



*A Salisbury-Cathedral-centric view of History.*

*Editor: Mark Brandon: markandsuebrandon@outlook.com*

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## YE OLDE CHRISTMAS

The J&T library now comprises some 272 books and under the Local History section, the most prolific author is John Chandler. In 1991 he compiled *A Wiltshire Christmas*, published by Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd. It is full of lovely anecdotes, stories and poems, some even in the Wiltshire dialect like this verse by Edward Slow of Wilton published between 1867 and 1898:

*Wen in Zalsbry oft I went,  
Var measter on a errant zent,  
I warn, mwoast ael me brass wur spent,  
In buyin zim figgetty pooden.*

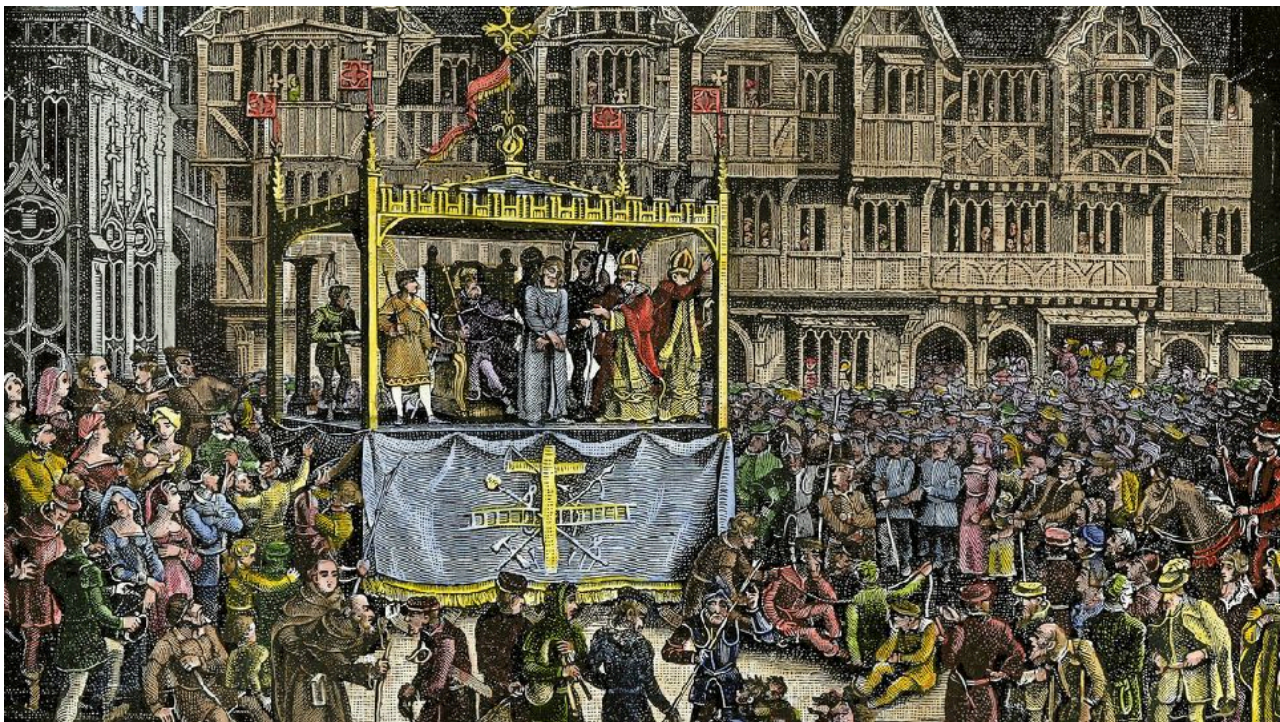


Illustration of a mystery play performance from Thomas Sharp's 'Coventry Mysteries', 1825.

Edith Olivier (1872 - 1948) like Edward Slow became Mayor of Wilton although she was of a different social class, living at the Daye House on the Wilton estate and befriending the talented such as Rex Whistler and Cecil Beaton. Her father was rector and she recalls helping to make the church decorations:

*But the great undertaking each year was making the wreaths of evergreen, for over six hundred yards were required to twine round the pillars and to hang festoons between them. The only place in Wilton which was big enough for this wreath-making was the Manège at Wilton House (area for training horses and riders), with its sawdust covered floor, and here we spent about ten days every December. Wooden benches were placed in rows down the length of the Manège, and upon these were laid pieces of rope, some of which*

were thirty and some forty-five feet long. One end of each piece was fastened to a nail at the end of the bench, and then we sat down and moved slowly backward, as we tied in the pieces of ilex (holm-oak), holly, box and laurel, of which the festoon was composed. Our teacher was an old gardener, who had done this kind of thing all his life, and he was very strict about our technique. We had to sit 'straddle-legged', and to learn how to graduate the different lengths of stalk in our greenery, so as to make the festoon really strong. It was bitterly cold in the Manège, and around us, as we worked, there rose a cloud of thin dust, made of sawdust and pollen. It always gave me hay-fever, and I sneezed steadily all the time.



