



North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (NAFCo) 2026

The North Atlantic Fiddle Convention (NAFCo) is delighted to announce that celebrations for its 25th anniversary year are officially underway!

The milestone year began in style with NAFCo 25th, a standout anniversary launch concert presented as part of Celtic Connections on Friday, 16 January at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

The evening featured an outstanding line-up of artists, including rising Canadian star Mary Frances Leahy, the bold and dynamic Astro Bloc, and the fresh Scottish-Galician duo Darach. Audiences were also treated to a special set from the NAFCo House Band – a collective of exceptional musicians from Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, whose trademark energy and local

spirit brought the stage to life. The evening was expertly hosted by North-East musician, Cameron Nixon.

The concert captivated audiences with its rich blend of transatlantic fiddle traditions, contemporary flair, and collaborative spirit, creating an atmosphere of celebration and connection throughout the hall.

With performances spanning Shetland to Scandinavia, Glasgow to Galicia, and Ontario to Aberdeen, the programme showcased a truly international lineup of artists whose music bridges generations and geographies.

Post Celtic Connections, local North-East audiences were then treated to some further NAFCo Teasers with Mary

Frances Leahy, Michael Leahy, and Tim Edey at two sold out Glassel gigs, a day of outreach in schools across Aberdeen and the Shire, along with outreach at NESCol and Big Noise Torry.

We are looking forward to the 5-day festival of music, dance and traditions from across the North Atlantic in Aberdeen at NAFCo 2026, 24–28 June. See you there!

Full details of the anniversary programme of events to be held throughout 2026 can be found at www.northatlanticfiddle.com/ or sign up to the NAFCo mailing list to keep up-to date with any news.

**Kirsty Clements and
Laura Harrington**

[Photo credits: ABCassidy Photography]



Mary Frances Leahy, Michael Leahy, Tim Edey



Darach – Roo Geddes and Hugo Franco



Astro Bloc – Eryn Rae, Éadaoin Ní Mhaicín, Paul Jennings, and Gillie O'Flaherty



NAFCo House Band – Laura Harrington, Sharon Hassan, Sarah Beattie Cook, Louie Watson, Kirsty Clements



The Folklore Society Comes to Aberdeen

We are honoured to be hosting the annual conference of The Folklore Society here at the University of Aberdeen, 5–7 June 2026, followed by an online-only day on 10 June 2026. This year's theme is 'Folklore on the Move', and delegates will be considering how movement is vital to folklore, both in terms of physical movement (e.g. dance and performance), but also the movement of things like stories, songs, or even graffiti. Folklore is inevitably shared through interpersonal interactions, and the result is that it migrates across national boundaries and generations, changing all the while. We like to say that tradition equals continuity plus change, and delegates from around the world will be discussing this inherent tension and how traditions and movement interrelate. More information is available on the website of The Folklore Society: www.folklore-society.com.



www.folklore-society.com

Nicolas Le Bigre



From the Director

This autumn we welcomed five new Master's students, Barbara Briggs, Apollo Elliott, Myah Garrison, Julia Grant, and Sarah Kremen-Hicks. It is always fun getting to know our students and introduce them to new aspects of culture that they may not have

encountered before. Our Field School saw a busy four days in Aberdeen, followed by three in the central Highlands. We try to give students a glimpse into the pervasive nature of folklore, as manifested in such diverse areas as the fish trade and granite industries, music and song, agriculture, religious practices, and cultural tourism. Throughout runs a thread of human creativity brought to bear on the challenges and celebrations of life.

Charley Buchan, a Broch loon, joined us in September as our Doric/North-East Scots Development Officer, thanks to a generous legacy from the late Forbes Hurry. He'll be working with partners across the region to increase the use of Doric in educational and work settings, updating the Elphinstone Kist, and working to develop cross-generational language learning opportunities.

