

Wassail Songs and Carols from Gloucestershire

Richard Chidlaw

I find it difficult to believe that anyone in this company would want to listen to me speak on the subject of collecting songs. It is rather as though you have been served a substantial sandwich of two slices of Mighty White with a very mean scraping of marge in between. I am neither the scholar nor the musician/folk music collector. My interest in the subject has always been that of the amateur – both from the point of view of the scholar and the folk-enthusiast. I suppose, when I began collecting as a teenager, I was interested primarily in the culture of my local area – around Wotton-under-Edge. It was the 1960s and the time of the Folk Revival and any material was held to be of interest. Like so many things, it was an excuse for something else – and I enjoyed visiting old people and asking them to reminisce, well, about anything - and I would write it all down in my field notebook. I had no recording equipment and in order to get the tunes into musical notation I had to use several friends with greater musical talent than mine.

Here I would give you the first problem which I encountered – Which particular verse has the real tune? Sometimes the old singers would be rather unsure of the tune. After all, here was a boy on a bicycle turning up to ask them to sing something which they may well not have sung for 50 years! On occasions, we had to make an intelligent guess. Once Bill Davis at Badminton had sung his wassail right through, he was perhaps getting near the true version – so we chose the tune of the last verse!

I began collecting when I visited a family in the village of Tresham. I set out to walk there, about three miles from Wotton, and was soon given a lift by the bread delivery man. I was brought home by the postman in his van. Things you're not allowed to do these days, of course. Jane had worked with my grandfather in the shop in Wotton, so I knew about Sally, her mother, and I thought that she would be likely to know something. When I arrived, I was asked to talk to Sally's mother, Granny Frankcom, who proved to be a great source of information. I shall return to the Wassailing Song later, but on this occasion, Alice, Gran's daughter-in-law, was there and after they had sung the Wassail, Alice said that she knew another song – Late home came I. She offered to write it out for me. Gran was not impressed. Her maiden name had not been Chappell for nothing and she found this rather too unsavoury. Leaning quietly over to me, she said firmly – "an if you don't want that – you can burn it!" I'm sorry to say that I did not take her direction.

Ref to *Late Home came High*.

Now Alice wrote the words out as she pronounced them. My next question which I had to answer was, what do you do about dialect or odd pronunciation? Do you try to keep it, or do you "correct" the grammar and the spelling? I've always tended to try to represent the way the words were spoken because I feel that it gives it more character. I would do that with Gran's stories. But I can see that it can be rather phoney. Sometimes, however, it means that you keep preserved something which you don't understand at the time which may prove to be valuable.

My next song for you is Gaarge Ridler's Oven. I put this in, not because I have collected it, but because I was given this text which has variants from the standard printed version. This song was and, no doubt is, the special possession of the Gloucestershire Society in London. It was sung by Gloucestershire gentlemen, pretending to speak in the local dialect and this particular spelling was worked out for it. The text was written out in Dursley and sent by Thomas Vizard, a local solicitor, to Cyril Bengough in January 1901. He refers in his accompanying letter to Gibbs's Cotswold Village and the concealed political meaning of the verses. He commented "but the argument struck me as far-fetched". No doubt it is!

Ref to *Gaarge Ridler's Oven*.

I think the tune is a little like the wassail tune and I wonder if they might be related. William Chappell the printer of the 19th century claimed that the same tune did for both songs.

My next song is the Turmut Hower. This is a song which has used dialect to make it seem more rustic. When I wrote this out for you, I decided to put it into a more straightforward form. It was sung to me by my grandfather's elder brother, Eric Pilsworth of Cam. Uncle Eric was always a bit of an entertainer and sang in village concerts etc. You'll find this text in lots of Gloucestershire books. I don't know how well-known it is. He also sang other songs like The Old Top Hat that Father wore.