Cecil Beaton (1904 - 1980), mentioned above, records being invited to a children's party in 1931 at Ferne House near Donhead (Home of Lord Rothermere, above) when Cecil was living at Ashcombe:

*Soon the village children from Berwick St John trooped in by invitation - fifty or sixty of them standing like a military unit. They had large heads, weedy complexions, and goggle eyes. An overfat schoolmaster, crimson in the face, conducted a hymn while his minions sang with only a remote interest in the proceedings.*

*The Duchess stood to attention surrounded by many ugly, grey-haired women, including a few deaf mutes. The village children, puny and unattractive, made a startling contrast to the healthy ducal offspring.... One boy was asked the main difference between town and country and ruggedly replied, 'Oi think the moir difference is that in the cities there is so much dust and doirt and muck. In the country, the air is different and there are flewers.'*

*'Quite right, that is excellent.' The Duchess seemed a stalking crane in her off-white flannel skirt, socks and gym shoes. Finally she excoriated those who are cruel to the animals. 'Above all you must be kind to birds.'*

I am not sure if country folk between the wars were both inbred and poorly educated or if, as Hugo Vickers (who edited his diaries) wrote: *Cecil can be as venomous as anyone I have ever read or heard in the most shocking conversation.* I wonder if this trait goes back to his school days when he was reportedly bullied by Evelyn Waugh!

## YE MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS

**M**artyn Whittock's *Life in the Middle Ages* (Constable & Robinson 2009), contains this section:

*The block of time between 26 December and 6 January was regarded as one interlinked sequence of festivities in which there were three fast days in the middle, surrounded by celebrations. The Sarum Rite*



The late fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which describes the seasonal festivities at the legendary court of King Arthur:

*The king lay at Camelot at Christmas-tide  
with many a lovely lord, lieges most noble...  
and jousted full joyously these gentle lords;  
then to the court they came at carols to play.  
For there the feast was unfailing fifteen  
days.*

Left, a painting from the original manuscript courtesy of the British Library and in the Public Domain.

indicates that Christmas Day should start with a Mass. This was followed by reciting the genealogy of Christ, which was accompanied by lighting of candles and tapers in the darkened church. The largest of these was the candle burning on the rood loft, the wooden screen dividing the chancel from the

nave and surmounted by statues of Jesus, St John and the Virgin Mary.....On 26 December, St Stephen the first Christian martyr was remembered. 27 December became the day of St John the Evangelist. 28 December was Holy Innocents' Day, which recalled the children of Bethlehem murdered by Herod's soldiers. This day linked back to Christmas Day and forward to 6 January, Epiphany. 1 January, already significant as New Year's Day, became the feast of Christ's Circumcision. Older traditions concerning New Year's Day continued to cause concern to Church leaders. In northern England it was influenced by activities whose roots went back to Viking times and to which has become attached the Scandinavian word 'Yule'. This word was not known in England before the eleventh century, though it may have had an earlier form to describe midwinter events which were pagan in origin.....

At Torksey (Lincolnshire), an amnesty for disputes was called yule-girth: at York this ran for 12 days from St Thomas' Day on 21 December and apparently attracted many undesirable characters to the city to make the most of this permissive period.... In 1155, New Year's Day was shifted to 25 March, which was the Christian feast of the Annunciation. This way of calculating the start of the year lasted until 1752. Despite this, New year's Eve and New Year's Day continued to be a time of community events.

## YE ELIZABETHAN CHRISTMAS

In Mortimer's *The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England* (Vintage 2013), writes at length about Christmas, the details of which highlight the extreme difference between the experiences of the rich and poor.

