

Fruits of Red Rose Forest

Seasonal Celebrations 1. – Winter

These are traditional activities which take place at certain times of the year. They could be used as a basis of a celebration event or as small activities that add value to another event. There is much more information available on the internet or in specialist books. Common Ground has also got lots of information on celebrations and apple activities. (Also see other activity card – Seasonal Celebrations 2)

Wassail!

The act of Wassailing has traditionally taken place on Epiphany or the eve or day of twelfth night, around the 5th/6th, January, at orchards all over the apple producing areas of the country. It was most prevalent in Somerset and Devon, but apparently absent in Herefordshire. A Wassail is a great way to celebrate your orchard at this dark time of year. Some folklorists have frowned upon a revival of a custom where it has not previously been performed, but we can argue that Apple trees have a right to be wassailed wherever they now grow!

Wassailing has given birth to customs as varied as first footing, carol singing and wishing others good health when supping. The word wassail is derived from *wes hal*, which is an Anglo-Saxon phrase meaning "be whole" or "be of good health". By the 18th Century the word conjured up images of drinking lots of ale and having a riotous time in the company of others.

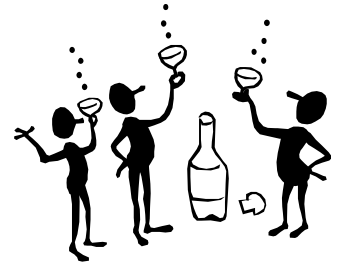


The main purpose of wassailing is to perform a ceremony to protect the trees from evil and to make them bear a plentiful crop in the coming season. Wassailing may have possible links with tree worship. The ceremony, however, is undoubtedly fun involving cider, songs, the firing of guns or thrashing of trees, horn blowing, and a community coming together on a cold Twelfth Night.

The ceremony took place in the orchard where the wassailers had previously chosen one tree to represent the whole orchard. As it grew dark the wassailers would gather around the chosen tree, carrying a pail of cider which would be used to toast the tree. A piece of toast, or a cake, soaked in cider would be laid in the tree fork or hung from the branches. In some orchards the wassailers mimed the tree bearing a good harvest by bowing down to the ground before it three times and rising slowly as though they were carrying a heavy sack of apples. Then a traditional song was sung to the tree.



When the formal toast and singing was over shotguns were (in modern times) fired through the top-most boughs while everyone shouted and blew horns. The overall aim was to drive away evil spirits and awaken the sleeping trees.



In Devon the wassailers stood around the chosen tree and sang
“Here’s to the tree, Old Apple tree! Whence thou mayst blow, and whenst thou mayst bear, Apples enow.

Hats full, caps full, Bushels, Bushels Sacks full, And my pockets full too!
Huzza! Huzza!”

After this the cider jug was passed around and with a cheery shout, guns filled with powder only, were fired into the trees among the branches.

A similar Rhyme was said in West Sussex. Wassailing became a free-lance venture, where a gang of ‘professional wassailers’ would go round all the local farms, offering to carry out the wassailing in return for food, drink or shelter. The chief wassailer, or Captain of the team, in the 1920’s was ‘Spratty Knight’. The team gathered in the orchard and Spratty blew his cow horn to frighten evil lurking spirits away. The team then hit the tree with sticks and sprinkled it with ale, then all sang:

“Stand fast root, bear well top. Pray good god, send us a howling crop.
Every twig, apples big, every bough, apples now. Hats full, caps full, 5 bushel sacks full. And a little heap under the stairs. Hulloo Boys, Hulloo and blow the horn!”

Sometimes, people shared drink from the Wassail bowl – this was usually a secret recipe of hot spiced cider with roasted apple pieces in it. Each person who drank from the bowl, took a piece of apple, wishing good luck to the company as they ate it.

Christmas – If the sun shines through the branches of an apple tree on Christmas Day, an abundant crop of apples is foretold.



Ideas Spot!



Why not..... 🍏 Have a go at Wassailing – gather your friends and colleagues and drink health to your Orchard 🍏 Try making your own wassail brew of warmed and spiced freshly squeezed apple juice 🍏 Hold a Wassail walk and share apple cake and apple punch 🍏 Use party poppers instead of shot guns to awaken the sleeping trees and hold a Wassail celebration party!

If you would like more information, please contact Red Rose Forest:

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Get involved

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