Ref to *Turmut Hower*

My next problem to share with you was this: How do you distinguish songs of value from the rubbish? Are all old songs equally good? I've never valued The Old Top Hat and when Uncle Eric went on to sing the Crow Clapping Song, I thought of it as a sort of Nursery rhyme. When Mr Roy Palmer saw it, he valued it far more than I did and included it in his Folklore of Gloucestershire p 210 under the heading Working Ways. When I told my grandfather about Uncle Eric's singing of the Crow-Clapping Song, he remembered it in a fuller version and told me more of the background. His father, Bill, had been employed as a child to scare the crows in the fields at Petty France on the A46, near Badminton, where his grandfather had been a coachman and where relatives of his mother lived. I felt that I had to keep the spelling of "Shee-auver" It would seem very peculiar to change it into "Shoo-over" – sounds that my grandfather and his father would never have made, as they spoke in a very broad Stroud accent!

Ref to *Crow Clapping*.

I am now moving on to carols. When I had my first job after college, I was employed as an assistant curate in Bewdley, Worcestershire at a £1000 a year. It was a job which involved visiting people regularly and I soon heard about The Bewdley Carol and wanted to track it down. It was still well-known and I got a 19th century printed version (Hepworth's Anthem) from one elderly lady and then got two others to sing it to me. I then produced, as a christmas card, the sheet which you have. My interest encouraged others to talk to me about it and one particular family – the Genners –, I found, had been regarded as its proprietors. It was Genners' Anthem. I was supposed to be having a driving lesson, but my instructor, Bill Brown, was more interested in talking to Jack Genner, who had been heard singing the carol the previous Christmas, so we stopped off at Jack's house and showed him the printed version. He was putting a window in his green house at the time. He looked at the words and knew that some weren't right but he had to go off into the kitchen on his own to sing it through until it came right. His version is the text on the second sheet.

He said, "Bewdley's the only place to have that song. It couldn't come over to Kidderminster and be sung with the same heart. Christmas Eve is the main night over Bewdley and it's Christmas Night over there. It gradually builds up to the last verse and Christmas Day is the great day."

Here is another of my collecting problems: When there is something in the text which doesn't make sense, can we not expect clarification from the singer? The answer is No. I asked Jack what the plating was that the last lovely morning had been placed on. (As if that could make any sense!) but he had no idea. You don't question, you just reproduce what you have heard.

Ref to *Genner's Anthem*.

And then Jack gave us both a tot of whisky, although he normally didn't touch the stuff. And I cannot remember if we continued with the driving lesson or not!

And so I come to the collecting of Wassail Songs. You'll remember that it was for that reason that I went to see Sally and Granny Frankcom. I had got an inkling that there were versions of this song to found in different places. I think that I had seen Alfred Williams's Thames Head Wassailers' Song by then and at least one other printed text, perhaps in the Gloucestershire Notes and Queries Vol 1, The main difference in collecting these songs was that they were songs that belonged to a community and were sung by groups. The differences weren't just the idiosyncrasies of an individual singer and I set myself to find out whether the versions could be said to be clearly identified as the tune and set of words which belonged to that locality. The variety might have been like Bill Davis's Badminton version, which had a variant tune for each verse, but I feel that, over the years, I have been able to establish this. The Tresham Wassail differs from the text with which most people will be familiar in the Oxford Book of Carols, in that there is only one animal, the Ox, which is being addressed. In wassailing the ox, a variety of good things are wished on the household which the group of wassailers is visiting. They are a group of men who expect to be given drink and food in return for their good wishes. Gran's father, William Chappell, born in 1845, was in a party of wassailers but it was called Mummying. They had an ox's head (made out of a hollowed out swede) on a pole and a small wooden bowl. We shall meet the ox's head again in a moment. The song also has a chorus. Vaughan Williams's version in The Oxford Book of Carols is a mixture of a variety of bits and pieces and the tune, which he collected in Pembridge in Herefordshire from Gloucestershire singers, also has a chorus in the original manuscript.

Ref to *Tresham Wassail*.

Now the ox was also known as Broad. In wills from the 16th century, local farmers leave their cattle by name to various members of the family. Broad is an ox name which goes back a good way. The Tresham Swede may not be very impressive, but other villages had more expensively constructed Bull's Heads. If you are interested in reading about this, you should refer to Ritual Animal Disguise by E.C.Cawte pp.142 – 8. I have given him all my material about the subject.

One village which had a well-made bull was Horton and the group of young men would bring it to Little Sodbury Manor where the Hatherell family were farming and they would sing their version of the wassail to the accompaniment of ribs of beef, tambourine, jew's harp and mouthorgan. The lad inside the bull would roar and go at the girls and make them scream.

