

Maggie May : The Story of a Liverpool Classic

By Richard Edmunds



**Oh dirty Maggie Mae they have taken her away
And she'll never walk down Lime Street any more
Oh the judge he guilty found her
For robbing a homeward bounder
That dirty no good robbin' Maggie Mae
To the port of Liverpool
There she turned me tool,
Two pounds ten a week, that was my pay**

One of the more idiosyncratic entries in the Beatles oeuvre, appearing on their last album '*Let it Be*', '*Maggie May*' was recorded as a 38-second ad-lib between takes of '*Two of Us*'. It was in keeping with the theme of nostalgia and lasting friendship contained in the latter song, having been performed by John Lennon and his school Skiffle group the '*Quarrymen*' on 6th July 1957, at St Peter's Church Fete, in Walton, the fateful day he first met the fifteen year old Paul McCartney (*Pictured above*).

A traditional Liverpool folk song, sometimes referred to as a second anthem of the city, it relates the tale of a notorious '*street walker*', Maggie May, who supplemented her nefarious income by robbing her clients, resulting in her conviction and transportation to a British penal colony, (in some versions Van Diemen's Land, modern day Tasmania, in others the colony at Botany Bay, modern Sydney).

It has been claimed the song is based on a true story and that its original composition occurred during the era of Australian transportation (1788-1868). As evidence of this Stan Hugill (1906-1992) the most notable 20th century historian of sea shanties, referenced an early version, clearly a fore runner of the same song, entitled '*Nelly Ray*' which appeared in print in a 1930 London nautical publication "*Blue Peter*":

Nelly Ray. (Song.)

**I was paid off at the home,
From a voyage to Sierra Leone;
Three pounds monthly, was my pay.
When I drew the cash I grinned,
But I very soon got skinned
By a lass who lived in Peter Street, called Ray.**

**I shall ne'er forget the day
When I met Nellie Ray.
'Twas at the corner of the Canning Place;
With a mighty crin-o-line
Like a frigate of the line,
As if I were a slaver she gave chase.**

**Saying, '*What cheer ! homeward bounder,
Just you come along with me*';
So in Peter Street we had some gin and tea;
It was morn when I awoke
Then I found that I was broke
For sweet Nellie had skedaddled with my money.**

**To the magistrate I went,
Where I stated my lament :
They soon had poor Nelly in the Dock.
And the Judge he guilty found her,
For she'd robbed a homeward bounder,
And he sent her to Van Dieman's far away.**

**Oh! my charming Nellie Ray,
They have taken you away,
You have gone to Van Diemen's cruel shore;
For you've skinned so many tailors,
And you've robbed so many sailors,
That we'll look for you in Peter Street no more.**

It appears at the very end of an article which reproduced the journal of Charles Picknell (1810-1886) a mariner of Hastings, Sussex, who served in the Royal Navy from 1825-1851, and afterwards until his death, held the post of Pier Warden at Hastings. The journal recalled a voyage he made to Australia in summer 1830 as a junior crew member of the '*Kains*' convict ship.

The 'Kains' carried 120 convicted felons, all female, and two thirds aged between fourteen and thirty. The ships medic, Doctor Clarke, described the women of the 'Kains' in his journal -

"The general character and conduct of the prisoners were such as might be expected from the lowest class of society - from persons whom all the wise and salutary laws of England had failed to reclaim, most immoral and abandoned, if there ever was a Hell afloat it must have been in the shape of a female convict ship, quarrelling, fighting, thieving, destroying in private each others property for a mean spirit of devilishness - conversation with each other most abandoned without feeling or shame. As regarded the personal cleanliness of the prisoners that in some measure depended on their natural disposition, education and attitude, some of them by nature and habit were cleanly while others were filthy to the 90th degree."

Picknell's own journal concentrates on the twenty-six-man crew of which he was a member, most of whom spent a large part of the journey drunk and singing 'saucy songs' below decks. Though 'Nelly Ray' is presented as an example of one such song, it is unclear whether it was an example cited by Picknell himself in the original journal or added later due to its relevance to the subject matter, female transportation (*it appears at the very end of the journal after a few additional notes on the journal by Picknell and after a list of provisions held on the Kains*). The original journal itself apparently no longer survives to indicate one way or the other.

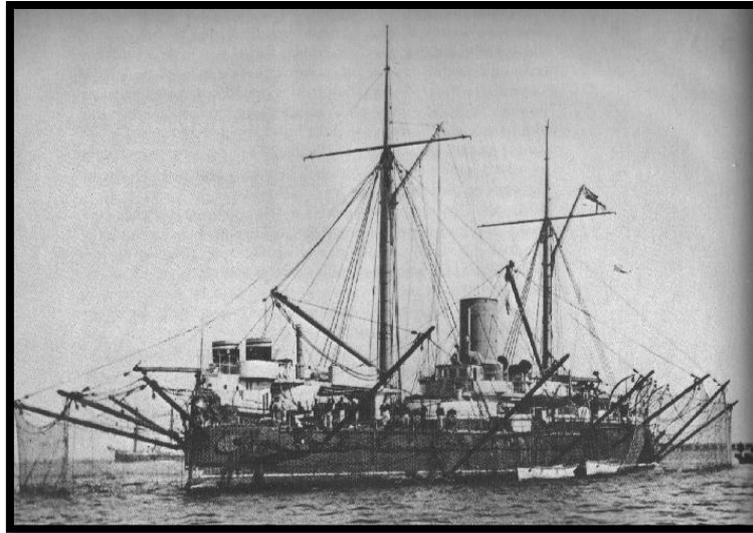
If the song was related by Picknell, it is extremely doubtful it was heard on the original 1830 voyage. Chief among the objections to this dating is the fact it makes reference to the unlucky sailor being 'paid off at the home'. This must surely refer to the Liverpool Sailors' Home, in Canning Place, (*also referenced in the song*), an institute which first opened its doors a full two decades later in 1850.

