WASSAILING

Wassailing is an English custom of genuine longevity spanning many centuries and is one of the few customs which may have pre-Christian associations, unlike those frequently claimed for morris dancing or the commonly used mummers play. This is not surprising since the custom is essentially wishing people good health and prosperity, and it's not so amazing that we have been doing that for a very long period of time!

The word itself has Saxon origins and in Old English the words ***waes haell*** literally mean **be healthy**. When used as a drinking toast, which it frequently was, the response was "***drinc hael***". The words also exist in Old Norse and it is possible that the expression was used in Danelaw regions of England under Viking rule. The lack of a drinking toast equivalent in Germanic languages suggests that the drinking aspect developed in England from the 1100's. (1) Certainly by the 13-15th centuries it had developed to mean a gathering involving singing and drinking. The Wassail-Drinkail combination appeared in "The History of the Kings of Britain" written ca. 1140 by Geoffrey de Monmouth. (1)

In more recent times the event has involved either visiting houses, typically by women or children or an agricultural connection visiting orchards wishing for a good crop, productive trees and prosperity. Good luck was proffered and a song sung. The visitors would carry a bowl (The Wassail Bowl) decorated with ribbons and greenery, containing a concoction of ale, toast, nutmeg, and roast apples.

There were regional variations to what the bowl contained and cider was more popular in the West Country. It was common for the apples to be roasted to pulp giving a spongy texture to the wassail drink resulting in the term "Lamb's Wool" for the mixture.

There are many references to Wassailing over the centuries across the country with differing regional variations although southern and western counties predominate. The Wassail Bowl was first mentioned by Matthew Paris in the 13th century (2) when bread and fine cakes were dipped into the contents by the assembled company. Also at this time Robert of Gloucester described the marriage of King Vortigern (a fifth century British warlord) to the Saxon princess Rowena where the toast 'waes heal' was used. (2) In Peter de Langtoft's account (1320) the cup was passed around exchanging the toast 'wassaille' – 'drinkhaille'. This was also the custom in Tudor England. (3)

Records survive in St Mary of Pré Priory, St. Albans, of payments to visiting harpers, players and wassailers associated with the visiting wassail practice between 1461 and 1493. (4) In 1555 a wassailing event in Henley on Thames was described by Henry Machin in his diary (5). This lavish affair involved twelve maidens singing, accompanied by a feast of *spices, fruit, marmalade, gingerbread, jelly, comfit, sugar plate and divers others.*

References to wassailing involving trees/crops first appeared in 1585 (2) in Fordwich, Kent, but was also referred to in Devon in 1630 and Sussex in 1670 in the diary of a country parson, where it was referred to by its local term "apple howling". There are many references specifically in fruit growing areas of the country.

Although the practice was well established, particularly in southern England, the dates of performance vary considerably from the pre-Christmas period, especially Christmas Eve, to Plough Monday (the first Monday after 12th Day). Sometimes the event took place on several nights. However, Twelfth Night was especially popular, with parties held for playing cards, games, drinking, singing and merry making. It was common to have a "Twelfth Cake" as a centrepiece baked containing a pea and a bean. The recipient of the slice containing the bean was appointed King of the revel with the finder of the pea becoming Queen. (6)

The Wassail Cup itself was of some significance certainly between the 14th and 16th centuries being made of precious metals for well-to-do families, after which (17th C.) it degenerated to a wooden bowl when adopted by the common people. (2) Edmund the Earl of March left a silver wassail bowl on his death in 1382. An ancient wassail bowl is preserved in Jesus College, Oxford. In the north-east the wassail bowl was known as the Vessel Cup.

