

Suit Code: A Graphic Shorthand for Tin Whistle and Irish Flute Fingerings

By Grey Larsen

The Suit Code Symbols

The four suit symbols in the deck of playing cards are familiar to almost everyone. Suit code uses them, plus an open circle, to represent the five fingering patterns used for the primary notes of the tin whistle (also known as a pennywhistle) and keyless Irish flute.



I created suit code in 2019, and made extensive use of it in my instructional book *First Lessons Tin Whistle*. (See p. 3 for more information on this book.)

Two Groups of Three Holes, and the Fingering Patterns We Use

The notes that are easily played on the tin whistle and keyless Irish flute — their *primary* notes — are fingered by opening and closing various combinations of six finger holes. On the D whistle and the Irish flute in D these primary notes are D, E, F#, G, A, B, C and C#.

These six finger holes naturally divide into two groups of three. The top three are controlled by the top hand (the hand closest to the whistle mouthpiece or flute embouchure hole) and the bottom three by the bottom hand.

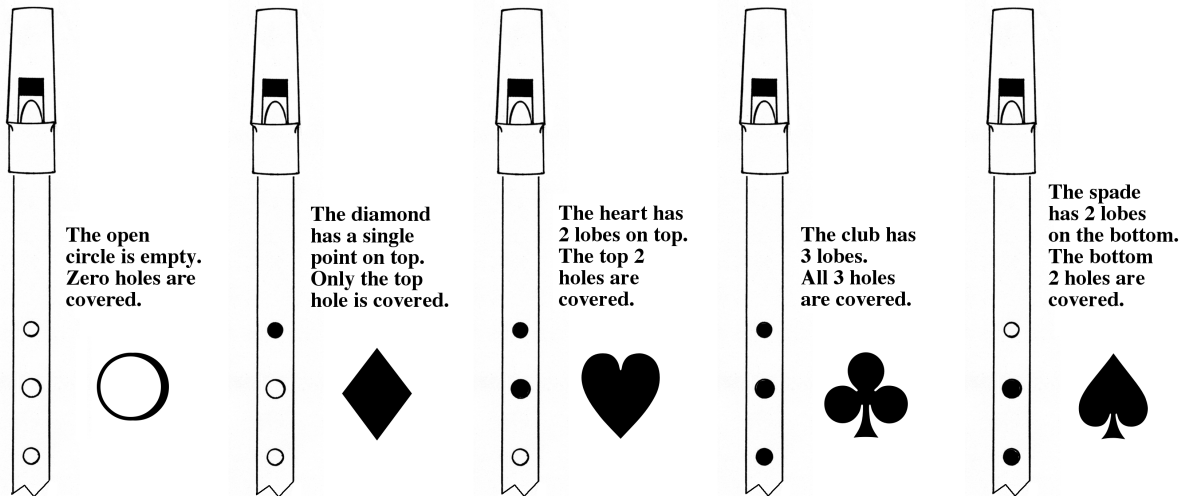
For each hand there are eight possible patterns of open and/or closed holes. Luckily, the bottom hand uses only four of these patterns. The top hand uses those same four, plus one more. This fifth pattern is used only when playing low C and high D (and only by the top hand).

There are more wind instruments that also use this basic six-hole fingering system, such as renaissance, baroque and classical flutes and simple-system piccolos and fifes.

How Suit Code Works

Here are the five fingering patterns we use in playing the primary notes of the tin whistle and Irish flute. As you read about these patterns, please refer to the diagram on the next page.

- The first pattern — **zero holes covered** — is represented by an **open circle**: ○. This is easy to remember because the open circle looks like a zero.
Open circle = zero holes covered.
- The next pattern — **top hole covered** — is represented by a **diamond**: ♦. This is easy to remember because the diamond has one point on top.
1 point on top = top hole covered.
- The next pattern — **top 2 holes covered** — is represented by a **heart**: ♥. This is easy to remember because the heart has two lobes on top.
2 lobes on top = top 2 holes covered.
- The next pattern — **all 3 holes covered** — is represented by a **club**: ♣. This is easy to remember because the club has three lobes on top.
3 lobes on top = all 3 holes covered.
- The final pattern — **bottom 2 holes covered** — is represented by a **spade**: ♠. This is easy to remember because the spade has two lobes on the bottom.
2 lobes on the bottom = bottom two holes covered.



Notice that the spade looks very much like an inverted heart. This may help you remember the spade's meaning. The heart represents "top two holes covered" while the spade represents the inverse of this, "bottom two holes covered."