October saw me at the American Folklore Society Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, where I took part in a couple of sessions on Folklore and Education. This accords well with how we work at the Institute, demonstrating the relevance of folklore today, whether an old story from hundreds of years ago or contemporary practices in our everyday lives. Like great literature or art, folklore has much to teach us. After all, the vast majority of human creativity has emerged from ordinary people in the everyday. Helping people engage with their creative side can be a great boon to self-expression and social connection.

Button Boxes and Moothies, organised by Frances Wilkins in November, was a huge success, with diverse artists, old and young, presenting workshops, concerts, and off-the-cuff arrangements by musicians who had never played together before. Held on the Old Aberdeen campus, the

event generated a lovely sense of togetherness across the weekend, with a closing meal and ceilidh at the Dunbar Hall. Well done to Frances and the whole team, from committee members to participants.

Throughout the year, we've hosted an incredible range of storytelling events in cooperation with the Grampian Association of Storytellers, along with partners at the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. Brought together by Nicolas Le Bigre, we saw storytellers from Scotland and far beyond as well as special workshops on topics such as Refugee and Migrant Storytelling, harnessing the power of narrative for processing significant life changes.

January found me in Burghead, as ever, for the Burning of the Clavie. Once again, it was wonderful to see the community's commitment, enthusiasm, and expertise on display, with everyone playing their part — an ancient practice with contemporary relevance through its deep roots, enacted anew each year in a ritual of renewal and transformation.

Watch out for the Buchan Lecture on 27 May at the Sir Duncan Rice Library, followed by the Folklore Society Conference 5–7 June, and the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention, 24–28 June, returning to Aberdeen for the first time since 2018 and on track to draw more than 15,000 visitors and participants. This remarkable international gathering features dozens of incredible concerts, a busy youth fiddle camp, and a full menu of workshops, both music and dance, where you can learn tunes, styles, and techniques, to improve your playing. The Convention is unique in creating a dynamic dialogue between practising musicians and academics allowing us to explore diverse traditions through very different lenses.

Finally, I want to appeal to you to support our work in any way you can, from volunteering with archive materials to funding studentships, projects, or the daily resources needed to keep the Institute open. Your help can make the difference.

Thomas A. McKean

Supporting the Elphinstone Institute

In the current financial climate, the Institute relies ever more on donations and legacy funding. It is important to note that our amazing range of programmes, partnerships, and projects, are funded by these wonderful gifts. We encourage anyone with a belief in the North-East's internationally renowned and domestically treasured culture and traditions to get in touch with any ideas about broadening our funding base, helping to secure our future for the next thirty years. As a unique bridge between institution and region, the Institute's valuable work needs your support.

Help us to continue and expand our mission to research, celebrate, and promote the culture of the North-East and North of Scotland.

Email: elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk

Tel: 01224 272996

Language Survey

Aberlangs — Aberdeen City of Languages, is a partnership initiative supporting multilingualism and the presence of home, heritage and community languages in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. They are investigating the experiences of families in the North-East of Scotland who use more than one language at home, and to explore how schools and communities support children growing up with multiple languages.

If you are a parent or carer of a school-age child in Aberdeen or Aberdeenshire and would like to take part, use the QR code or visit the link tinyurl.com/abdnlangsurvey to access the survey.

Do you have children who can speak more than one language?

Please complete our survey to help us support multilingualism in North-East schools.



tinyurl.com/abdnlangsurvey

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Button Boxes & Moothies

It was a long wait but an absolute delight to direct the Button Boxes & Moothies 2025 festival after a ten-year absence. Festival stalwarts and one or two newcomers stepped forward to the steering group to help with the planning and stewarding over the weekend, and as was said at the end of the weekend, they were the 'dream team' that made it such a huge success in 2025. My special thanks go to Kenny Hadden, Malcolm Reavell, Lynn Gowans, Barbara-Ann Burnett, Allan Taylor, Tom Roche, Tom McKean, Ian Russell, Norma Russell, Jenny Shirrefs, Kaitlyn Woodruff, Alex West, Marion West, Kevin Yule, Seumas, Ronan, Ada, and Magnus Martin, Andy and Andrea Clark, and our two MLitt students who volunteered over the weekend, Barb Briggs and Apollo Elliott.