Another north-eastern feature of the wassail was to parade a doll in a box (known as a "milly-box") and this was accompanied by carol singing. In some areas the doll was covered and the audience were asked to pay to see the decorated Wassail Doll. (1)

The house visiting wassail seems to have varied between **bringing** a wassail treat and **asking** for a wassail treat (cf. "penny for the guy" or modern Halloween door knocking). As early as 1689 John Seldon wrote "*The Pope in sending rellicks to princes, do as wenches do by their wassails at New-years-tide, they present you with a cup, and you must drink of a slabby stuff; but the meaning is you must give them moneys, ten times more than it is worth."* (1)

Travelling vendors sold wassail by cup content but poor folk had an empty cup for collecting by singing carols and begging.

The apple tree blessing wassail, which frequently happened at dusk, was usually accompanied by noise from guns, banging pots and pans, shouting, horns, singing, etc., beating the trees and pouring cider on the roots. Toast was put on the branches for robins; the noise was generally regarded as being necessary to drive off evil spirits.

As with other parts of the ceremony the wassail song itself varied from county to county albeit with a number of common phrases. A Northamptonshire version was collected in 1853 (1):

Good master at your door, our wassail we begin;
We are all maidens poor, so we pray you let us in;
And drink our wassail, All hail Wassail;
Wassail, wassail and drink our wassail

Numerous variations were collected in the 19th/20th century from Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, Yorkshire (We've been a while a-wandering), etc.

A popular Somerset folk song went:

The girt dog of Langport he burnt his long tail,
And this is the night we go singing wassail;
O master and missus, now we must be gone,
God bless all in this house till we do come again.

In the Vale of White Horse they sung :

Wassail wassail all over the town, our toast it is white and our ale it is brown;
Our bowl it is made of a sycamore tree, and a wassailing bowl I will drink unto thee,

The song is similar to the Gloucester Wassail. The Vale merry makers carried a bowl which they hoped would be filled at each house visited. (7)

A song for tree wassailing was noted by Robert Herrick in 1648 :

Wassail the trees that they may beare, you many a plum, and many a peare;
For more or lesse fruits they will bring, as you doe give them wassailing.

Another tree related song and chant that was popular in the Wessex counties went like this:

Old apple tree we wassail thee
And hope that thou shalt bear
For the Lord doth know
Where we shall be
When apples come next year.
For to bloom well
And to bear well so merry let us be
Let every man take off his hat
And shout out to the old apple tree.

SHOUT: Old Apple tree, we wassail thee,
And hoping thou will be
Hat fulls, cap fulls, three bushel bagfuls
A little heap under the stairs.

Other songs make reference to the non-agricultural custom, viz:

We are not daily beggars
That beg from door to door;
But we are neighbours' children,
Whom you have seen before.

We have got a little purse
Of stretching leather skin;
We want a little of your money
To line it well within.

Although the concept of wassailing faded particularly after the Great War, in more recent times it seems to be making a comeback as a popular folk orientated jollification. The modern practice of

morris dancing accompaniment and dressing up (Green Man, Wassail Queen, etc.) was not a general traditional practice.

On 5th January 2019 (twelfth night), the Vale & Downland Museum held a wassailing to welcome some newly planted apple trees. There were craft activities for children, toast for the trees and an appropriate libation for their roots. A good crowd gathered with singing and dancing accompanied by the Icknield Way Morris Men with proceedings conducted by the Butler (Dr Jim Birch) and the Wassail Queen (Curator Suzie Tilbury).

References

(1) Roud. S., "The English Year", Penguin, 2006

(2) Hutton. R. "The Rise & Fall of Merry England" Oxford University Press 1994

(3) Brand, 'Observations', ed. Ellis, i. 2; Medii Aevi Kalendarium, ed. Hampson, 100-2.

(4) Victoria County History for Hertfordshire, Vol. 4, Ed. William Page, 1914

(5) Machin. H., Diary, Camden Society, 1848

(6) Day. B., "A Chronicle of Folk Customs", Hamlyn, 1998

(7) Bloxham. C., "May Day to Mummers: Folklore & Traditional Customs in Oxfordshire", Wychwood Press , 2002.