rants to the midnight air.
F C F F Bb F
 He's waving both his arms and speaking with a fervour,
F C
 Words tumble out as servants stand and stare.

Bb C F F C Dm

Who is this man full of animation?

Bb C F F C

Who is this man leader of a nation?

Bb C F F C

Who is this man hidden away, far from public view?

Bb C F F C Dm

It's mad King George, only mad King George,

Bb C F

It's mad George talking to the moon.

One day he talks in riddles, another he acts normal,

Then something snaps and triggers the madness deep within.

And no one understands him as he shouts up to the heavens,

The silver moon would seem to be his only friend.

He wears no wig or waistcoat, his beard is long and flowing,

He takes his food, lifts his bowl and throws it at the wall.

To drive the devil from him, they beat him and secure him,

They leave him with no dignity at all.

His son becomes Prince Regent and speaks on his behalf

And little cares what happens to the frail and aging king.

Doctors cover him with leeches, to draw the poison from him,

But this will never forge a peace that only sleep can bring.

6 -The Alchemist and the Devil

Long before it was shown that elements could be altered at the molecular level, some held a belief that base metals could be turned into noble metals by heating or combining different elements, a process called alchemy.

In this tale, the alchemist calls on the Devil to help him out but is tricked by the Devil into losing his soul.

G

He lived in a cottage hidden deep in the woods,

F C G

Far from travellers' haunts.

G

Each night he'd be found in a cellar underground,

F C G

Away from the world and the villagers' taunts,

F C G

Where jars of chemicals lined the walls

F C D

And there were minerals powdered fine.

G

His vision to see, by alchemy,

F C G

Base metal transformed to a lustrous shine,

F C D

Transformed to a lustrous shine.

He blew with his bellows and he stoked his fire,
A crucible hung by a chain.
There were flashes of red, blue, yellow and green
When the powders spilt and touched the flame.
There were clouds of smoke and a sulphur smell
And sparks up the chimney flew.
But he'd see no gold when the lead turned cold
And a deep frustration slowly grew, a deep frustration grew.

Am F
'They can mock all they want but I'll see them laugh
G D
On the other side of their face.
G
When I turn base lead into solid gold,
F C G F C D
Then the ways of alchemy they'll embrace, alchemy they'll embrace.'

He followed his formulas time and again
But something wasn't right.
When he called on the Devil for a helping hand,
Old Nick came by that fateful night.
'You've one ingredient missing, I fear,
And you'll never, ever reach your goal
'Til you, by grace, with your powders place
A small piece of your mortal soul, a small piece of your soul.'

This seemed a very small price to pay
And with the Devil he sealed the deal.
With a spark and a flash, the fire did blaze
And the alchemist's soul was then revealed.
A piece was placed into the bowl,
True gold began to shine,
But the soul that was left, Nick stole by theft
'Fine payment friend, this now is mine, my friend this now is mine!'

'They can mock all they want but I'll see you laugh
On the other side of your face,
For I stole your soul in the place of gold
When the Devil and his ways you did embrace, the Devil you did embrace.'

So the Alchemist sat and he grasped his gold
But Old Nick had tricked him well.
What use that transmutation
Now his soul was with Old Nick in hell.
And then before his staring eyes
The golden colour bled
And, in his hands, the precious gold
Transformed and reverted back to lead, reverted back to lead!

'They'll mock all they want and they'll see me laugh
On the other side of my face,
When to turn my lead into solid gold
The Devil and his ways I did embrace, the Devil I did embrace.'

7 - The Decision

A visit to Hever castle triggered the writing of this song. Hever was the family home of Anne Boleyn and was the background to her courtship with King Henry VIII. It was easy to imagine Anne mulling over whether to accept Henry's marriage proposals from the tranquillity of that beautiful estate.

While walking round the lake, we were fortunate to see a kingfisher in flight, which inspired me to include the bird in the song.

C F C Am
Over the lake flies a shimmering bird,
Dm G C G
Turquoise and rust catch the eye of a girl.
C F C Am
It goes where it pleases, unfettered and free;
Dm G C
That's all that she wanted to be.

Freedom to make her own way in this life
Would end if she took on the role of a wife,
For the court of King Henry, from Hever in Kent,
Awaits should she give her consent.

F C
All of the finest that life could desire
G C G
Would come with a marriage of brimstone and fire
C F C Am
But if a colourful bird were confined to a cage,
Dm G C Dm / G / C
Would its lustre and beauty soon fade?

Important decisions and choices to make,
The kingfisher dives deep down into the lake.
The game Anne's been playing must come to an end -
She writes out a letter to send.

To seek the affections of a powerful man
While withholding consent was a dangerous plan.
As the ripples spread far from the kingfisher's dive,
She resolves to become Henry's bride.

She signs off her letter and settles her fate,
Foregoing the peace of her family estate.
The kingfisher sits and he swallows his prize;
She seals down her letter likewise.

8 - Timour the Tartar - Revisited

Inspired by the track 'Timour the Tartar' from one of my favourite CDs, 'JigWeed' by a band called the 'Huckleberries', I recorded myself playing the chords of the original tune on bouzouki (slowly) so that I could play the melody on recorder alongside for fun. Unfortunately, it was still too fast for me to play well and I abandoned the experiment.

