



# The Prancing Pony

The Official Newsletter of White Horse Morris

Issue #24

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## Christmas Pudding and Mulled Wine take their toll

Unfortunately it did not take long for all that hard work before Christmas to be undone.

Freed from the shackles of the European Union's dietary restrictions, the men and women of White Horse Morris celebrated their liberation on 1<sup>st</sup> January with a full English breakfast. This was followed by a binge on traditionally English foods such as Christmas pudding and mince pies "with lashings of double cream", pies and mash and sherry trifle. White Horse trainer Mike "Ziderboy" Perry (right) also attributed part of the blame squarely on the shoulders of Bagwoman Helen for her delicious but highly calorific mulled wine recipe in the Christmas *Prancing Pony*. However, in line with Government policy, no-one was willing to take responsibility for anything.

This month, Chris Hall sends greetings from "The North" with her story of "White Horse and Me" and we have several interesting video clips, also the announcement of another new arrival into the WH family.

January is traditionally the month of "Wassailing", and we feature an informative article by Liz Pike, along with some interesting film clips and several memories of some of White Horse's own recent wassailing outings.



### 70<sup>th</sup> (10<sup>th</sup>) anniversary – Squireal thoughts:

Your over-worked and under-paid officers have been thinking ahead and especially towards the 70th anniversary of the founding of White Horse Morris. Given the fluidity of the Covid situation these ideas are of course only tentative.

**Saturday April 24<sup>th</sup> (my birthday!)** – this date is the anniversary of when WHMM first danced out at The Lavington, Westbury in 1951. Depending on what we can and can't do we **EITHER** dance in Westbury / organise something with the local folk dance group **OR** walk/cycle/drive to Westbury White Horse from several locations, meeting at the top and if allowed, do a flash mob impromptu dance set.

**Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> September** – we organise a day of dance with invited sides/people followed by a ceilidh in Sutton Veny or Dinton Village Hall. This could be a bring food to share type event with a bar that we could buy in.

As things become clearer we will let you know but in the background, **alas**, we will work tirelessly on your behalf as we have a **collective duty** in these **unprecedented** times with so many **unforeseen** circumstances before we can restore normality. In other words, as we say in Eton *carpe diem et draco dormiens nunquam titilandus*.

### "White Horse Morris and Me"

Following the AGM, the Squire wrote to everyone *ex cathedra* requesting responses to these questions:

- What first got you interested in Morris dancing?
- How did you come to join White Horse?
- What do you like (most) about White Horse?
- What are your top six memories or experiences with White Horse?
- If you were given autocratic decision-making powers, what change would you make to the current White Horse kit?



We have received responses from quite a few of view but it would be great to hear from more White Horse past and present. So if you have not yet responded, please send in your answers.

### Chris Hall speaks from Northumbria

- Well, back in 1979 a couple of friends went along to practise with Ouse William Morris in Norfolk. OWM were later to become Ouse Washes Molly. They enthused about it so much that I felt I had to go along and try it. The rest is history, and I've danced in England, Wales, Hong Kong and New Zealand. However, the first time I experienced anything on the dance front that wasn't country dancing at school was in my teens when I used to go along to our local folk club. One Friday night the MC made an announcement to say how pleased they were to welcome a special guest. An unassuming guy

walked on to the stage, he was introduced as the new Northumberland and Durham Champion clog dancer. He held up a belt, similar to those that champion boxers have, broad and with many silver badges on it. His name had just been added that day. He proceeded to climb up onto a small, round pub table and danced the champion routine. I was blown away by it and really wanted to find out more and get involved. However, with no transport or means of finding a class, it was just filed away in my head for future reference. It's been filed away until September when I started learning some hornpipe steps over Zoom. I don't think I'll ever make a champion clog dancer!

