

Apple Traditions & Tales



Wassailing was traditionally held between Christmas and 18th January, often on Twelfth Night (the old date of 17th January) as a celebration of the cider apple and ceremony to ensure a good crop in the coming season. This was traditional in southern counties in particular Wessex – the old counties of Devon and Somerset – where cider was a major contributor to the local economy. Wassail comes from Anglo Saxon *wes hal*, was haile or wase hail: to be in good health or be fortunate.

In one tradition the farmer, his family and friends would eat hot cakes and drink cider before going after dark to the orchard for the ceremony. A tree was chosen, usually the oldest, and the good spirits were greeted by putting a piece of toast or cake soaked in cider among the branches. More cider would be sprinkled on the ground as a libation. To scare off evil spirits, the men fired guns into the boughs and banged on kettles and pots while the others in the party would bow and sing the Wassail Song:

*Here's to thee, old apple tree,
Whence thou may'st bud and whence thou may'st blow!
And whence thou may'st bear apples enow.
Hatsfull! Capsfull!
Bushel – bushel – sacksfull!
And my pockets full too! Huzza!*

Another version of the tradition has the best or oldest tree chosen to represent them all, known as the Apple Tree Man. This was feted as a guardian of the orchard.

The tree was treated as above, but also the tips of the lowest branches were lowered and dipped into the cider pail before being toasted with cider and songs. The trees were rapped and sometimes bark torn off. A huge noise was made by beating trays and buckets and blowing rams horns to drive away evil spirits and waken the trees. This was thought to dislodge insects from the bark and tearing it was supposed to bring early fruit.

A version of the wassail song from Sussex and Devon where boys went to the orchard on New Year's Day to circle the trees chanting:

*Stand fast, bear well top,
Pray God send us a howling crop;
Every Twig, apples big;
Every bough, apples enow,
Hats full, caps full
Full quarter sacks full.*

A wassail song from Norton Fitzwarren, Somerset:

*Old Apple tree, we wassail thee,
And hoping thou wilt bear
For the lord doth know where we shall be
Til the apple come another year;
For us to baer well and bloom well,
So merry let us be*



*Let every man take off his hats
And shout to the Old Apple Tree;
Old Apple Tree, we wassail thee,
And hoping thou wilt bear
Hatfuls, capfuls,
Three bushel bagfuls
And a little heap under the stair.*



Similar celebrations took place, varying from place to place, linked by a belief that if trees weren't wassailed then there would be no apples. Sometimes men would show the trees what was expected of them by bowing down to the ground three times and rising up slowly, miming the actions of lifting a heavy sack of apples.

Yorkshire Brides used to take grafts of their favourite fruit trees with her to grow in her new orchard when she moved to her husband's home.

Apple Gifting took place in apple growing areas of Britain including some parts of Wales. Apples were decorated and taken from house to house as a sign of friendship, good health and to bring good luck. They symbolised sweetness, fertility and immortality. They have been used as religious symbols in association with the offerings of the Three Wise Men in Christianity and also believed to be used in Druidic rites.

Apples could be transformed into "The Gift" by coating in oats, wheat grain and raisins. Three sticks were pushed into the apple to make a stand and the top was trimmed with scented evergreen sprigs such as box, yew or thyme and hung with hazel nuts. The apples were dusted with flour and highlighted with gold leaf.

Apples were presented at Ripon Collegiate Church on Christmas Day. Choir boys brought red apples decorated with a sprig of rosemary to give to members of the congregation in return for money.

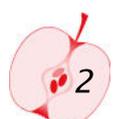
The Unfruitful Tree by Friedrich Adolph Krummacher.

A farmer had a brother in town who was a gardener, and who possessed a magnificent orchard full of the finest fruit trees, so that his skill and his beautiful trees were famous everywhere.

One day the farmer went into town to visit his brother, and was astonished at the row of trees that grew slender and smooth as wax tapers. "Look, my brother," said the gardener, "I will give you an apple tree, the best from my garden, and you, and your children, and your children's children shall enjoy it."

Then the gardener called his workmen and ordered them to take up the tree and carry it to his brother's farm. They did so, and the next morning the farmer began to wonder where he should plant it. "If I plant it on the hill," said he to himself, "the wind might catch it and shake down the delicious fruit before it is ripe; if I plant it close to the road, passers-by will see it and rob me of its luscious apples; but if I plant it too near the door of my house, my servants or the children may pick the fruit."

So after he had thought the matter over, he planted the tree behind his barn, saying to



himself: "Prying thieves will not think to look for it here."

But behold, the tree bore neither fruit nor blossoms the first year nor the second; then the farmer sent for his brother the gardener, and reproached him angrily, saying: "You have deceived me, and given me a barren tree instead of a fruitful one. For, behold, this is the third year and still it brings forth nothing but leaves!"