The rhythm track lay untouched for years until I stumbled across it recently and couldn't remember where the chords had come from.....so, rather than waste a good rhythm, I came up with my own tune and decided to record it with the band. I've since remembered the original source and am relieved to say that the new tune bears little resemblance to the original, other than the chord sequence - but I've kept a similar title in recognition of the original source.

A music x2 -> B music x2

A music x2 -> B music x2

C music x2

A music x2 -> B music x2

A music

D/D/D/G

D/D/D/A

D/D/D/G

D/G/A/D

B music

A/A/A7/A7

D/D/D/G

D/G/D/G

D/D/A/A (D 2nd time)

C music

Bm/Bm/Bm/Bm

G/G/G/G

Bm/Bm/Bm/Bm

G/G/A/D

9 - The Signal Box

When visiting a friend in the north of England, he pointed out an old signal box that was about to be pulled down. I thought this a shame and that keeping it as a museum might have been an alternative option.

Being aware that 'AI' is about to take over millions of jobs in the coming years, this made me think of how often new technology takes away employment, leaving people on the 'scrap heap of life', under the banner of 'progress', which I find very sad.

C F

The rails have all been taken, the sleepers long forsaken,

G F C

The trackway opened up for recreation.

C F

A signal box, decayed, that people pass along the way,

G F C

Is ignored in its crumbling degradation.

Em Am F G

The window panes are broken, the door is hanging open,

Em Am F /G

The levers in the box have turned to rust.

C F

An old man climbs the broken stairs to a view beyond repair

G F C

But he sees beyond the debris and the dust.

G C
 The mail train on the main line is released with lever one;
G C
 Thirty years have flown away before his eyes.
F C
 Lever two connects the junction and lets the milk train through;
G C
 It's five a.m. and the sun begins to rise.

Lever three diverts to sidings where the coal trucks lie at rest,
 Underused as all the pits close down.
 Lever four lets in the branch line and an overcrowded train;
 It's the one that brings commuters into town.

It's a scene he still remembers but it's all just burning embers
 And the brief illusion dissipates too fast.
 He feels anger deep inside, he used to work the box with pride,
 Now here it stands - a mockery to the past.

He knows its poor condition means it's time for demolition
 And there's not another soul who gives a damn.
 But when the old machinery gave way to new technology,
 It broke the heart of one more signalman.

An old signalman, dismayed, an old signal box, decayed,
 Fill my mind with thoughts of yesterday.

10 - One Copper Brown

This is the song that inspired the title of the CD. It's my visualisation
 of a travelling bard passing on news of national importance to the people
 of the towns and villages in old England, before the days of mass media.

News, in the form of a 'broadside', was often delivered by song as literacy
 levels were low. A few coppers thrown in a hat would help keep the bard
 fed and watered on his travels, which is where the song title comes from.

E D A /E
 I'll tell you what I heard today,
D A E /D/A/E
 Sung from the latest broadside.
E D A /E
 Before the bard went on his way
D A
 He told about Lord Nelson's fray
D A E /D/A/E
 And the enemy he defied.

I paid the bard one copper brown
 To hear the news of England's fleet.
 He'd carried word from town to town
 Of how Lord Nelson brought the French down
 Leading Boney to defeat.

But though we cheered and roared 'Hooray'
And backs were slapped in wild acclaim,
The bard had further news that day,
His words then carried on to say
Bold Nelson he was slain.

11 - The Old and Venerable Bede

I am the old and venerable Bede,
They call me a man of great learning indeed.
I read and I write, I've compiled a great history too -
Of the people of England and how Christianity grew.

Outside the monastery, life carries on -
Though minds are now closed, forward thinking long gone.
The common perception is nothing will alter or change -
'Til the 'ending of days' that we're waiting for God to arrange.

I am the old and venerable Bede,
I liken my toils to planting a seed.
I hope, in my heart, that when my time is long over and done -
The fruits of my labour will enlighten the Ages to come.

12 - When Mr Slater Sadly Moved Away

A little homage to the 'Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band'. Bonzo aficionados will no doubt remember the song 'Mr Slater's Parrot' which was about a parrot owned by one of the band members, Rodney Slater. My own song has me imagining the bird's sad demise when its owner moved properties and deliberately (?) left it behind! All totally fictitious, of course.

D
When Mr Slater sadly moved away,
E
He left behind his parrot in a cage.
A A7 D
This gold and blue macaw, with razor beak and claw,
E A
Would turn an evil, bloodshot eye on everyone he saw.
And when he wanted food he'd call out 'Nuts!'
He'd want it 'now' and take no 'ifs' and 'buts'.
He'd screech and shout and rage 'I will not wait an age!'
'I'll nip your ears and fingers if you let me out this cage.'
If you said 'Pretty Polly', and tried to pacify,
This parrot he would cock his head and scathingly reply
G D
'Oh can't you try and think of something new?
A A7 D
You sound just like a blooming cockatoo!'

