

## Wassailing in South Yorkshire

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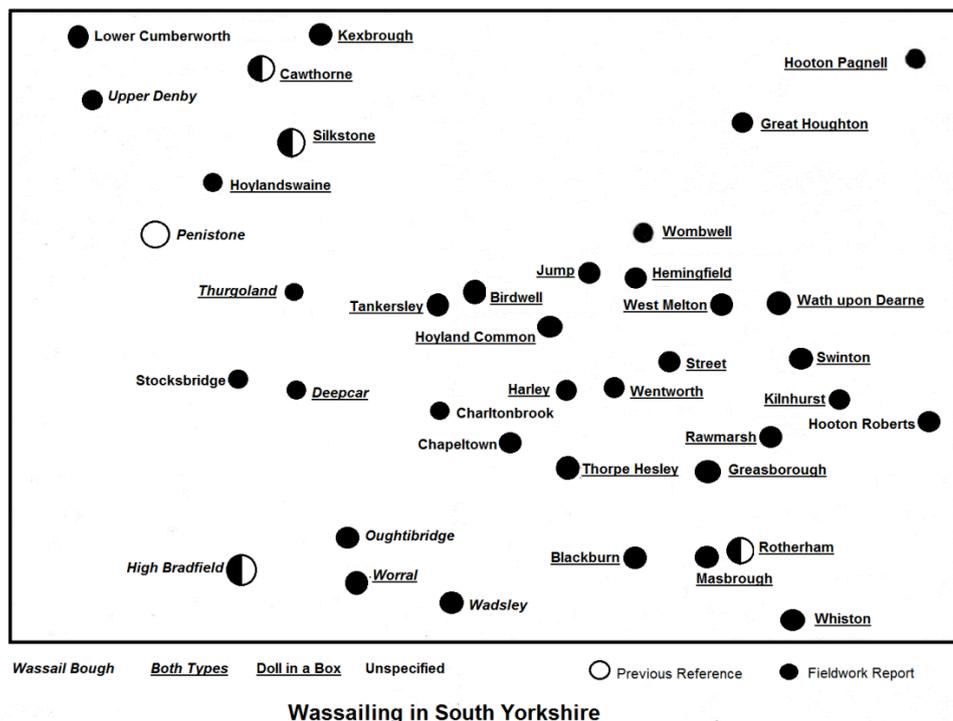
Seasonal house-visiting customs are a fascinating part of our traditional popular culture. The formal visit to a house by an individual or group at a “special” time of year, with some form of performance, ranging from the most complex mummers’ play or sword dance to the simplest rhyme, has been found throughout these islands and beyond, with evidence dating back to at least the eighteenth century. Those customs that have attracted most scholarly attention have, naturally, been those showing the most complex characteristics. The mummers’ play with its variety of characters, substantial text, use of costume and disguise and dramatic action is the prime example, having received more scholarly attention than any other. The intrinsic interest of the mummers’ play has made it the target of many far-fetched theories of origin which have in recent times been largely discarded.

It was partly with the intention of challenging these theories that I embarked on my study of seasonal house visiting customs in 1973.<sup>1</sup> I was interested to find more about the whole genre – to see how different types of house-visit might be distributed and co-exist in a defined geographical area, within South and West Yorkshire, and how their success or failure could be influenced by external factors such as audience reaction, settlement patterns, and topographical features. Data was gathered through postal questionnaires, through local schools and appeals in local newspapers and on local radio. By far the most successful means of gathering information was by personal visits to the selected communities and talking to people whenever and wherever they could be found. It soon became clear to me that there was much to be learnt about seasonal house-visiting through the simple visits, which, requiring little or no preparation or rehearsal, were more often and more commonly performed. These included Letting in Christmas and New Year, Jolly Minering, Carol Singing, Penny for the Guy and the only visit regarded locally as a female preserve, Wassailing.

*Wassailing* is a term which, like *mumming* or *mumming*, has been used in association with a number of different house-visits. In the Walkley area of Sheffield, for example, the word was used to describe performances of the “Old Tup” play. However, it has been most generally used to describe a house-visit which was performed by young girls during the Christmas season. These visits were of one of two main types: one in which the girls carried a doll in a decorated box, and another in which they carried a decorated branch, known as a “Wassail Bough” (pronounced “wossle boo”). In both cases the visit included singing “Here we come a-wassailing”, a song which has been recorded throughout England,<sup>2</sup> with a concentration in Yorkshire, often associated with house-visiting.

