

## The Birmingham Dulcimer Tradition

Despite the drop in its popularity after the piano came to power in the 18th C the dulcimer didn't die out totally in the UK. A few areas became 'strongholds' for the instrument. One of these area was Birmingham, where players played for audiences in their homes and in pubs in the 19th and early 20thC.



Photograph (c. 1890) of an unknown dulcimer player outside The Swan public house in Yardley, Birmingham.

A particular dulcimer playing style that developed in Birmingham was *plucking* (with plectrums), instead of hammering, the strings.

***"I can't get on with hammers, I keep hitting all the notes at once."***

Bill Fell

During the Victorian era (1837–1901) dulcimers were used mainly to play popular music such as music hall songs and folk dances. If someone could not afford a piano they might make their own dulcimer instead.

Many players were amateur musicians, learning from friends or family. They would play for their own amusement, with other musicians or earn a few bob playing outside a pub or to accompany dancing. The other musicians played fiddles, cello, accordions, banjo, mouth organ and other instruments. They would also meet in each other's houses to get together to play.



**Albert Fell 1908**

Albert Fell and his son Bill made and played the dulcimer. Sadly, the family tradition was lost when Bill died in 2005.





Bill Fell's dulcimer decorated with inlaid patterns which were often made from wood or mother of pearl

Dulcimer players were very resourceful and often made their own instruments to keep costs down. Though instruments were beautifully finished with marquetry in wood and mother of pearl, they were often made from household materials. Fred Woodley was a plate metal worker and used recycled materials from home and work to keep costs down; one of his dulcimers was constructed from arc welding rods and an old wardrobe!



**Fred Woodley 2010**

Fred Woodley, who learned to play from his father, is still maintaining family tradition by playing and making the Birmingham-style dulcimer. Two of his granddaughters, Laura and Jenny both play the dulcimer.

The tradition of dulcimer playing is being kept alive in the West Midlands through the Redditch-based Make and Play Dulcimer group (contact details on Useful Links and Resources page).