The language used in this version also raises several alarm bells. The word 'Skedaddled' did not enter the general lexicon until the early 1860's, when it was coined by the Union side in the American Civil War. A search into the 'British Newspaper Archive 1710-1953' confirms it was unknown in the British Isles before this date, first appearing in print an Irish Newspaper in May 1862, in the context of American civil war forces. A craze for its usage then occurred with it over a thousand appearances in various different British newspapers in the remaining months of that year alone, with it explicitly stated to be a new word of American origin.

The term 'Homeward bounder' (which appears in Picknell's version, and with such regularity in all known versions of the song that it was surely present from inception), similarly does not appear anywhere in print, newspaper or book, until 1835, a full five years after the 'Kains' voyage, and even then remained exceedingly rare until popularised in the 1850's (*as the instances of its usage in British Newspapers 1710-1900, below, show*). It then fell out of favour as an archaic term, until a brief resurgence of popularity in the 1890's.

1830's = 6	1870's = 40
1840's = 10	1880's = 19
1850's = 302	1890's = 52
1860's = 44	

The verses "*With a mighty crin-o-line,/ Like a frigate of the line*" similarly points to a later date as Crinoline petticoats did not become generally available or popular until the 1840's, and furthermore, frigate warships rigged with so-called "*crinoline frames*", nets to deter torpedo fire, were unknown until 1877.



H.M.S Hotspur rigged with a 'crinoline frame' torpedo net, circa 1879.

A search of Liverpool newspapers for the term '*frigate of the line*' or '*frigate on the line*' in the 19th century shows it is also entirely absent in the 1830's. It then gradually creeps into use, appearing twice in the 1840's, six times in the 1850's, eight times in the 1860's, once in the 1870's and then disappearing entirely for the remainder of the decade. Though hardly scientific, this nevertheless suggests it was terminology more common in the 1850's-60's, and rarely used before or after.

The metaphor of '*Nelly Ray*' as a British war frigate is extended further with the line '*As if I were a slaver she gave chase*'. This also seems an ill fit with the proposed 1830 dating, as the general blockade of the African slave trade commenced with the 1842 Webster–Ashburton Treaty, an agreement between the British and U.S. government to work together on the abolition of the slave trade. (*Britain was later granted full authority to intercept American slave ships in 1861, by the Lincoln administration, and the Royal Navy squadron remained busy in this endeavour until 1870.*)

Though these factors do not rule out Charles Picknell noting the song in his journal, it does indicate that if so, it was an addition made later in his life, after 1877 at the earliest. Further support for this theory is the rate of sailor's pay, cited in the song as '*three pounds monthly*'. This British Newspaper Archive indicates this was typical sailors pay in the decade 1880-1890. For example, an article in the March 1884 '*London Standard*' records that for '*three pounds a month sailors have the chance of procuring employment off any shore*'. A later article entitled '*Our Sailors*' printed in the '*Liverpool Mercury*' of 3rd February 1890 relates '*These sailors had shipped in the "Thorn" for a voyage to Australia and back, and they were to get three pounds a month, with, of course, their board and lodging.*'

So if '*Maggie May*' was not a genuine product of the transportation era, just what are the songs true origins?

That both the form and content of the song show obvious similarities to the American Minstrel standard '*Darling Nelly Gray*' has long been recognised and acknowledged, and the fact that the earliest known version reproduced in the '*Blue Peter*' is sung in honour of a '*Charming Nelly Ray*' would seem to indicate it has its origin as a bawdy comic parody of the former.

One of the earliest recorded discussions as to the origins of '*Maggie May*' appears in the 1955 edition of '*Sea Breezes: The Magazine of Ships and the Sea*' (published in Old Hall Street, Liverpool). There an ex sailor, who began his sea career in 1913 working as an engineer on the '*Ella Sayer*' of Newcastle, recalled hearing '*Maggie May*' sung by his stoke hold crew while perched on planks painting down the engine, describing them as '*good firemen, good beer drinkers, and good singers!*'. Another former seaman questioned the identity of the songs protagonist as he recalled a version of what was clearly in every other respect the same song, sung five years earlier, in the winter of 1908 by one of his shipmates on the barque '*Pharos*', bound for Australia, but in this version, as in Picknell's, the song instead referred to a '*Charming Nelly Ray*'.

"*Darling Nelly Gray*" certainly shows many similarities to '*Charming Nelly Ray/Maggie May*' not just in melody, form and content but also in its related themes of enforced bondage and geographic separation. Composed by Benjamin Russel Hanby (1833-1866), an American educationalist and pastor, in the year 1856, it is a moving and mournful lament of a Kentucky slave, parted from his beloved, when she is sold south to the harsh Georgian cotton fields. It recounts their pain at separation and their eventual post-death reunion in the afterlife:

Darling Nelly Gray (Benjamin Hanby)

**There's a low, green valley, on the old Kentucky shore.
Where I've whiled many happy hours away,
A-sitting and a-singing by the little cottage door,
Where lived my darling Nelly Gray.**

Chorus

**Oh! my poor Nelly Gray, they have taken you away,
And I'll never see my darling any more;
I'm sitting by the river and I'm weeping all the day.
For you've gone from the old Kentucky shore.**

**When the moon had climbed the mountain and the stars were shining too.
Then I'd take my darling Nelly Gray,
And we'd float down the river in my little red canoe,
While my banjo sweetly I would play.**

**One night I went to see her, but "She's gone!" the neighbors say.
The white man bound her with his chain;
They have taken her to Georgia for to wear her life away,
As she toils in the cotton and the cane.**

**My canoe is under water, and my banjo is unstrung;
I'm tired of living any more;
My eyes shall look downward, and my song shall be unsung
While I stay on the old Kentucky shore.**

My eyes are getting blinded, and I cannot see my way.
Hark! there's somebody knocking at the door.
Oh! I hear the angels calling, and I see my Nelly Gray.
Farewell to the old Kentucky shore.