The festival was launched with a Civic Reception hosted by Aberdeen City Council at the Town House, and the weekend events were held at the James MacKay Hall at the university's Old Aberdeen campus which was an exceptional venue (despite a rather chilly start!). There were workshops and demonstrations galore – a total of 36 over the weekend – in harmonica, Jews Harp, anglo, English, and duet concertinas,

melodeons and button boxes, plus a number of mixed instruments for players of any instrument. The local care home concerts, plus the come-and-try sessions, were new features for the festival. The come-and-try sessions were particularly popular and it was wonderful to see so many people of all ages attending to try out the instruments for the first time. A highlight for me was the Rambling House concert at the Dunbar Street Hall on the Saturday night – starting with a delicious meal of stovies and sticky toffee pudding, it was a chance to hear many of our guests and stewards. This culminated in the 'battle of the bands', a brilliant idea from our director Tom McKean to get all guests and many of our stewards up on stage and performing together in small groups.

Many thanks to our sponsors for the festival – in particular Aberdeen City Council, the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, Culture Ireland, SC&T, and the TMSA. We are now taking a well-earned break, but are already looking forward to the next festival which we hope will take place in 2029.

Frances Wilkins



Frances Wilkins, Aaron Clark, Lord Provost David Cameron, Michael Wright, and Méabh Mulligan
[Photo credit: Norman Adams]



Will Pound, Alex Wade, and Eva Caroll at Grandholm Care Home, Bridge of Don
[Photo credit: Barb Briggs]



Come-and-Try English Concertina session
[Photo credit: Barb Briggs]



Michael Wright, Ian Russell, and Ron Clark at the Rambling House concert, Dunbar Street Hall
[Photo credit: Barb Briggs]

Polish-Scottish Sea Songs at the Tall Ships

The Polish-Scottish Song Group braved stormy weather to give two rousing performances at Aberdeen's brilliant Tall Ships festival. On 20 July our international singers took to the festival's main stage to give a half-hour set of lively sea-related songs (not strictly shanties!), singing Scots and Polish versions of songs like 'Bonnie Ship the Diamond', or 'Maui', a famous Polish version of 'Rolling Down to Old Mohee'. The very next morning at 8am we performed on the Dutch tall ship the 'Morgenster' for a charity breakfast sponsored by Scottish Action for Mental Health. With brollies and hoods up, and rocking with the waves, we gamely sang a long set of sea-related songs, happy to support a charity doing important work in Aberdeen and beyond. The Polish-Scottish Song Group is open to all no matter your linguistic background or singing skill, so do get in touch to join.

Nicolas Le Bigre



Polish-Scottish Song Group on board 'Morgenster' at the Tall Ships in Aberdeen [Photo credits: Jodi Le Bigre]

North-East Scots Development Worker



Charley Buchan with Echt Women's Institute Junior Dippers Club
[Photo Credit: Elizabeth Watt]

I have been appointed to enhance Doric/North-East Scots in the region. I joined the Elphinstone Institute in September and have been busy getting out and about.

I wrote a piece for the Press & Journal 'Doric Column' on 29 November 2025, and will feature again twice later in 2026.

This was followed up with a Doric reading at the University of Aberdeen Christmas Carol Service at St Machar's Cathedral on 10 December, with the passage based on a translation written by former Rector Steve Robertson, and the service was broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland.

I also attended the MG ALBA Scots Trad Music Awards on 6 December at Aberdeen Music Hall, where MLitt graduate and Chair of The Friends of The Elphinstone Institute, David Francis, was awarded The Hamish Henderson Services to Traditional Music Award.