Each of these types of visit was performed in a specific area, there being also a few places on the borders of the respective areas in which both were performed. In most of the communities in the centre and to the east of the area, girls carried dolls in boxes, whilst in the west, from Wadsley in the south up to Upper Denby in the north, they would be more likely to carry decorated branches. In Worrall, Deepcar and Thurgoland both types of custom were

reported. The western part of the area is characterised by moorland and steep valleys, whereas the eastern part is less undulating. In the latter, there was considerable social upheaval when the deep mines were sunk in the late nineteenth century. Some communities increased their populations between censuses by up to 300%.<sup>3</sup> This might suggest that the Wassail Bough is an earlier form of the local tradition. The massive influx of population in the deep mine area, bringing in families from other parts of Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland, would tend to overwhelm existing local forms of tradition, replacing them with simpler, more generalised versions.<sup>4</sup>



The distribution map shows how there is a clear boundary between the wassail bough and the doll in a box areas, with only a few locations where both were known.<sup>5</sup> The western part of the area is also less densely populated with, historically, a greater mixture of employment, including metal-working and farming in addition to coal-mining. The map also shows how different the distribution appears with the benefit of direct fieldwork. Previous references indicated only five performance locations, which might have suggested that this was a relatively uncommon custom. More than thirty additional fieldwork reports clearly show that wassailing was both common and widespread in the area.

A typical visit with a doll in a box was described by Mrs. Carnelly from Thorpe Hesley who went round when she was five or six years old, just before the First World War. She would go with a friend, in the early evening on Christmas Eve and then again perhaps on Christmas and Boxing Day. They went to the door of the chosen house and sang:

## Wassail Song (Thorpe Hesley)

*Maggie Carnelly, 30th April 1975*

$\text{♩} = 110$



1. Here we come a wass - all - ing a - mong the leaves so green  
Here we come a wan - der - ing so fair - y to be seen,  
Love and joy come to you and to have a wass - all too  
And God send you a hap - py New Year, a New Year,  
And God send you a hap - - py New Year.

2. We are not daily beggars that beg from door to door  
We are your neighbours' children that you have seen before,  
CHORUS
3. We've got a little purse made of stretching leather skin  
We want a little of your money to line it well within.  
CHORUS

She went on to describe what happened next:

“And then we used to say our names after ... then knock on the door and some of them'd say ‘Come in’. They'd have Christmas cake on the table and cheese and mince pies. They'd say ‘Would you like a mince pie?’ and ‘Would you like ...’ and then give us perhaps threepence, a threepenny bit, one of those tiny silver threepenny bits or pennies or whatever.” (Tape 5)

Only a few of these visits were made in an evening, usually to people who were known to the children, and generally to those who were not so poor as the majority of the village population. The offering and acceptance of hospitality and rewards helped to confirm status and community feeling. The host family would enjoy being in the position to be able to offer generous rewards.

Several people commented on the fact that it was important that the doll should be looked at. Mrs. Carnelly described how it would be presented:

“Oh you put some fancy paper, or a fancy lace cover. I tell you what we used to have, an old lace curtain, and get a boot box and put it in ... You put the lace curtain in to make it fancy round and an apple and an orange in at the side of it.” (Tape 5)

Many girls would have a suitable doll which could be used in this way, and it was considered something of a disgrace if a proper doll was not used, as on an occasion recalled by Mr. Hague of Thorpe Hesley:

“Them who were well off could have a proper doll. My sister and her friend used to go out, but when it came to looking at the doll, they used to fly.” (Tape 7)

This reaction is evidence of the importance of community sanction and approval, without which the visit would not retain its popularity. Wassailing is unusual in that there were no recorded references to negative reactions. In most house-visits, reactions could vary considerably. Disapproval could be shown by a verbal rebuff – “You’re too early” or “You’re too late”, or by playing tricks on the performers, such as heating pennies on a shovel over the fire and sliding them under the door, resulting in burnt fingers.<sup>6</sup>