Chorus

Oh, my darling Nelly Gray, up in heaven there they say,
That they'll never take you from me any more.
I'm a-coming-coming-coming, as the angels clear the way,
Farewell to the old Kentucky shore!

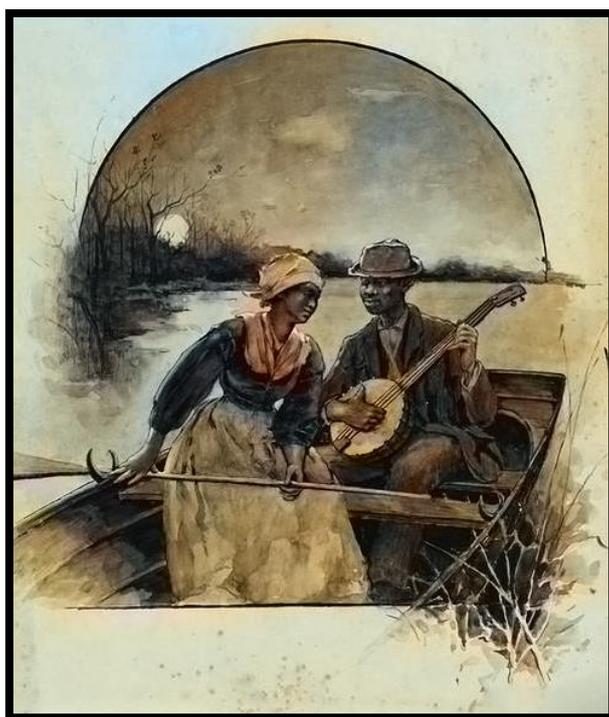


Illustration to My Darling Nelly Gray, 1892.

The song was universally popular from inception. It was bought to England by 'Christy's Minstrels' in 1859 where newspapers first note it as 'Nelly Gray' a 'beautiful little song' in December of that year. The 'Liverpool Daily Post' of 31st January 1860 makes note of its debut performance in their city by the same American Minstrel troupe, "We must specially notice the exquisitely charming song of "Nelly Gray," beautiful, from its very simplicity, given with remarkable expression of feeling". It remained popular for decades afterwards, and by 1884 there are reports it was on occasion being popularly sung alternatively both as 'My Charming Nellie Gray' and 'Charming Nelly Ray':

"Some capital times were rendered upon handbells. The brothers "Charming Nelly Gray' and 'The Chimes" receiving rounds of applause – South London Press 10th May 1884

"My Charming Nellie Gray, They have taken you away,- And I'll never see my darling any more" Was heard on every side. and voiced by all sorts -- Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, 29th March 1896

"Charming Nelly Ray" and various other charmers were duly the sound of the choruses reverberating the distant hills of Kent. ' – Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser, 11th August 1898

If Charles Picknell's journal is taken at face value as entirely his own work, (*it of course remains possible the song was added after his death by whoever inherited the diary*) then it at least proves that an alternate version of 'Darling Nelly Gray' sung as 'Charming Nelly Ray' did exist by the time of his death in 1886, and that by extension, both versions, the haunting original and the comic parody, co-existed at that time, perhaps accounting for this late confusion in newspapers.

The first specific reference to a song named 'Charming Nelly Ray' in performance can, however, be dated back to more than a quarter of a century before both these reports, to October 1870, when it formed part of the repertoire of Mr. Edgar Wilding, 'a brisk and agreeable comic vocalist'.

Wilding, a linen weaver's son, was baptised as Andrew Edgar Wilding in Ashford, Kent in August 1840. Married at nineteen, he lived with his wife and children in Marylebone, London, and was employed all his working life as a solicitor's clerk. He began his parallel career as a comic in 1864, styling himself as 'The Postman', appearing on stage in Theatres and Music Halls whilst dressed in a postman's uniform and singing of the people for whom he professed to have letters. This humorous skit remained popular throughout his stage life, (he was still performing it at the termination of his career eight years later in 1872), though he regularly added other popular comedy songs of the day to his repertoire, including 'The Mousetrap Man' (1866) 'The Irrepressible Donkey' (1868) 'Happy Costermonger Bill' (1872) 'The Sandstone Girl' (1872) and 'Carrotty Hair' (1872).

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Andrew Edgar Wilding (1840-1910) on the bill of the Whitechapel Pavilion, 21st March 1870.

Other contemporary newspaper reports describe him variously as 'A very original and smart comic singer' 'A funny little man, ludicrous and extremely eccentric', 'An eccentric comic singer of the old school' and 'A laughably grotesque comic vocalist'. Further insight into Wilding's career and personal circumstances appears in the following newspaper report in November 1876:

Wilding/Wilding/Hardy - "**Edgar Wilding**, a music-hall singer, petitioned for divorce by reason of his wife's adultery with the co-respondent. The marriage took place on November 14th 1859 at All Souls Church, both them that time being under age. She had a little money of her own, and they lived at different places in London, the petitioner being engaged as a clerk to a solicitor. About three years after the marriage he had reason to complain of his wife's mis-conduct, she having given way to intemperate habits in consequence of which he was compelled to separate from her, he undertaking to take care of the children of the marriage, and to allow the respondent keeping each week. At that time he was engaged as a comic vocalist at provincial music-halls. Subsequently he obtained engagements at some of the London music-halls, which he was compelled to relinquish in consequence of the disturbance which his wife caused at these places. Upon his discovering that she was living with the co-respondent in Crown Street, Soho, he instituted the present suit. Evidence having been given in support of the case Sir James granted a decree nisi, and allowed the petitioner to have the custody of the children."

The divorce papers show the couple had six children together 1860-66, but the marriage broke down 'some time before the year of 1870', Wilding accusing his wife of living as a 'common prostitute' and committing adultery with diverse persons unknown to him during this time, (and by doing so contracting Venereal Disease for which she was treated in the St Pancras Workhouse from September-November 1869.)