A visit to the Women's Institute, Echt on 17 January 2026 saw me contribute to their Junior Dippers programme where I carried out some Doric work with the children in attendance, supported by members of the Women's Institute. Development has also begun on what will be the first Doric Girlguiding challenge badge. The Kincorth unit in Aberdeen will have first opportunity to participate, with this hopefully being made available to all companies in the North-East region in the future.

Charley Buchan

Elphinstone News

Who's Who in the Institute

Patron

Very Rev. Prof. Sir Iain Torrance,
Pro-Chancellor

Staff

Dr Thomas A. McKean, Director, Ethnology and Folklore, ballads, custom and belief, Gaelic tradition, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Frances Wilkins, Senior Lecturer, Ethnomusicology, sacred singing in coastal communities, Scottish fiddle traditions in northern Canada

Nicolas Le Bigre, Lecturer, Ethnology and Folklore, archives

Professor Emeritus Ian Russell, Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology, oral traditions, including singing, music-making, drama, and speech

Alison Sharman, Administrator

Charley Buchan, North-East Scots Development Worker

Kirsty Clements, Festival Co-Lead, NAFCo 2026 (North Atlantic Fiddle Convention)

Laura Harrington, Festival Co-Lead, NAFCo 2026 (North Atlantic Fiddle Convention)

Honorary Research Fellows

Dr David Atkinson, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Pat Ballantyne, Scottish step-dance traditions

Dr Athanasios Barmplexis, contemporary shamanic healing in Scotland

Nataliya Bezborodova, custom and belief

Dr Julia Bishop, J. M. Carpenter Project

Sheena Blackhall, creative writing in Scots

Dr Elaine Brattke, J. M. Carpenter Project

Dr Katherine Campbell, ethnomusicology, music performance

Dr Robert Young Walser, J. M. Carpenter Project

Les Wheeler, Scots Language, education

Dr Sheila Young, marriage ritual during the pandemic

Research Students

Mary Cane, the grandmother experience in family life today

Morag Johnston, early fiddle music composed and collected by Scottish women

Tolheishel Khaling, Uipo (Khoibu) folk songs

Melissa La Rose, fairy belief in the twenty-first century

Robert Milne, composition and Doric language texts

Claire Needler, Elphinstone Scholarship, bilingualism in North-East schools

Máire Ní Bhaill, traditional singing among children in Ireland

Brenna Quinton, vernacular religion: blended Christian and spiritual well-being practices in modern-day Scotland

Edda Starck, landscapes of music: the more-than-human lives and politics of musical instruments

Duncan Strachan, string quartets in Scotland

Lorna Summers, community boatbuilding on the Moray coast

Carley Williams, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Scotland

Chris Wright, Elphinstone Scholarship, the role of traditional arts in place-based education

Toulmin Prize 2025

The winner of the Toulmin short story prize for 2025 is Marka Rifat who enthralled the audience at the prizegiving where she read her story to a captivated crowd. The prize of £500, generously sponsored by Martin and Steven Reid, grandsons of John Reid (aka Toulmin), was presented at the prizegiving event on Friday, 3 October at the Sir Duncan Rice Library. Keep checking our website for news of the Toulmin prize for 2026. www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/public-engagement/toulmin-prize/



Marka Rifat (second left) winner of Toulmin 2025 prize, with l to r: Sheila Reid, Richard Reid, Richard Bennett, Martin Reid and Steven Reid [Photo credit: Alison Sharman]

Neepie Lantern Competition 2025



The winner is Ali Gardiner (left image) from Aberdeen with their scary creation. The runner-up is Vibha Chauhan (right image) with their design.

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The Institute relies on outside financial support to make many of its activities possible. To help establish closer ties between the Elphinstone Institute and communities, please consider becoming a friend of the Institute (annual subscription is £20.00 per year). There are events organised by the Friends throughout the year, with the Ballad Bus outing coming up on Saturday, 23 May.

If you would like to join the Friends of the Elphinstone Institute, volunteer, or have suggestions, please contact elphinstone@abdn.ac.uk

What's On

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