

## **January: The Apple**

### **Wassailing An Ancient English ritual**

It is midwinter in England. On one of the darkest nights in January, an ancient ritual of thanksgiving and renewal is still performed,

A small group of us carrying pots and pans, whistles and wind-chimes process behind an accordion player, along a narrow, winding lane into an apple orchard, tucked away in a tiny Somerset village. Once here, bonfires are lit, casting light and warmth into the icy darkness.

We gather around one of the oldest and most venerable trees, the guardian of the orchard, traditionally known as the Apple Tree Man, to toast its health, wishing it 'waes hael' - 'good health' in Old English, for the coming year. We sing the 'wassail' song, and cider made from juice pressed from apples borne by this and other apple trees in the orchard is tipped around its roots. A young girl is lifted up to place a piece of toast that has been soaked in cider in the crook of two of the lower branches of the tree. The toast is for the robins and blue tits - considered to be the guardian spirits of the trees. To the accompaniment of the accordion we sing again and make as much noise as we can - before moving away to warm ourselves by the fires and drink hot apple juice and cider.

Wassailing is a very ancient English drinking ritual believed to have its roots in Celtic ceremonies, performed in the depths of winter, to give thanks to the gods associated with vegetation and fertility, to ensure that crops and animals would be bountiful and to welcome in the coming year.

According to accounts dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> C onwards, Old Twelfth Night (according to the Christian calendar), 17<sup>th</sup> January, was generally regarded as the traditional date for wassailing, but events were also held on other days in January or during December. At this time of year a wassail bowl - traditionally made of carved wood and filled with an alcoholic mixture likely to comprise hot cider, or ale, spices, sugar and roasted crab apples - might be taken from house to house for the purpose of drinking a toast to good health. Domestic animals, such as oxen, might be 'wassailed' too.

The wassailing of orchards, to bless their trees, ward off disease and help ensure a good crop of apples for the coming year was widely considered essential if disaster was to be avoided. It is most closely associated with the cider-producing counties of the South-West of England (Somerset, Devon Dorset, Gloucestershire) and South East England, where orchards and cider-making formed part of the fabric of daily life.

**ANNA LEWINGTON**  
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The recent revival of interest in orchards, especially community orchards throughout Britain and in cider making, many 'wassailing' ceremonies are being re-enacted once more.

### **Mid Winter Festivals**

Samhain was the Celtic festival which marked the end of summer. At this time it was believed that the vegetation gods retreated underground and that the doors between that world and this were not quite closed. Rituals of thanksgiving and divination were performed during the festival in which apples played an important part. In ancient Celtic stories, apples were linked with paradise and immortality, and seen as the source of everlasting youth. During the Samhain festival apples might be buried in the earth to feed the souls of ancestors as they made their way between the two worlds. Apples and nuts were also roasted in a sacred fire and alcoholic drinks of apples and ale were served.

The Celts and ancient northern European peoples revered the apple, as did the Romans for whom it was a symbol of abundance and fertility. Pomona was the Roman goddess of orchards and the harvest, and a festival dedicated to her was celebrated at the beginning of November.

These feasts were both taken over by the Christian church (as the feast of All Souls and All Saints) and became Halloween.

### **Cider**

Fermented apple drinks were made by the Celts in antiquity from native crab apples and also by the Romans, who brought cultivated apple varieties with them to Britain.

The British enthusiasm for cider however is attributed to the arrival of the Normans in the 11<sup>th</sup> C; as cider became the most popular drink after ale at this time and was used to pay tithes and rents. During the middle ages most of the apples grown in Europe were used for cider making.

A boost to cider production and the provision of fruit for eating, occurred in the late 1600s when farmers, landowners and smallholders turned to fruit trees as a source of income, and planted large numbers of orchards. This regional pattern of commercial apple growing was to last until the end of the 19thC and lay the foundations of the West Country's famous cider industry. By 1667, cider had become the national drink and orchards and cider production, especially in the West Country, the West Midlands and Shropshire and neighbouring counties, created a farming pattern that shaped English rural life. In the 18thC a cider allowance became part of a farm worker's wages.

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*Kings Favourite, Golden Bittersweet, Buttery Dors, Tom Putts, Sweet Coppin, Fillbarrel, Warrior, Yeovil Sour* are just a few of the apple varieties once commonly found in the cider apple orchards of the West Country. Their fascinating names suggest the range of flavours and characteristics – generally classed as either sharp and bitter, or bittersweet – that distinguish them and the cider they produce.

The last ten years has seen a revival of interest in the production of ciders in Britain and enthusiasts have been searching out old varieties as well as planting new orchards.

**Saving The Threatened Home Of Apple Ancestors**

All our modern apple varieties are believed to be descended from the wild apple *Malus sieversii* native to Kazakhstan, in Central Asia.

A belt of ancient forests here, extending also through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan is the home not just of this and other apple species, but of some 300 varieties of wild fruit and nut trees, including apricots, cherries, plums and walnuts, from which domesticated varieties are believed to be descended.

But these bountiful forests – described by the Russian geneticist Nicolai Vavilov in the 1920s as ‘the Garden of Paradise’ - are in trouble: in the last 50 years some 80% have been destroyed by human development, over-grazing, pests and diseases and fires. Many species are now threatened with extinction.

Due to the mountainous and fragmented landscape in which they are found, the genetic diversity of these trees is very high and could be of critical importance in the breeding of new climate-tolerant or disease-resistant varieties of the modern fruits – including apples - that we take for granted today.

Flora & Fauna International, a British conservation charity, has been working to try and save one of the most highly threatened apple species *Malus niedzwetsky* and by 2014 2,000 saplings had been grown from seed and planted in the forest. A collaborative project led by Prof Adrian Newton of Bournemouth University was launched in Kyrgyzstan in 2009, to conduct research on threatened trees, train Kyrgyz scientists and involve local people in the sustainable use of their forests.