In the diagram above I show only the top half of a tin whistle, which is controlled, of course, by the top hand. (One could just as well show the top half of an Irish flute.)

It's important to remember that the first four fingering patterns are used by both the top and bottom hands. The fifth pattern (♠) is used only by the top hand, and only when playing low C and high D.

A Suit Code Fingering Chart

In the following chart each note is represented by a pair of suit code symbols, one stacked above the other. The top symbol is for the top hand and the bottom symbol for the bottom hand. Each vertically aligned pair of symbols forms a **suit stack**.

SUIT CODE FINGERING CHART FOR THE TIN WHISTLE IN D AND IRISH FLUTE IN D

♣	♣	♣	♣	♥	♦	♠	○	♠	♣	♣	♣	♣	♣	♥	♦
♣	♥	♦	○	○	○	○	○	♣	♣	♥	♦	○	○	○	○
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C♯	C#	d	d	e	f#	g	a	b	

The chart shows two rows of suit code symbols. The first row contains symbols for notes D through C#. The second row contains symbols for notes d through b. Below the symbols is a musical staff with notes corresponding to the symbols. The staff is divided into a Low Register (notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, C#) and a High Register (notes d, d, e, f#, g, a, b). Each note in the High Register is marked with a narrow upward-pointing triangle above its suit stack.

Each high-register note is identified by a narrow upward-pointing triangle above its suit stack. (Irish flute and whistle players rarely play above high B, the highest note in this chart.)

Looking at the two rows of suit code, you can see how the fingerings for each hand change as you proceed from the lowest note toward the highest. You might observe that:

1. The top hand uses ♣ for D up through G.
2. The bottom hand uses ○ for G up through C#.
3. Both hands employ the ♣ ♥ ♦ sequence (bottom hand: for D-E-F#, top hand: for G-A-B).

The fingering chart shows two fingerings for high D:

1. ♠/♣ — the vented fingering, with the top hole open, or “vented”
2. ♣/♣ — the unvented fingering (the same as the fingering for low D)

These two options for high D are contained within a bracket.

This chart also shows that the fingerings for almost all notes are the same in their low- and high-register forms. For example, low E and high E share the same fingering: ♣/♥.

The Usefulness of Suit Code

1. Suit code can ease the process of learning to play tin whistle and Irish flute by organizing and streamlining our mental model of fingerings. It depicts each note with simplicity: as a pair of familiar symbols — a suit stack. For some people (whether they read music or not), memorizing suit stacks is easier and more meaningful than memorizing combinations of six covered and/or uncovered holes.

2. Suit code provides a useful and efficient way to represent tin whistle and Irish flute fingerings in a line of text. It’s much easier to use “♠/♣” than to write “the fingering you get when you uncover the top hand’s top finger hole while covering the other five holes.”

3. Suit code provides a way to show people who don’t read music which notes should be played in a tune or song. For example, here is the children’s song, “Hot Cross Buns,” notated with suit code.

◆	♥	♣	◆	♥	♣	♣	♣	♣	♣	♥	♥	♥	♥	◆	♥	♣		
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○		
Hot	cross	buns,	hot	cross	buns,	one	a	pen	-	ny	two	a	pen	-	ny,	hot	cross	buns.

This notation does not convey rhythm. If someone is familiar with the song, they may already know the rhythm. If not, they can learn it by ear.

If you think of other uses for suit code, or have comments about it, I’d enjoy hearing from you. You can reach me by email at grey@greylarsen.com.

First Lessons Tin Whistle

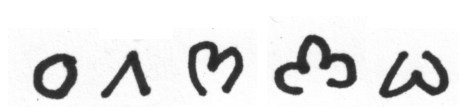
The beginning tin whistle book *First Lessons Tin Whistle* makes extensive use of suit code, as well as standard music notation and a staff-based tin whistle and Irish flute tablature system. It takes a detailed and comprehensive approach to teaching the rudiments of whistle playing.

To learn more about this book and to download free excerpts, please visit greylarsen.com/tw. There you can also access songs and tunes notated in suit code, an explanation of the staff-based tablature system mentioned above, exercises for finger coordination, and other useful materials and resources for tin whistle and Irish flute players.

Writing Suit Code Yourself

If you wish to create suit code with your computer, you’ll find that many fonts have symbols for the suits of the deck of cards, and for open circles.

If you wish to write out suit code by hand, you might consider making up symbols that are easy to draw and which approximate the five suit symbols. Here is an example.



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