It was to this backdrop of marital turmoil, that 'Charming Nelly Ray' first appears as part of his stage act, as one of four 'brisk and agreeable new comic songs' debuted in front of a packed audience at The Eastern Music Hall, Limehouse in the week of 9-16th October 1870, (the others being "Selling Laces," "Dissolving Views," and "Wasn't it a funny thing,"). At least two of these last three do not appear elsewhere, so may have been his own original compositions, and they evidently proved popular as six weeks later 'The Era' newspaper of 27th November 1870 reports that 'Mr. Edgar Wilding, sings some of the best comic songs ever written, in a spirited style, and gratified the people with his songs of "Nellie Ray," "Wasn't that a funny thing for her to say to me," and "Dissolving Views'.

Whether 'Nelly Ray' was also of his original composition is open to question. It would seem most likely it was the following song, which later appears in at least two printed broadsheet versions, author unnamed, one that notes that it had been 'sung with success' by Tom Bournley, a rival comic and song writer who performed in London and various other cities from 1865-1880, and the other that it was sung with 'immense success' by another London comic, Gus Westbrook, whose stage career similarly overlapped with Wilding's, lasting from 1868-1881:

NELLY RAY.

**I love a little country queen, a village beauty rare,
With rosy cheeks, white pearly teeth and lovely nut-brown air
Her waist is so slender, and her feet they are so small,
Of all the girls I ever loved, my Nelly beats them all.**

(chorus) Nelly Ray, Nelly Ray, charming little Nell,
Nelly Ray like birds in May, singing all the day,
Nelly Ray, Nelly Ray, pretty little girl;
I never had a sweetheart like my little Nelly Ray.

Her father is a farmer in a village down in Kent,
And being on my holidays, to spend them there I went,
One day while strolling out, up to the farm house I did roam
And there I first saw Nelly, as she drove the cattle home.

I took my Nelly for a walk among the bright green grass,
And words of love I whisper'd then to this sweet country lass ;
I sat her down upon a bank, and then sat by her side,
And while my arm was round her waist, she pledged to be my bride.

And now I've named the wedding day and happy we shall be,
No thought of jealousy will cross the mind of her or me;
But in our little- farmhouse we'll be happy night and day.
Our lives will pass like sunshine, for I've got the brightest ray.



NELLY RAY.

I love a little country queen, a village beauty rare,
With rosy cheeks, white pearly teeth and lovely nut-
brown air ;
Her waist is so slender, and her feet they are so small,
Of all the girls I ever loved, my Nelly beats them all.

Chorus

Nelly Ray, Nelly Ray, charming little Nell,
Nelly Ray like birds in May, singing all the day,
Nelly Ray, Nelly Ray, pretty little girl ;
I never had a sweetheart like my little Nelly Ray.

As only Wilding is associated with a song by this same name in contemporary newspaper reports, it's possible he was the original composer, and it was latter covered by his contemporaries Westbrook and Bournley, especially when its content is considered, a love ode to the daughter of a Kent farmer, Wilding of course a Kent lad by birth, spending his formative years there.

However, a year earlier, in November 1869, whilst his wife was confined with her malady to the St Pancras workhouse infirmary, he performed in the north of England, at Durham. His set then included a song entitled *'The Returned Convict'*. As it *'nearly bought the house down with laughter'* it must have been comic in nature and appears to be his own peculiar rendering of a sombre transportation ballad by the same name, set in Botany Bay, widely popular earlier in the decade from 1859-1865, which begins with the refrain *'Oh well can I remember'* (a stylistic device which also later appears in *'Nelly Ray/Maggie May'*)

As Wilding evidently enjoyed some success with this, it just might have provided the impetus to follow up with a reworking of the similarly popular contemporary ballad *'Darling Nelly Gray'*, in much the same vein, transforming it from a haunting ballad of separated lovers, into a darkly comic tale of transportation, and a prostitute getting her *'just deserts'*, his recent experiences with his errant wife doubtless preying heavy on his mind. If so, it may be his use of *'Charming Nelly Ray'* as the protagonist was also a deliberate, and not so subtle, dig at his stage rivals Tom Bournley and Gus Westbrook, then enjoying success on the Music Hall scene, perhaps, with the above quoted comic ballad, containing the similar refrain *'Nelly Ray, charming little Nell'*?

A composition date of 1870 for the *'Darling Nelly Gray'* parody, in any case fits better than an 1830 dating, as it is perhaps the only time the phrases *'Skedaddled'* *'Homeward Bounder'* and *'Frigate of the Line'* were all in popular common parlance, and it is also during the era the British Navy were still heavily involved in tracking slavers on the African coast.

During his tour of the north he is specifically credited with tailoring the content of his songs to suite local audiences. The scene of his *'Nelly Ray's'* debut, The Eastern Music Hall and Hotel, Limehouse, had been built a decade earlier by Charles Dunk, and according to one source *"the building quickly became a haunt for local sailors weaving in and out of the docks"*.



The Eastern Hotel and Music Hall, Limehouse, pictured in the 1890's.

Providing cheap drink, lodging and entertainment for its transient dockside community, the general character of the venue is apparent from a case heard at the Old Bailey ten months earlier, on 13th December 1869, when Neils Olsen and Thore Neilson, describing themselves through an interpreter as the *"Master and mate of the ship 'Expedite', lying in the river, off Limehouse"* charged nineteen year old Elizabeth Green, with having violently struck both of them in the bar of *'The Eastern Music Hall'* stealing from them a watch, chain and locket, which she passed to an accomplice, twenty three year old Henry Newland, and which were later recovered by the police from a dockside pawn shop.

The entire area of the East India Docks was positively awash with sailors, both native and foreign, and was notorious for its opium dens and high level of poverty and vice, another contemporary source complaining that the seamen attracted prostitutes to the area *'like flies to a honey-pot'*.