- When I moved down to Wiltshire back in 1999, I started to look for a side to join. I decided that, although I liked the people, Sarum Morris wasn't for me as I didn't like their style of dance at the time. The Bristol Sides were just a bit too far away and I just couldn't see myself in the one red, one green leg of the Pig Sty kit at the time. So I was resigned to not dancing locally. I still had Bunnies, HK Morris and still occasionally 'guested' with Eryri in Wales and with anyone else who asked. At a Boxing Day dance out at Stourhead I got talking to John Wippell and he mentioned that WHM were about to launch a mixed side. I was very excited, this was just what I wanted. A local side. First practice - I was there.
- What I liked most about White Horse were that they were friendly and welcoming.
- My top memories with White Horse? Summer Solstice at Stonehenge, and Winter Solstice at Stonehenge. Dancing in the Co-op in Tisbury. Our workshop day with Mel, going with newbies to their first 'outside' workshop. Dancing at Weymouth festival.
- If you were given autocratic decision-making powers, what change would you make to the current White Horse kit?
- You know my views, but here goes: EVERYONE, in the same kit, white shirt, black trousers, baldricks for Cotswold and rag coats for Border. Personally I hate dancing in a hat but I know others like them. And .....No arm bands ☺

Love Chris



**Santa with Morris bells delivers cider to the thirsty in Bishopstrow**

Exciting video footage available below

[Click to Download](#)

**Wassail !**

*Wassail! wassail! all over the town,  
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown;  
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;  
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink to thee.  
Here's to our horse, and to his right ear,  
God send our master a happy new year:  
A happy new year as e'er he did see,  
With my wassailing bowl I drink to thee.*

Looking back to what seems like a different world and a different century, two years ago we were dancing in front of the Green Man to bless the orchard of the



Donhead Apple Company and benefited from their lovely cider. Last year we were wassailing in Stroud. In the article below (on p3), Liz Pike offers some historical background to the tradition of Wassailing, but before that, Mike Perry reminds us:



Only a year ago and we were in Stroud for the annual Wassail for what was to be our last official dance out



for 2020. Of course we tried to keep things going with the launch of *The Prancing Pony*, dancing at Bishopstrow and also the late practices at Fonthill Park Cricket Club.

We have lost a year of Morris Dancing and music and as importantly meeting up with the special friends that make White Horse Morris what it is. However, given the severity of what is happening across the country with the strains on the NHS, care homes, schools, work, businesses, mental health etc. this is really a small price to pay.

The vaccine roll-out has started and some of us will get this sooner than others but hopefully, we should start to see a decline in cases as a result of the lockdown and the lack of available hosts for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. I think it is important that when you are invited to get the vaccine you go and get it. It is, I think, both an act of self-protection but also a civic duty to help protect others.

Looking ahead we can't predict when we can get back to doing the things we love and how we will be able to do them. Hopefully, there will be some good things coming out of our experiences both on a personal level and also on the way society works. Perhaps we will be more caring, forward planning and able to use intelligence and expert information above mere rhetoric. I want this to be true and maybe it is just a dream but we can all do our part.

Sometime soon we will be together so please stay fit and healthy. Fitness for Morris is also fitness for life so do some stepping and capering on top of your normal fitness programme. See you all soon but for the moment un abbraccio e un bacione a tutti \* (bonus marks for translation). (Click link below).

Mike

- \* uścisk i wielki pocałunek dla wszystkich
- \* объятие и большой поцелуй всем
- \* 所有人的擁抱和親吻

[IMG\\_1872.MOV](#)  
13.1MB

### Wassailing with Liz Pike

Wassailing is another of our mid-winter ceremonies that has been practised for centuries. It almost died out in the 20th century but is now enjoying a revival. 'Wassail' probably derives from the Saxon Waes bu Hael meaning 'Be of good health' but may have links to the Scandinavian Waes Hael. It is documented in several mediaeval texts but is thought to be of much older origins though all relate to drinking. An anonymous Anglo-Norman poet witnessed this toast before the Battle of Hastings in 1066:

*Rejoice and Wassail,  
Pass the bottle and drink healthy,  
Drink backwards and drink to me,  
Drink half and drink empty.*

Wassailing was common throughout the country and has developed into several different customs covering the winter months; most relate to the Christmas period, particularly Twelfth Night when a Wassail cup was

passed round which are usually two-handled. In high society they were highly decorated and made out of gold and silver and frequently decorated with ribbons. Wassel cups were filled with warm ale or cider, often with fortified wines and spirits, together with exotic spices such as cinnamon and cloves. Eggs and cream were also frequent additions as were baked apples. These were sharing cups to drink a toast and pass round. No doubt they added to the merrymaking associated with Twelfth Night excesses of past times.

Certainly by the 13th century Wassailing referred to a festive occasion associated with drinking, pledging good health, singing and other entertainments.

