

History Notes (7)

CHRISTMAS IN CRICK OVER 150 YEARS AGO

With Christmas approaching we often reflect on past times when ideally there were always carols by candlelight in a snowy village. But what was it really like in Crick nearly 150 years ago? To help answer this question I found an article written in 1976 by E W Timmins, published in the Christmas edition of Crick News in which he describes Christmas traditions in the mid 1800s. These traditions would have continued well into the early 1900s, perhaps even within living memory.

Today we are used to public services and businesses being closed for most of the time from Christmas Eve until New Year. This was not the case in the 1800s and early 1900s. The village then was much more agricultural and the Christmas holiday was confined to just two days. It did not have the same significance as today: newspapers were published even on Christmas Day. Nevertheless, villagers put a great deal of effort and enthusiasm into their festivities, and because no ready-made entertainment such as television was available, they derived great pleasure from making their own.

E W Timmins tells us that, “A series of ‘Penny Readings’ was held in the school for several years at Christmas time with seasonable songs, carols, recitations, Christmas readings etc., including on occasions humorous songs by Mr. Darnell, which he made up to everyone’s apparent delight. At other times, equally successful entertainments were Carol Concerts given by the whole of the Church choir and the musical part of the congregation, and of course there was always the general Village Concert.”

‘Penny Readings’ were introduced and became popular in Victorian Times and continue today, for example, the Crick Music Society’s soirees. They were an entertainment comprising individual recitals, instrumental performances, songs and readings from well known published sources such as Shakespeare, Scott and Dickens. Do not confuse these ‘Penny Readings’ with music hall entertainment, where acts of original material were performed and would have been comparatively expensive to attend. ‘Penny Readings’ were great mass entertainment, cheap to attend and filled halls that would otherwise have been left empty.

As we would expect, the Church was central to the community celebrations and the focus of every individual’s effort. Again E W Timmins tells us, “A special community effort by the churchgoers was the decoration of their church, and the finished work was considered worth seeing for its own sake. For example, in 1870 it was regarded as particularly attractive. The walls of the nave and aisles were festooned with evergreens, which were also used to inlay the arches. Over the chancel arch were the words “The Lord is in His Holy Temple” in gold on crimson, and the organ-gallery carried the lines “Hark the Herald Angles sing Glory to the new-born King” in white on scarlet. The pulpit had a cross of white frost on a scarlet cloth studded with gold stars on each panel. Two large lilies-of-the-valley encircled by a gold crown on a scarlet background appeared on the panels of the reading desk, with a white cross on the front panel. The north wall of the chancel was covered by a huge 12-pointed star in scarlet and green, with “an illuminated representation of the Lamb” in the centre, and surrounded by the text “The Word was made Flesh, and dwelt amongst us”. The reredos, lectern and font were also covered with decorations. To us, this seems all rather overdone, but it was very much to the taste of that Victorian age.

The services at Christmas in church were usually an Evensong on Christmas Eve, either at 3 p.m. or 6.30 p.m., and on Christmas Day there was a service with Communion at 10.30 a.m. and Evensong again either in the afternoon or evening.”

It is notable that the midnight service on Christmas Eve was absent. This service was originally introduced earlier in pre-Reformation times but its popularity had died out and it had not yet been revived.

Christmas dinner, just as today, was a feast. “The prime Christmas fare was still traditional English beef, a survival from the days when, at Martinmas, (November 11th), animals which could not be wintered because of insufficient winter feed had to be killed and salted down; this was always followed by “plumb” pudding, which was the successor to the old Yule-tide cake. The meat was always well displayed in the butchers’ shops, and in 1874, Mr. W. Edmunds ‘exhibited one superior ox, fed by John Cowley, esq., of Kilsby Grange; one prime heifer bought by auction at Northampton market; also a good bacon pig, two choice porklets and four prime Down shearhogs’. A similar show was put on by Mr. R. Bales with other locally produced carcasses”.

As far as I can tell, ‘shearhogs’ are sheep, possibly male, but certainly less than a year old and before the wool has been sheared. The word ‘Down’ refers to the breed. Pigs were called porkers and ‘porklets’ would be a pig under a year old. These animals would be surplus to a farmer’s requirement and would have been slaughtered being too expensive to keep over the winter.

The main difference in the Christmas dinner then as opposed to now was the dominance of meat. We see the butchers selling ox, beef, bacon, ham, pork, and lamb. Poultry was not much in evidence and turkeys had not yet been introduced. The meat for each household would be cooked in the local bake-house - there were three or four in the village at this time – probably delivered to the baker before the mid morning Church service and collected after the service on the way home.

“A special feature of the season was the distribution of charities in the parish. On Christmas Eve 1874, ‘the village was all astir in the morning at the distribution of a prime carcase of beef amongst the poor, with the widows and old people coming in for a share of the coals to cook it with, and a packet of tea and sugar etc.’ Every year Mr. Edward Whitmell gave this 1½ cwt. of coal to each of the poor widows of the parish, and Mr. Joseph Haswell of Rugby, who had land in Crick, gave 2 cwt. to them on New Years day, delivered free.”

Such generosity was described as enabling the givers “to participate in the joyful feelings that generally prevail at this festive season”. Even today this tradition continues, albeit in a modified form. At Christmas, Crick Parochial Charities distributes vouchers to “the widows and old people” to be spent at the Co-op or the Post Office. This Charitable Trust is the successor of these various earlier provisions often set up through endowments. .

And what about presents for the family? Well, that is a modern idea of our materialistic world causing us all to use our credit cards and spend money, so that we can still “participate in the joyful feelings that generally prevail at this festive season”!

Happy Christmas! I hope that we can all “participate in joyful feelings”.

Jim Goodger

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CHRISTMAS-TIDE

THE YULE-LOG FIRE.

This was one of the most ancient features of the Christmas celebration, and originates from the Scandinavians. Those old sea-captains used to burn log-fires at the feast of Juul, in honour of their god, Thor, and this gave rise to the custom of burning the Yule log at Christmas. High and low, in the Middle Ages participated in the ceremony, which consisted of selecting the largest block of oak in the neighbourhood and dragging it to the baron's hall, where it was burnt on the hearth of the huge chimney. The homage paid to the Yule log in the olden times almost amounted to worship, for on its way to the hall, where it was conveyed by willing hands, the passers-by would uncover their heads, and pay due honour to the monarch of the forest.

It is only natural that several other superstitions were associated with a custom derived from a Scandinavian source. If a squint-eyed person or a flat-footed woman entered the baronial hall while the Yule log was burning, the guests took it as an omen of the very worst luck, and ignorant as this superstition seems, it has not entirely disappeared, as the antipathy to the squint eye is still borne by the superstitious. Although the ceremony of the Yule log has altogether died out, the modern custom of burning Christmas candles may be regarded as an offshoot of the fine old ceremony, which was not thoroughly complete unless an immense candle, known as the Yule candle, was burnt at the same time as the Yule log was shedding its welcome rays down our ancestors' halls. In conclusion, we may add that our forefathers had no qualmish regard nor sensitive scruples in their celebration of Christmas; and if at times they carried their amusement to a pitch we latter-day English would call licentiousness, we must remember that they had no such ideas in their minds at the time, but that they were doing honour to a time-honoured custom of spending "A Merrie Christmas" as it only could be spent.

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