At a truly great feast, dozens of dishes are laid out at each course. When Robert Dudley entertains the queen at Kenilworth in 1575 she is served by 200 gentlemen carrying more than a thousand dishes of silver and glass. Two years later Elizabeth decides to call on Lord North at Kirtling; she stays from suppertime on Sunday 1 September to after dinner on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup>, and this is the food that Lord north has to provide for the two-day visit:



(above, Elizabethan yule log)



*Bread: 1,200 manchet loaves (a small loaf for breakfast), 3,600 loaves of cheat bread (made from second grade flour) and 276 extra loaves*

*Meat: 11<sup>1/2</sup> cows, 17<sup>1/2</sup> veal calves, 67 sheep, 7 lambs, 34 pigs, 96 coneyes, 8 stags made into 48 pasties, 16 bucks made into 128 pasties, and 8 gammons of bacon*

*Birds: 32 geese, 363 capons (castrated chicken fattened for eating), 6 turkeys, 32 swans, 273 ducks, 1 crane, 38 heronsews, 110 bitterns, 12 shovellers, 1,194 chickens, 2,604 pigeons, 106 pewits, 68 godwits, 18 gulls, 99 dotterels, 8 snipe, 29 knots, 28 plovers, 5 stints, 18 redshank, 2 yerwhelps (snipe), 22 partridges, 1 pheasant, 344 quail, and 2 curlews*

*Fish: 3 kegs of sturgeon (kegs were 4 - 5 gallons of pickled sturgeon), 96 crayfish, 8 turbot, a cartload and 2 horse loads of oysters, 1 barrel of anchovies, 2 pike, 2 carp, 4 tench, 12 perch and 300 red (smoked) herring*

*Other: 2,201 cows' tongues, feet and udders, 18lbs lard, 430lbs butter, 2,522 eggs, 6 Dutch cheeses, 10 marchpanes (marzipans), £16 4s-worth of sugar, and £29 1s 9d-worth of salad, roots and herbs*

*The whole visit, during which he entertains more than 2,000 people, cost him £642 4s 2d - say £233,000 today (not including a present of a jewel worth £120 for the queen - say £44,000 today). Imagine cooking all that (re-enactment above).*

When it comes to the poor, Ian reckons that a sailor would be given 5,800 calories per day at a cost of 4.1<sup>1/2</sup>d. A labourer would earn 4d a day so cannot afford



more than 5,100 calories - not enough to feed his family as well as himself, let alone pay for clothes and other requirements. Most of the time their bread would be made from rye, barley or *maslin* (a mixture of wheat and rye). However, when crops failed they would make bread from peas, beans, oats and acorns.

The theatre (Globe, page 4) was very much part of Tudor Christmas entertainment - think of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* - along with the role-reversal intrinsic to *The Feast of Fools* (Christian adaptation of Roman *Saturnalia*) and *The Lord of Misrule* (Official who managed Christmas festivities in great houses, colleges and Inns of Court). It was quite normal for a whole town to be involved(right).



**THE GENIUS OF POSEY**

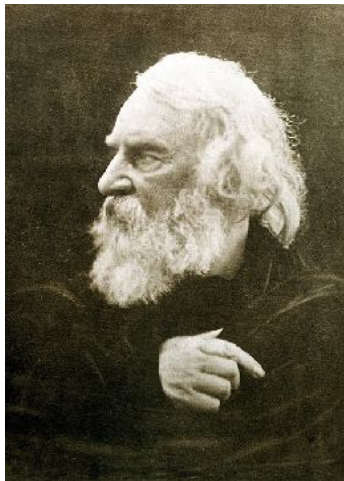
**W**ith constant news from the Ukraine and Palestine I have chosen American, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 to 1882) to end this Christmas miscellany:

I heard the bells on Christmas day  
 Their old familiar carols play,  
 And wild and sweet the words repeat  
 Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought how, as the day had come,  
 The belfries of all Christendom  
 Had rolled along th'unbroken song  
 Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:

**To all Jot & Tittle  
 readers, we wish  
 you a happy and  
 restful Christmas.**



The portrait is by the brilliant \*photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1868) who lived at Freshwater (near Alfred Lord Tennyson) on the Isle of Wight and was the innovator of the close-up. \*Praised by Darwin and Herschel.

'There is no peace on earth, ' I said  
 'For hate is strong, and mocks the song  
 Of peace on earth, good will to men.'

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;  
 The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,  
 With peace on earth, good will to men.'

Till, ringing, singing on its way,  
 The world revolved from night to day  
 A voice, a chime, a chant sublime,  
 Of peace on earth, good will to men.