Wassailing was not the preserve of the wealthy and took place across the county. The poor would take a wooden Wassail cup, usually made of white wood such as ash, around the village calling at



houses, particularly of their employers, singing Wassailing songs and sharing the cup, whilst requesting food and/or money. These seemed to happen any time from November to February. It is thought that these provided a form of benevolent aid to help the poor through the worst of the winter. Certainly the Wassailers were expected, with many of the songs referring to shutting the door and demanding a rhyme before flinging the doors open and inviting them in for a feast or asking for silver to fill empty purses. The Carollers then frequently blessed the farmer, his animals and crops.

Many songs have been collected from all over the country. Often troupes were formed of children or women and girls. Wassailing is thought to be the forerunner of carol singing around towns and villages and probably of first footing in Scotland. Most of the surviving songs were collected from this type of Wassailing. The song below is one of the common tunes but words varied depending on where collected.

*Here we come a Wassailing among the leaves so green.  
Here we come a wandering so fair to be seen.  
We are not daily beggars that beg from door to door,  
But we are neighbours' children whom you have seen before,  
We have a little purse made of stretching leather skin.  
We want some of your small change to line it well within.  
Bring out a table and spread it with a cloth,  
Bring us out a cheese and of your Christmas loaf,  
God bless the master of this house likewise the mistress too,  
And all the little children that round the table go.*

This tradition seems to have declined rapidly with industrialisation. Maybe the large towns were not so cohesive or the factory owners as benevolent. Also poor laws were being introduced so maybe the rich did not feel they needed to personally support the poor. Music Hall music was also replacing much of the traditional song which was seen as old fashioned. However, the tradition persisted in the countryside until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but seems to have largely died out between the wars.



Growing up alongside the above traditions was orchard Wassailing. This also goes back before mediaeval times. They seemed to be a much more private affair, involving individual farms or orchards, rather than the whole village. Some medieval accounts refer to groups of young men travelling from farm to farm with cow horns and sticks regaling the trees with the blowing of the horns and beating the trees with toast soaked in cider being put in the branches. Alcohol, of course, was central with pails of warm cider or ale brought to the orchard or the revellers invited into the farm house. Some accounts say the participants carried their own cups. The dregs were sprinkled around the roots of the trees to return the apple spirit back to the trees. Usually a verse or chant was made and in some areas songs were sung. This is an example of such a chant:

*Health to thee good apple tree  
Well to bear, pocketful, hatful,  
Peck fulls bushel bag fulls*

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, accounts record that guns and blunderbusses being fired into the tree was becoming a common practice. Orchard Wassailing seems to have been commonplace throughout the country but died out in most areas a lot earlier than house to house Wassailing, surviving only in the strongholds of the West Country, Sussex, Kent, Hereford and Worcester, all of which were important fruit growing areas.

The origins of events are tied up by mythology, magic and sprits but in principle the noise was to wake the trees from their winter slumber, the bread to appease the robin, believed to be the guardian spirit of the orchard and pouring cider to the roots to return the apple spirit back to the tree so ensuring a good crop. Although sounding pagan today it was condoned by the church

and formed part of the cycle of the church festivities for centuries although banned by Cromwell and the puritanical Victorian church. Traditionally Wassailing took place towards the end of the 12 days of Christmas before work resumed. It is not certain when or why the ceremony moved to the 17<sup>th</sup> January. The calendar moved back 12 days in 1752 but there is little evidence to support the ceremony moving to the old Twelfth Night until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today 17<sup>th</sup> January is generally regarded as Wassailing day.



As with house to house Wassailing, it had almost died out before the folk revival of the 1970's, largely brought back by Morris sides (drinking and sticks being a good fit). Today it is enjoying a huge revival with many organised events by cider producers, community orchards and Morris events. The Green Man seems to have merged into the ceremonies as part of this revival, possibly because of the need for a MC at modern events. Peter and I held our own private Wassail alternate years for many years, as well as the apple ceremony which Peter claimed killed most of the trees. Wassailers were provided with a selection of delicious curries made by Peter followed by a music session. I have not held one since his death but maybe next year??