The gardener, when he saw where the tree was planted, laughed and said: "You have planted the tree where it is exposed to cold winds, and has neither sun nor warmth. How, then, could you expect flowers and fruit? You have planted the tree with a greedy and suspicious heart; how, then, could you expect to reap a rich and generous harvest?"

The Little Red House with No Doors and No Windows and a Star Inside (Anon). A story to tell your children. Have a red apple and knife handy for the end of the story.

There was once upon a time a little boy who was tired of all his toys and, tired of all his play. "What shall I do?" he asked his mother. And his mother, who always knew beautiful things for little boys to do, said, "You shall go on a journey and find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside."

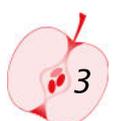
This really made the little boy wonder. Usually his mother had good ideas, but he thought that this one was very strange. "Which way shall I go?" he asked his mother. "I don't know where to find a little red house with no doors and no window."

"Go down the lane past the farmer's house and over the hill," said his mother, "and then hurry back as soon as you can and tell me all about your journey."

So the little boy put on his cap and his jacket and started out. He had not gone very far down the lane when he came to a merry little girl dancing in the sunshine. Her cheeks were like pink petals and she was singing like a robin. "Do you know where I shall find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?" asked the little boy. The girl laughed, "Ask my father, the farmer," she said, "perhaps he knows."

So the little boy went on until he came to the great brown barn where the farmer kept barrels of fat potatoes and baskets of yellow squashes and golden pumpkins. The farmer himself stood in the doorway looking out over the green pastures and yellow grain fields. "Do you know where I shall find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?" asked the little boy of the farmer. The farmer laughed too. "I have lived a great many years and I never saw one," he chuckled, "but ask Granny who lives at the foot of the hill. She knows how to make molasses, taffy and popcorn balls, and red mittens! Perhaps she can direct you."

So the little boy went on further still, until he came to the Granny, sitting in her pretty garden of herbs and marigolds. She was wrinkled as a walnut and as smiling as the sunshine. "Please, dear Granny," said the little boy, "where shall I find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?" Granny was knitting a red mitten, and when she heard the little boy's question, she laughed so cheerily that the wool ball rolled off her lap and down the little pebbly path. "I should like to find that little house myself," she chuckled, "I should be warm when the frosty night comes and the starlight would be



prettier than a candle. But ask the wind who blows about so much and listens at all the chimneys. Perhaps the wind can direct you."



So the little boy took off his cap and tipped it politely to the Granny and went on up the hill rather sorrowfully. He wondered if his mother, who usually knew almost everything, had perhaps made a mistake. The wind was coming down the hill as the little boy climbed up. As they met, the wind turned about and went along, singing beside the little boy. It whistled in his ear, and pushed him and dropped a pretty leaf into his hand. "I wonder, " thought the little boy, after they had gone along together for awhile, "if the wind could help me find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?"

The wind cannot speak in our words, but it went singing ahead of the little boy until it came to an orchard. There it climbed up in the apple tree and shook the branches. When the little boy climbed up, there at his feet lay a great rosy apple.

The little boy picked the apple. It was as much as his two hands could hold. It was as red as the sun had been able to paint it, and the thick brown stem stood up as straight as a chimney, and it had no doors and no windows. Was there a star inside?

The little boy called to the wind, "Thank you." and the wind whistled back, "You're welcome." Then the little boy gave the apple to his mother. His mother took a knife (At this point start cutting an apple crosswise) and cut the apple though the centre. Oh, how wonderful! There inside the apple lay a star holding brown seeds. "It is too wonderful to eat without looking at the star, isn't it?" the little boy said to his mother. "Yes indeed." answered his mother.

The Story of William Tell.

When Switzerland was ruled by Austria there was much unrest. William Tell, a good patriot, had a reputation as the best crossbowman in the country. Gessler, the tyrant overseeing his district, decreed that anyone not saluting the Austrian Emblem would die.

Tell refused and was arrested. As part of his punishment his son was taken and tied to a tree with an apple placed on his head. Tell was ordered to shoot the apple off his son's head.

Tell took up his crossbow and two arrows. His first shot split the apple in two, burying itself in the tree. Turning to Gessler he said: "If I'd hurt the boy the other arrow would have been in your heart."

Tell was condemned to prison instead of death. On the way across Lake Uri to the prison, a storm blew up. Tell was also an excellent oarsman so he was untied to help row the boat away from the storm. As they approached the shore he escaped.

Gessler threatened to kill Tell's family if he didn't surrender, but Tell ambushed him and killed him. Inspired by Tell's actions the Swiss rose up and drove out the Austrians. Tell was offered the crown of Switzerland but he refused and returned to his home in the mountains.