Friends of Mr Slater had taught the bird to talk
But the language you would hear just made one's eyes come out on stalks!
The vicar blocked his ears, his wife burst into tears;
They'd not heard such profanity in over sixty years!

When to the 'old folks' home' he took his feathered friend,
The screeching, from that bird, nearly drove them round the bend
And his language, oh so bold, is better left untold,
A litany of curses that would make the blood run cold.

Mr Slater grew bewildered and never understood
Why his parrot was so nasty and wouldn't act the way it should.
He'd say 'You'll never reach a ripe old age.
There never was a worse bird in a cage!'

Now Mr Slater also had a cat
And two feet from the cage was where it sat.
That parrot, he did feel, would make a perfect meal.
If once the door was left ajar, then in the cage he'd steal.

The parrot, on his perch, would laugh and sneer
And a 'V' sign with his wings he'd make appear,
'Your whiskers I would pull, you oversize fur ball.
Two seconds in this cage, then for my mercy you would call!'

Such arrogance was shown, you should have heard him verbalise,
But anyone could see the cat was plotting his demise.
If protection was to cease to be dispensed,
That bird would have to take the consequence.

Now Mr Slater knew the feline way
And kept a watch to keep the cat at bay.
But when the deeds were signed, he left his pets behind.
Next time the cage was cleaned, the cat had one thing on its mind!

For, when everything was spick and span inside,
The cage door was left sitting open wide.
Oh yes, they were to blame. When they rushed back, 'twas in vain,
A pile of 'V' shaped feathers was all that did remain.

So, Mr Slater's parrot came to a sticky end.
If you like happy endings, then you'll just have to pretend
And when ghostly squawks and screeches come and go,
You might hear Mr Slater's parrot say 'Ello!'
'Hello' – 'Ello!'
'Hello' – 'Ello!'
'Goodbye'

13 - Father's Footsteps

The owner of our local Bangladeshi restaurant was bemoaning the fact that his children weren't interested in carrying on his family run business when he retires. This made me think of the many trades where fathers passed down their knowledge and experience to their children, hoping that they, in turn, would pass the traditions on to future generations. Times have changed though and, sadly, this 'handing down' is becoming less and less common as time goes by.

C F G C
The smith beats out the horse shoes, he keeps a steady time.
C Dm G
His young son watching the hammer fall learns the rhythms and the rhyme.
C Dm G
The joiner glues the wood joints, and his son sits closely by.
C F G C
He's learning through experience and this knowledge he'll apply.

C F G C
They'll be following fathers' footsteps, learning their fathers' trades,
C Dm G
Age old custom 'hand-me-downs', planned from birth, prove their worth.
C Dm G
They'll be following fathers' footsteps but traditions fade away
C F G Am
And these fathers' sons might be the ones who let the past decay,
F G C
Who let the past decay.

Toolmakers and carpenters and tradesmen in the past,
Kept tradition in the family and followed their fathers' paths.
Stonemasons and bookkeepers have all been protégés,
Many young musicians learnt their skills watching their fathers play.

Now the world outside the window beckons one and all.
So many opportunities, so many Sirens call
And the wealth of life's experience, that might have seen them through,
Is cast aside impatiently in search of something new.

No more following fathers' footsteps, learning their fathers' trades,
Though age old custom 'hand-me-downs', planned from birth, proved
their worth.

No more following fathers' footsteps, as traditions fade away,
Many fathers' sons become the ones who let the past decay,
Who let the past decay.

14 - What if....?

This song was triggered when I began thinking about those 'sliding door' moments in life that you look back on and wonder how things would have been different had you chosen another path.

Robert, from Dorking Folk Club, pointed me in the direction of a magazine that looked at historical 'what ifs', surmising alternative histories, which was all the spur I needed to write this song. If you need a clue for the 'Martians' and the 'common cold' reference, look no further than 'The War of the Worlds' by H.G. Wells.

C F C
What if Adam said to Eve 'I don't eat apples'?

C F G
What if Pilate gave to Jesus one more chance?

Am Em
What if Ali hadn't beaten Henry Cooper?

F G
What if Nuryev said 'Sorry, I can't dance'?

What if Slade had never written 'Merry Christmas'?

What if litmus turned red by alkali?

What if Holmes had been undone by Moriarty?

F G C
What if humankind had never tried to fly?

F C
Would the difference be profound? Would the echoes still resound?

C G
I guess it's true, things wouldn't be the same

F C F
And, if fate turned the other way, what would history have to say?

G G7 C
'What if' can make an interesting game.

What if Hitler hadn't seen his eighteenth birthday?

What if Martians hadn't caught the common cold?

What if Shakespeare had become a mathematician?

What if the Spanish hadn't searched the world for gold?

What if Lennon hadn't met a young McCartney?

What if Sinatra couldn't sing a note in tune?

What if JFK had bent to tie his shoelace?

What if Earth had lost its grip upon the moon?

What if nobody had ever split an atom?

What if one plus one had never equalled two?

What if politicians gave an honest answer?

What if Hercule Poirot always missed a clue?

What if Darwin hadn't sailed upon the 'Beagle'?

What if the tortoise always beat the hare?

What if everything I'm told I could believe in?

What if gods were moved to answer every prayer?