



Norma Waterson: English Folk Singing

Wassails

NORMA WATERSON:

At one time to go wassailling was probably good business for the farm workers and the less farm workers have been on the farm... well, it's just gradually died out. Although there are still some, the Bodmin wassailers still go and it's just the traditional wassail is now over.

What happened was that in some of the places, certainly outside Whitby some years ago it was noted that a hundred and fifty men had got dressed up, got blacked up, their swords with them and everything and they descended down – they were all farm labourers from the farms all around – they'd descended down into Whitby and they were noisy and they did this and they did that. And that's the start of wassailers. And wassailling just means be well, be hale, be hearty, it's an Anglo Saxon word.

And they went round with a wassail bowl and the bowl was usually made out of some form of fruit tree, they'd chop a fruit tree down, like a cherry or something like that and make a bowl out of it and they'd fill the bowl with, in the West Country it was cider because that's where cider was made. In other places it would be beer and in the hop country it would be beer... but anyway it was put in and little bits of toast would go up in the trees and they'd throw the cider or the beer or whatever it was over the trees

and say, you know, give us a good harvest for the next year and then they would go from house to house and the people in the houses thought it was unlucky not for them to do it. So they were all invited in and all given either money or Christmas cake or whatever whatever season it was. Wassailling like that only went on between a few weeks before Xmas and a few weeks after Old Xmas day which is January 6th.

By the plough lads, by the horsemen, all these people that worked on the farm because work at that time of year is very scarce and so they did something and the reason they disguised themselves... In the north we called them guisers and the reason they disguised themselves was because they were going banging on doors and shouting and stuff and they didn't want their masters – the people that employed them, they didn't want them to know that it was them.

So it was almost like an anonymous licence to go begging. But it has a long tradition of people going out at probably the coldest and darkest time of the year and bringing a little cheer into a house and a lot of people and just singing and dancing. You'd get a mummer's play with that. I belong to a guiser's team and we go round the farmhouses you know and the farmhouses, the farmers let you in, and you have groaning boards of food, absolutely wonderful. They usually make a hot mulled wine and so by the time we get home we're...

We have to have a driver, stays on the orange juice. But don't tell anybody because nobody knows who I am because we're all disguised!