Five years earlier, in 1865, *'An Essay on the Present State of the British Mercantile Marine'* bewails the fate of *'homeward bounders'* plied with drink and led astray by *'harpies'* in dock communities, their monthly pay stolen and their clothing disappeared to the pawn shops, all themes that ring with familiarity when considering *'Charming Nelly Ray'* and its later derivative *'Maggie May'*:

This being the present state of things, seamen become the easy prey of the "landsharks" who surround the "homeward-bounder" in every nameable disguise [including] grog shop keepers who under the guise of boarding houses for seaman, lure them into dens of intoxication, profligacy and vice, and first drowning their reason by stupefying drinks, then inflame their passions by every excitement they can place in their way, at length they drain them of every penny of their hard earned gains, and turn them adrift, bodies poisoned, minds disordered by scenes of vice, in which they mingled, (perhaps for the first time), clothing gone, being pledged at the sign of the 'Three Bells' or at the 'bar' for drink, leaving them without food, raiment or home, or else they are hurried on board of some ship that may be in want of hands. The month's advance note goes to clear off the old score, it is absorbed by the harpy whose victim he is, not to pay for the sailor's comfortable subsistence, but 'run up' against him for rum or other viscous indulgences, ruinous to the body and every noble and manly sentiment"

Whether Edgar Wilding's 1870 comic music hall song *'Charming Nelly Ray'* is the same sweet ode to a Kent farmer's daughter as popularised by his rivals, or the bawdy ode to a transported prostitute by the same name, which later reportedly appears at the conclusion of Charles Picknell's journal, remains an open question, though the latter would certainly match the *'grotesque comic style'* attributed to Wilding by reviewers. If so, the references to crinolines, and their implied similarity to torpedo nets, and the stated rate of the sailor's monthly pay appearing in Picknell's version, may have been later additions and alterations to the song tacked on by sailors in the late 1870's and early 1880's. (As pier warden at Hastings, Charles Picknell would have had ample opportunity to hear songs from passing sailors throughout the latter part of his life, and was more likely to have heard it filtered through this source, rather than direct from the London Music Halls.)

As Wilding's version of the song was first performed in the capital at Limehouse, not far from Canning Town, for an audience of sailors, *'harpies'* and the surrounding London dockside community, then the references to the Liverpool locations Lime Street and Canning Place, appearing in most versions of the song, may also be later alterations. This cannot be said with certainty though, as in the course of his eight years on the stage, Wilding toured several major cities in England and Scotland, and he had performed at least once in Liverpool, for a week-long engagement in January 1867 at The Theatre Royal in Williamson Square. He must then have had a degree of familiarity with the city by the time *'Charming Nelly Ray'* appeared in his set, and pertinently Williamson Square is directly opposite Peter Street, referenced as the location of Nelly Ray's digs, in the earliest known versions of the song. It is probably also worth noting that at least one other song in Wilding's known repertoire *'The Sandstone Girl'* was a tongue in cheek romantic ode to a Liverpool girl.

'Charming Nelly Ray' is only reported to have been performed sporadically on the Music Hall stage after Wilding's own premature retirement, but there is a newspaper report of a Mr T. B. Browning of *'The Marionettes'* performing *'Nelly Ray'* a comic song at Ballarat, Victoria, Australia in February 1879, though this more likely refers to the same ode to a Kent farmer's daughter popularised by Wilding's rivals Bournley and Westbrook.

What does seem certain though is a parody version of 'Darling Nelly Gray' called 'Charming Nelly Ray' existed by the 1890's, and was being sung by sailors in the opening decade of the 20th century. In all likelihood, it had reached audiences the other side of the globe by this point too, where it's transportation theme would have held particular interest, its probable transmission route, the same sailors who comprised both its subject matter and perhaps too, if Wilding was the author, its premier audience. Equally possible, Wilding's bawdy maritime audiences themselves created the parody in the 1870's, from an amalgamation of the popular minstrel ballad 'Darling Nelly Gray' and his song 'Charming Nelly Ray'. The exact truth, for the time being, remains unclear.

Whoever was the creator, it was not the only parody of 'Nelly Gray' then in existence. That songs popularity was so widespread it positively lent itself to the form, with at least two other examples existent in the surviving broadsheets, like "Nelly Ray" both rather dark tales in their subject matter, one revolving around spousal abuse and the other bastardy:

My Husband was a Good for Nothing Man.
Parody on NELLY GRAY.



WHEN I was gay and keen, and aged seventeen,
I sighed for a husband, lack-a-day,
I was courted by a man who took me by the hand,
And he called me his darling Nelly Gray.
His promises were fair, then to church we did repair,
'But I soon found his tricks I couldn't stand,
Before we long had married been, all his earnings
went in gin,
Oh, he was such a good for nothing man.
He would often pawn my clothes, black my eyes and
break my nose,
And call me such nasty wicked names.

Then murder I did bawl, and the peeler he was called,
To the station-house he went out of hand;
I play'd my cards so well, they popp'd him in the ocell,
And they looked up my good for nothing man.
When before the magistrate, he had to meet his fate,
He trembled, he stater'd, sighed and sobbed;
The magistrate did say, he too long had had his play,
And committed him for six months to quod.
He fell upon his knees, and did mercy beg of me,
But the peelers shoved him in the van,
The coachman said 'gee wo', and along did swiftly go
And took away my good for nothing man.



SALLY BRAY
PARODY ON
"NELLY GRAY."

I AM sitting in our alley, a kissing of old Sally,
Where runs a crystal stream—a common sewer,
When a man of six-foot height, with a beauteous black-eye
Came a-brawling and knocking at our door.

But how then did the comic parody by the name of 'Nelly Ray' subsequently morph into 'Maggie May', in some sailor's versions by 1913 at least, and in all latter versions?