Liz Pike

### **Wassailing in Devon**

Many of the points made by Liz above are reflected and shown in this excellent short video "*Wassail! Singing to trees: A pagan tradition*" posted by Survive the Jive on YouTube about the wassailing events in two Devon villages, Sandford and Bideford.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFwKFseL8WQ>

The notes say:

*"The Anglo-Saxons left a pagan Winter tradition in Western England where people sing to the apple trees to encourage a good harvest, and this is called Wassailing. Wassail comes from Old English "wes hal" meaning "be healthy". There are many well attested records of the tradition of "wassailing the apple trees" from the 16th century onwards – but this practice is generally agreed to be far older. Each village has its own customs, but singing to the trees, offering them toast and making noise are common to all.*

*In this video I visit two small villages in Devon to demonstrate the Wassailing tradition. It includes firing guns into the air, hanging toast in the tree branches, electing a Wassail King or queen to lead the procession, a mummings play of an axeman who attacks the trees, lots of cider drinking and lots of singing too! Thanks to Sandford orchard and all the people who participated in the two events."*

From the British Film Archive it is also fascinating to watch the (slightly staged) Pathé News film from 1927 showing a lot of cyder (sic) being consumed at Whipple in Devon,

[Wassailing Apple Trees - British Pathé \(britishpathe.com\)](http://www.britishpathe.com)

and black and white footage from Carhampton in Somerset which shows locals firing shotguns and drinking cider from a two-handled wassail bowl.

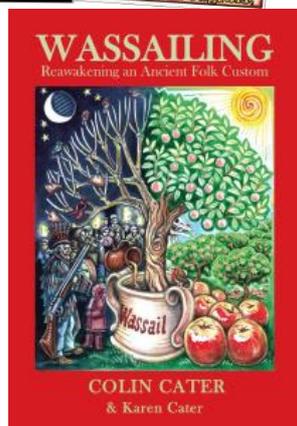
[Watch Carhampton Wassail online - BFI Player](http://www.bfi.com)

### Wassail Greetings

Some readers may be familiar with the East Anglian artist Karen Cater who produces a complete range of beautifully illustrated greetings cards which celebrate the traditional customs of the folk calendar, including Christmas and Mumming.



Wassailing is among them and there is also a book, which looks at the origins of the custom and its recent revival. Follow this link to the HeddinghamFair website.



[https://www.heddinghamfair.co.uk/all\\_customs.htm](https://www.heddinghamfair.co.uk/all_customs.htm)

### Some good news from Open Morris!

In renewing our membership of Open Morris, we were pleased to discover that affiliation fees have been waived for the coming year, in recognition of the reality that sides had no income from their usual sources.

### Holly and Daisy sticking in 2017

It was interesting to receive a video clip from Sarah showing Holly and Daisy dancing as long ago as 2017, proving once again the value of parents hanging onto old photographs and videoclips of their children so that they can embarrass them in later life.



[VIDEO0085.3gp](#)

### Another Emily, Another Matilda - In these dark times some wonderful news from The Wippells

.....We are delighted to announce that Emily and Ben have another little girl, 7lb 15oz, born by C section on New Year's Eve and named Matilda Margaret Judd. We stayed for one night beforehand to look after three-year old Polly but came home once we knew Emily and the baby were safely delivered so we haven't been able to see Matilda.

Bristol was also in Tier 3 so we are allowed to be in a bubble, but we need to be certain that Emily and Ben have not contracted the virus during their time in Hospital before our next visit. Thankfully Emily is now back home after two nights away and all is good, particularly with Polly who after the initial shock is coming round to the idea of being a big sister!

We would like to point out that it is a rather strange coincidence that Emily Farewell's new baby is also called Matilda as we were not consulted at any stage about the name selected!

Carol and John

### Peter Swann

It was with great sadness that we heard from Graham Lever that Peter Swann has passed after a long illness.

Peter was a caller and musician and with his wife Susan was active in the EFDSS and was well known to many in White Horse Morris. Pat McGovern added that he remembered Peter fondly. He was such a nice man and had such a wealth of knowledge about the Dance.

Our condolences go to Susan and her family.

Mike

**All items for the next Prancing Pony to Mike Perry by Friday 12 February, and preferably sooner.**

### Right!

Please write something: words or pictures or both. We are particularly looking for articles that are thought-provoking, entertaining and informative, but as you will know, will accept *anything*, however banal! For example you might like to share with other WHM readers your what you are doing to keep yourself sane and positive – if applicable – during these dark times.