The day or days on which girls went wassailing varied from place to place. In Thorpe Hesley, visits started on Christmas Eve and continued for two or three days. In the Hoyland Common and Tankersley areas, wassailing was particularly a Christmas Day morning visit. In West Melton and Hemingfield, Boxing Day was the normal time, whilst in Rawmarsh the girls went out on New Year’s Day. The girls there, Mr. Tonks recalled, considered the local arrangement of house doors rather convenient:

“Very often they got quite a few coppers. They’d go round the streets and they could sing outside two doors together, you see, because there were two doors close together. Two doors then a space, then doors and if there was no action they’d move on you see.” (Tape 14)

Several other house-visits took advantage of housing arrangements. The “courts”, with a group of small terrace houses arranged around a paved central area, which were common in many parts of Sheffield and Rotherham in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, made it possible for more complex visits, such as at the Old Tup and the Hero Combat play, to perform to a number of households at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

In many details there were strong similarities between the wassail bough and the doll-carrying custom. The exact time of year at which the visit should take place also varied; in Bradfield girls went out at Christmas, and also to “let in” the New Year, in Worrall they went Wassailing on Boxing Day and in Upper Denby they went on Christmas Eve. The wassail bough itself could be made in several ways. A lady in Worrall recalled:

“They used to be mainly made of holly, big spray of holly and we used to trim them up like you do a Christmas tree.” (Tape 12)

In Bradfield, a small fir tree was used:

“It was like a Christmas tree, you know, only you could carry it and we used to put all sorts on it just the same as they do on Christmas trees ... we always had a fir tree, but a smaller one you see.” (Tape 19)

In Upper Denby both these types of wassail bough were remembered, and were both regarded as suitable.<sup>8</sup> Possibly the holly branch type represents an older form, and the fir tree

type is a result of the increasing popularity of the Christmas tree, following its use by the Royal Family from 1841.<sup>9</sup>

As with the carol parties in the same area, house-visits with the wassail bough around Bradfield involved a considerable amount of walking, especially if the visits were to be financially rewarding:

“We used to go a long way with a wassail tree you know, all to farms for far enough and we used to see who could get to these places first where they give you the most money.” (Tape 19)

Here again, local knowledge and housing patterns influenced seasonal house-visiting. In other examples, particular streets would be targeted as being more likely to provide greater rewards. In some of the complex visits, teams would compete to be first, or dispute over territorial “rights”.<sup>10</sup>

When they reached the house they sang a similar version of the song recorded in Thorpe Hesley.<sup>11</sup> This was followed by the rhyme commonly used to let New Year in. The girls then continued in the same way as those in Thorpe Hesley:

“And then we used to knock on t’ door and they used to give us something and give us some mince pies or cake. We used to go to all the doors and then they’d say, some of them you know at the very outlying, they’d ask us to sing a little Christmas song or something as well. We were always welcomed wherever we went. We used to have mince pies or some cake and always some money.” (Tape 19)

A most unusual belief recalled by Mrs. Chapman of High Bradfield was that it was considered unlucky for men or boys to let New Year in, in that district:

“The girls had to go wassailing for the New Year, that was the idea of that.” (Tape 19)

By the time they had been round all the farms, their wassailing would have occupied most of the day.

The tunes used in the wassailing visit show only slight variation amongst the seven versions recorded in the course of this study, the greatest variation appearing in the one tune recorded from the wassail bough district, from High Bradfield.<sup>12</sup> It is similar to the version, with the distinctive third line, from Anston, South Yorkshire, published by Lucy Broadwood in 1893, where she refers to children carrying green boughs and waving them over their heads, asking for a New Year’s gift.<sup>13</sup> This is further evidence that this is an older, localised form of the tradition.

## Wassail Song (High Bradfield)

*Nellie Chapman, 23rd April 1976*

♩. = 132

Here we come a wass - ail - ing a - mong the leaves so green

And now we go a wan - der - ing so fair - ly to be seen.

Ou - r jol - ly wes - sel, yo - ur jol - ly wes - sel,

♩. = 155

Love and joy come to you, and to our wes - sel boo

Pray God send you a hap - - py New Ye - ar, a New

Year. Pray God send you a hap - - py New Year.