Again, the popularity of the Christy Minstrels in England, particularly in Liverpool, might account for this. The 19th May 1869 edition of the 'Liverpool Mercury' records a further performance in the city by the same troupe which included a rendition of a song 'Little Maggie May' which had been 'exquisitely harmonised by Mr. C Blamphin.' Charles Blamphin (1830-1895) a British composer and harpist, originally composed this song in 1864 with the New York born proprietor of his particular band of Christy Minstrels, George Washington 'Pony' Moore (1820-1909). Though Moore is also often referred to as a writer of comic songs and parodies, this particular ditty was very much a sweet saccharine ballad:

LITTLE MAGGIE MAY.
(G.W.Moore and Charles Blamphin 1864)

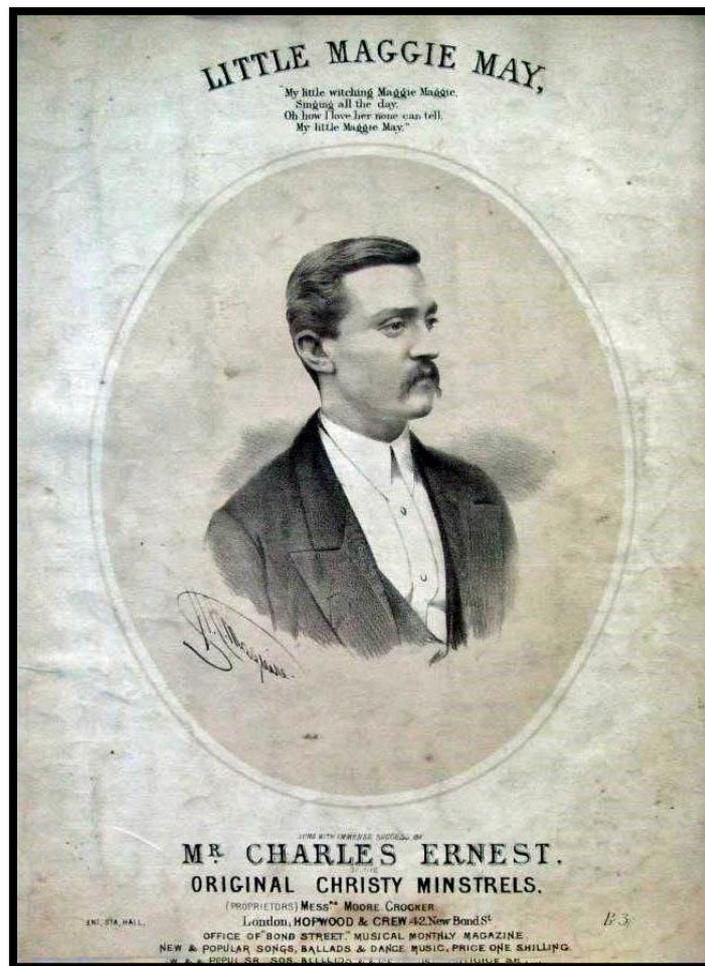
The Spring had come, the flowers in bloom, the birds sung out their lay.
Down by a Little running brook I first saw Maggie May.
She had a roguish Jet-black eye, was singing all the day;
And how I loved her, none can tell-my little Maggie May!

Chorus.

My little witching Maggie, Maggie singing all the day;
Oh! how I love her, none can tell, my little Maggie May!

Though years rolled on, yet still I loved with heart so light and gay,
And never will this heart deceive my own dear Maggie May.
When others thought that life was gone, and death would take away,
Still by my side did linger one, and that was Maggie May.- Chorus.

May Heaven protect me for her sake; I pray, both night and day,
That I, ere long, may call her mine, my own dear Maggie May.
For she is all the world to me, although I'm far away,
I oft times think of the running brook and my little Maggie May.- Chorus.

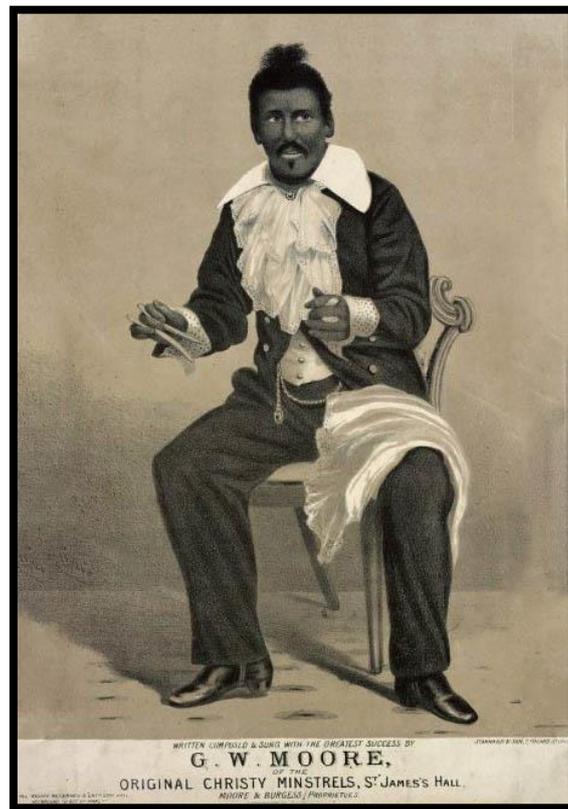


Victorian era Broadsheet of 'Little Maggie May'

As with its earlier contemporary, *'Darling Nelly Gray'*, *'Little Maggie May'* is a tale of separated lovers and was equally well received and popular from first debut, even finding itself the subject of a legal dispute in summer 1870 by the composer of *'The Sweet Wild Rose'* who claimed the theme of the first eight bars were plagiarised. Legal tussles aside, the following report from April 1887 shows the lasting popularity of *'Little Maggie May'*, and the importance Moore himself placed on it in building the reputation of his own band of minstrels:

"The ceremony took place at the afternoon performance, the gift being acknowledged by Mr. Moore in a few earnest words of thanks to those who had laboured so loyally with him. In addressing the audience, he reminded them that many of the songs in the first part were old ones, which had helped to make the reputation of his troupe, one in particular, entitled "Maggie May," having been written and composed by him more than twenty-five years ago, before he came to London."

