

# THE FIRST NOEL

17<sup>th</sup> c. Traditional English Carol

"*The First Noel*" (also written "*The First Noël*" and "*The First Nowell*") is a traditional classical English carol, most likely from the 17th century, although possibly earlier. The word Noel comes from the French word Noël meaning Christmas, from the Latin word natalis which translates as birthday.

In its current form, it is of Cornish origin, and it was first published in "*Carols Ancient and Modern*" (1823) and Gilbert and Sandys' "*Carols*" (1833), both of which were edited by William Sandys and arranged, edited and with extra lyrics written by Davies Gilbert for "*Hymns and Carols of God*". Today, it is usually performed in a four-part hymn arrangement by the English composer John Stainer, first published in his "*Carols, New and Old*" in 1871. Variations of its theme are included in Victor Hely-Hutchinson's "*Carol Symphony*".

The melody is unusual among English folk melodies in that it consists of one musical phrase repeated twice, followed by a refrain which is a variation on that phrase. It is thought to be a version of an earlier melody sung in a church gallery setting "*The First O Well*"; a conjectural reconstruction of this earlier version can be found in the "*New Oxford Book of Carols*".

~ Tull