The performance of the song was followed by a recitation also used in “letting in” Christmas and New Year:

“Hole in my stocking, hole in my shoe,  
Please will you give us a copper or two?  
If you haven’t got a penny, a ha’penny will do,  
If you haven’t got a ha’penny, God bless you.”

Pronunciation of the terms “wassail”, and “wassailing” can vary considerably. The former term is either pronounced *wosslin* or *wesslin*. These appear to be virtually interchangeable, several informants making use of both forms and no apparent localisation of this variation can be observed. *Wosssel* appears to be the term in most common local usage, yet the *wessel* form can be found throughout the area, including Hoyland, Rotherham, Upper Denby and Bradfield. Addy<sup>14</sup> gives the form *wessel*, perhaps suggesting that this is the older local pronunciation.

The custom of wassailing in the area is hard to date exactly. Addy refers to it as being performed in 1888. Ten years previously, in 1878, the editor of *The Rotherham and Masbrough Advertiser* was observing:

“Singers, mummers, children wanting to know if you required ‘the wassail’ these and others of the same ilk came literally in crowds ... It is time something was done to check the growth of this sort of thing.”<sup>15</sup>

Eventually his wish for action was to become unnecessary. Whilst there were a number of examples reported between 1920 and 1940, very few wassailing visits appear to

have taken place since 1945, although two unsubstantiated questionnaire reports refer to New Year performances at Stocksbridge in 1974 and 1979. One factor mentioned, responsible for the decline in this particular custom, was parental fear for the safety of young girls making such visits after dark. This fear did not seem to have affected the popularity of carol singing. Of the carol singers who called at my house at Burncross between 1974 and 1979, the majority were young girls between the ages of seven and thirteen years, in groups of two to four. Forty or fifty years ago such groups would probably have come wassailing. The twenty-first century “trick or treat” house-visitors include a high proportion of young girls dressed as witches and monsters, but are usually accompanied by an adult or older sibling.

Wassailing was a popular but relatively minor seasonal house-visit in South Yorkshire. The performers did not need to learn parts, find costumes or disguises. All that was required was a simple decorated branch or a doll in a decorated box. Each visit would take only a few minutes so that, in villages and towns, many houses could be included. Some aspects of wassailing are, however, common to all seasonal house-visits: the inclusion of some form of performance (song/rhyme), the giving and receiving of a reward, the selection of a “special” time of year, and the choice of suitable houses or territory. The same factors have affected development, survival and disappearance: community identity, local tradition, the landscape, the changing patterns of settlement and employment, the influence of communications, mass-media and other forms of entertainment. There is much to be gained in increasing our understanding of the dynamics of customs such as seasonal house-visiting by widening the focus from more complex, dramatic performances to include the complete genre, including the subject of this article.

## Notes

1. “Seasonal House-Visiting in South Yorkshire”, submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, May 1988. The complete thesis is available online at: <http://theses.whiterose.ac.uk/580/>.
2. There are twenty seven versions listed in the Roud Folksong Index: [http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/query.cgi?cross=off&index\\_roud=on&access=off](http://library.efdss.org/cgi-bin/query.cgi?cross=off&index_roud=on&access=off)
3. For example, between the 1921 and 1931 censuses, the population of Bolton on Dearne increased by 272% and Thurnscoe 350%, see thesis, p. 26.
4. See S. Roud, *The English Year*, London, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 372.
5. Where there is no underline or italics, no details were recorded.
6. See, for example, Letting in the New Year at Greasbrough, thesis, p. 47.
7. See thesis, pp. 217-218.
8. Thesis field notebook 2, p. 72, 20.10.75.
9. T. G. Crippen, *Christmas and Christmas Lore*, London and Glasgow, Blackie, 1923, p. 153.
10. See, for example, thesis, pp. 140-142.
11. Tape 19 SVF 10, thesis, p. 95.
12. Tune SVF 10, thesis, p. 96.
13. L. E. Broadwood, and J. A. Fuller-Maitland, *English County Songs*, London, J. B. Cramer, 1893, p. 15.

14. S. O. Addy, *A Glossary of Words Used in the Neighbourhood of Sheffield*, London, Trübner and Co., for the English Dialect Society, 1888, p. 278.
15. *The Rotherham and Masbrough Advertiser*, 28.12.1878, 5c.