'Darling Nelly Gray' and *'Little Maggie May'* existed side by side as popular standards of the minstrel repertoire for up to half a century after their first composition. Newspaper evidence show both in contemporary performance as late as 1906, though by then the minstrel craze (and the golden age of the music hall in general) had begun to wane.



George Washington 'Pony' Moore (1820-1909) in Minstrel costume and make up

Though Moore and Blamphin's ballad *'Little Maggie May'* differs significantly in form to the later sea shanty *'Maggie May'* it does contain some similar themes such as *'Down by a Little running brook I first saw Maggie May'*, which mirrors the line *'When I first saw Maggie May, she was cruising up and down...'* oft contained in versions of the latter song, and it of course refers to *'Maggie, Maggie May'* as does the latter song. Interestingly it also refers to her *'singing all the day'*, as does *'Nelly Ray'* the ode to a Kent farmer's daughter popularised in the Music Halls just a few years later.

Perhaps crucially at least one newspaper report, from Xmas Eve 1902, in Tasmania, provides evidence that some versions of 'Darling Nelly Gray' were by then being sung as 'Oh me, **Little Nelly Gray**, they have taken her away, an 'I'll never see me darlin' anymore'. It is then no great stretch to imagine 'Little Nelly Gray' later morphing into 'Little Maggie May' and similarly supplanting 'Charming Nelly Ray' as the protagonist of the sailor's parody of the same song by 1913, particularly once the music hall had gone into decline and the original standards themselves were no longer regularly heard and were starting to fade in the popular memory.

In conclusion, all the available evidence suggests the traditional sea shanty 'Maggie May', as we know it, was a product of the Minstrel era in England, composed as 'Charming Nelly Ray' a dark parody of 'Darling Nelly Gray', possibly by music hall comics or by their rowdy dockside audiences in the early 1870's, and later added to, shaped and popularised by sailors in busy ports such as London and Liverpool, in subsequent decades. In the early 20th century it remained a song confined to below decks, naval dock yards and pub sing-a-longs, deemed unsuitable for wider publication or distribution due to its risqué content, until later revived and popularised in the 1950's by the English folk song movement and the Skiffle generation. It was then immortalised by Liverpool's most famous sons, The Beatles, on their last album 'Let it Be' in 1970.

'Maggie May'

'Version 1' (As Sung by Geoff Ling at The Ship Inn in Blaxhall on October 10th, 1953 & 1972)

**Now come all you soldiers bold, come listen to my plea
When you've heard my tale, you'll pity me.
For I was a darned damn fool at the port of Liverpool
The first time that I came home on leave.**

**I was paid off at the hold with the boys of Merrybold
Three-pound-ten a week was all my pay.
When she mingled with my tin I was very much taken in
By a little girl whose name was Maggie May.**

**Too well do I remember when I first met Maggie May
She was cruising up and down old Canning Town.
Oh she wore her clothes divine, like a figure on the line
So I being a soldier I gave chase.**

**In the morning I awoke with my heart all sore and broke
No trousers, jacket, waistcoat could I find.
When I asked her where they were,
She said to me, "Kind sir,
They're down in Stanley's pawnshop, number nine."**

**To the pawnshop I did go no trousers,
Jacket, waistcoat could I find**

**And a policeman came and took that girl away.
Oh she robbed so many a sailor and many a yankee whaler
She won't walk down Lime Street anymore.**

**Oh Maggie, Maggie May, they have taken her away
To slave like a nigger in the corner of Berkley Square.
The judge he guilty found her
For robbing a homeward bounder
And he paid her passage back to Monte Bay.**

[Note: This early recorded example of the song as transmitted in England in the oral tradition is quite interesting for a couple of reasons. First for the line "*I was paid off at the hold, with the boys of Merrybold*" which makes little sense but might suggest in the original it appeared as '*I was paid off at the home, with the boys of Marylebone*'. The comic Andrew Edgar Wilding, was a resident of Marylebone when he introduced '*Nelly Ray*' in his act, living there from the time of his marriage in 1859, until the time of his divorce in 1876. Secondly the line '*She was cruising up and down old Canning Town*', could also support the theory the song was originally composed in a London setting, rather than a Liverpool one, perhaps specifically crafted by Wilding to suit his Limehouse audience (*though Ling also later refers to Lime Street*). Thirdly the line '*For she wore her clothes divine, Like a figure on the line*' may suggest the references to crinoline net frigates contained in Charles Picknell version, were later additions peculiar to some orally transmitted versions, but not to all.]

'Maggie May'

'Version 2' (Sung by A.L.Lloyd on 1956 Riverside album English Drinking Songs)

**Now come all you young sailors and listen to me plea
And when you've heard me tale, you'll pity me
For I was a goddam fool in the port of Liverpool
The very first time I came home from sea**

**Now, I was paid off at the Home, from the port of Sierre Leone
Three-pound-ten a month it was me pay
Well, I wasted all me tin whilst drinking up the gin
With a little girl whose name was Maggie May**

**Now well do I remember where I first met Maggie May
She was cruising up and down in Canning Place
She was dressed up mighty fine, like a frigate of the line
So being a ranting sailor I gave chase**

**I kept right on her a track, she went on the other tack
But I caught her and I broke her mizzen line**

Next morning I awoke with a head more bent then broke
No coat, no vest, no trousers could I find

I asked her where they were, she said – Me good kind sir
They're down at Kelly's pawnshop, number nine
Now, you've had your cake and bun, and it's time for you to run
Or you'll never make the dockside, lad, in time

To the pawnshop I did go but no trousers could I find
And the policeman came and took that girl away
And the judge he guilty found her, of robbing a homeward-bounder
and now she's doing time in Botany Bay

Oh Maggie, Maggie May, they have taken you away
Never more to roam again down Canning Place
For you've you robbed too many whalers, and you've dosed so many sailors
And you'll never see old Lime Street anymore.