Mr Hatherell was an elderly retired farmer in Wickwar. We'd asked if we could go and record his singing of the wassail and he had dressed himself up for the occasion as though we were from the BBC, and worked out a special introduction. When asked to begin, having assured himself that the tape was running, he began – "The other day somebody asked me how old I was, well I told them I was old enough to remember the wassailing song being sung." Now interestingly to me, Cecil Sharp collected the Little Sodbury Wassail from Isaac Bennett in April 1907. When Mr Hatherell sang it some 63 years later, it was still largely the same tune. The difference was that it had lost all its fancy ornamentations. Mr Hatherell had remembered the verses about Broad but had forgotten the verses to the Butler and the Maid which Isaac Bennet had sung.

Ref to *Little Sodbury Wassail*

When Michael and I went to see Mr Archie Gardner at Windsor Edge near Nailsworth, we were sung a wassail of a very different type. It more closely resembles the text of The Oxford Book of Carols (No.15) and I have only come across it this once. After two verses, it changes to the more familiar form. Archie was quite prepared to adapt the song to the audience. You sang about animals to farmers, but in the Stroud Valleys where industrialists also had money and could be visited at Christmastime, you ensured that they were wassailed in their appropriate commodities. Joe Walker had a stocking mill and so he would need plenty of yarn. If "arm" can rhyme with "carn"(corn), then "arm" can also rhyme with "yarn". I like this practical response to a changing environment.

Ref to *Nailsworth Wassail*.

When I worked with the vicar of Coaley, Rev David Bick, I was told of a family he had visited in Frampton during bereavement, which had a special family carol. For some years after that I had hoped to be able to hear it but it was not until 1985 that I was asked to take the marriage of Mrs Lord at Frampton Chapel. This gave me my opportunity. "I will take the marriage, if you will sing me the carol". She very graciously agreed and I remember vividly her very attractive singing voice resonating in the chapel on that Summer's evening, singing Mr Lord's family carol – Oh Grand and Oh Bright. My luck was in for she also knew the Wassail as sung in the Slimbridge/Eastington area and I hadn't been able to get that before. Her late husband, Ray Lord, had the wassail from his granny, Florence Henrietta whose father was a wassailer in the Slimbridge area. You'll notice the verse about the Old woman and her cow, which is such a liability. Mrs Lord couldn't see what that had to do with the rest of the wassail – and you and I may well support her in this. Gwilym has collected wassail songs from Arlingham, Kingscourt (Rodborough) and Bisley with this verse. It is not a feature of most of the Gloucestershire songs, but is found in Somerset. Did one county borrow it from the other, or was there yet another source ?

Mrs Lord, who became Mrs Aldridge the following day, has since sung the Lord Family Carol to Roy and Pat Palmer and it has been printed in Gwilym and Roy's Let us be Merry.

Ref to *Oh Grand and Oh Bright*.

Slimbridge Wassail.

So I must draw to a close. Some singers like Mrs Aldridge, as I must now call her, are conscious of their heritage and of the importance of their family's tradition. The Wilkins Family of Tetbury safeguard their wassailing tradition and are fiercely proud of it. Another such person I must mention was Mr Cameron Riley Johnson of Yorkley in the Forest of Dean. He was someone who was very interested in his native area and collected and preserved material which gave it its characteristics. He produced little booklets of reminiscences, some of which he kindly gave me. One of the songs which he had learned and preserved was The Twelve Apostles, which is my last contribution for you this afternoon. Like so many versions of this song, it has marvellously garbled phrases. I rather like the idea of the angelic alcoholics – the Gabriel wine-ohs. I guess that many of us can spend happy hours trying to work out what it could possibly mean.

He knew a little bit of a song called *The Little Nigger* which has words which remind one of a character from a mummers' play - a fragment which tails off. Is it important ? Does it have a history ?

These are the sorts of things our more able collectors can maybe tell us?

Ref to *The Twelve Apostles*

The Little Nigger.

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Full texts of the songs and the tunes have been provided by Richard and will be added to this page in the near(ish) future