Maggie May

'Version 3' (As recorded in 1961 by Stan Hugill)

Come all ye sailors bold
And when me tale is told
I know you all will sadly pity me,
For I was a bloomin' fool
In the port of Liverpool
On the voyage when I first paid off from sea.

I was paid off at the home for a voyage to Sierra Leone,
Two pounds ten a month had been me pay
While jingling me tin I was sadly taken in
By a lady by the name of Maggie May.

When I sailed into her I didn't have a care
She was cruising up and down old Canning Place
Dressed in a gown so fine like a frigate of the line
And me being a sailor gave her chase.

Ah me Maggie Maggie May
They've taken you away
You'll slave upon Van Diemens cruel shore
You robbed many a sailor many a drunken whaler
But you'll never cruise down Paradise Street no more.

Next day when I awoke I found that I was broke
I didn't have a penny to me name
I had to hock me suit, me "John L's" and me boots
Down in the parkway pawnshop number 9.

She was chained and sent away from Liverpool one day
The lads did cheer as she sailed down the bay
And every sailor lad, he only was too glad
That they sent the old thing off to Botany Bay

Ah me Maggie Maggie May they have taken you away
And you'll slave upon Van Dieman's cruel shore
You've robbed many a sailor, many a drunken whaler
But you'll never cruise down Paradise Street no more.

Real life Maggie Mays

Though Maggie May and her forerunner Nelly Ray were almost certainly fictional inventions, several cases found in Liverpool Newspapers 1830-1870 mirror the details of the famous song in many respects, and stand testament to the fact it was a scenario very much with a basis in real life events:

*“**Mary Johnson**, a disorderly woman, was charged before the Mayor, on Thursday week, with robbing a sailor of his jacket, in a house of ill fame, in Atherton-street. The prisoner restored hits jacket and was discharged”*

31 January 1834 - Liverpool Mercury

*“**Catherine Murphy** was charged with robbing a sailor of £1 18s. together with the whole of his clothes. It appeared that prosecutor met the prisoner on the preceding evening and they agreed to pass the evening together. In the morning when he awoke he found that his companion, clothes, and money had disappeared. He immediately sallied forth as he was in quest of some of the missing articles, and having met a person calling herself the landlady, he was directed to a room in the lower part of the house, where he found his clothes, minus the £1 18s. which he had in his jacket”*

05 September 1837 - Liverpool Mail

*“Two prostitutes, named **Ann Johnson** and **Mary Bell**, were, yesterday, committed for one month, on charge of robbing a sailor of his wearing apparel, in Hatton-garden, on the previous night”*

20 June 1846 - Liverpool Mail

*“Yesterday, a female, named **Elizabeth Bonce**, who lives in a brothel in Preston street, was brought before Mr. Kushton, at the Police-court, charged with having robbed a sailor, named Poole, of thirty eight shillings and his clothes. It appeared that Poole went with the prisoner to the house in question the previous evening and in the morning found that he had been robbed of his clothes and money. It was proved that the prisoner had pledged part of the prosecutor’s clothes, and she was ordered to pay a penalty of 1 pound and five shillings, and in default of payment was committed to prison for three months.”*

25 December 1847 - Liverpool Mail

*“**Ann Connor** was brought up on a remand from gaol, charged with robbing a sailor named Rourke of 4 pounds 1 shilling, in a brothel in Banastre-street.”*

21 October 1853 - Liverpool Mercury

*“**Margaret Robinson**, was charged with robbing William Brown, a sailor, of two pounds and ten shillings, six pence, and pawning his coat, in a disreputable house in Preston-street”*

29 November 1853 - Liverpool Mercury

*“**Catherine McGonnell**, and **Ann Conolly** were indicted for robbing a sailor named James Thompson, in a house in Peter-street, on the night of the 11th instant”.*

26 March 1856 - Liverpool Daily Post

*“**Mary O'Donnell**, **Emma Hughes**, and **Margaret Rowlande**, remanded from this day a week ago for robbing a sailor, named John Daghish, of his watch, and 19 shillings at Peter Street were again brought up, and there not being sufficient evidence, discharged.”*

10 July 1857 - Liverpool Mercury

*“Robbing a Drunken Sailor.— Benjamin Block, seaman, who has recently come off voyage, spending the proceeds in the sailor's usual liberal manner, charged James Williams and **Ann Daley** with robbing him. The prosecutor was drinking at the Lighthouse, Hanover-street, Friday afternoon, where he met with the prisoners. He treated the female to several glasses of spirits, and drank pretty freely himself. When about to pay for some drink which had been ordered, the male prisoner made a snatch for the money which the prosecutor held in his hand, and succeeded in obtaining from him half a crown.”*

13 November 1865 - Liverpool Mercury

*“**Bridget Wheelan**, an evil one, was brought up on remand charged with having robbed Christopher Byrne, a sailor, of £5 note and £2 in gold.—On the previous occasion she stated that she had not seen the £2, but the £5 note she had given Henry Dodd, a barman with Mr. Kttshaw, a publican in Park-lane, to keep for her. The barman, however, on oath, said that he never received the £5 note, and a police officer was sent to the house to search for the note, the prisoner, Wheelan, being remanded until the following day was now brought up on a charge of stealing it”*

15 June 1867 - Liverpool Daily Post

“Two vile women were brought before the court in custody charged with having robbed a sailor, a remarkable looking man, in as much he exhibited altitude of little less than seven feet. The case possessed none but the usual features of such class of cases, and the prisoners were remanded.”

21 March 1868 - Liverpool Daily Post