

## **Wassail all over the place.**

Mumming plays and wassailing are both English winter customs, in many cases being performed in the same locality or nearby. The aim of this paper is to explore the symbiosis between these two customs in the collected tradition, with particular reference to Gloucestershire, and then to describe the current situation post the folk revival.

### **The Mumming tradition**

Firstly, let us consider the mumming tradition in Gloucestershire from the collected sources. We have 60 complete texts, fairly evenly spread throughout the county, as well as many fragments and references to uncollected plays. To describe the event in brief, a group of men from a locality or family group, typically from the labouring class, would rehearse a Combat Hero play and then, starting a few days before Christmas and going up to Christmas Eve, Boxing Day or perhaps around the New Year (but never Christmas Day), would perform their play from house to house, farm to farm, even calling at some business enterprises where they considered the collection would be profitable. In many cases, the performance concluded with a song, sometimes requesting money, food or drink, as collected in Sherborne in about 1930;

*Good master and mistress, both sit by the fire,  
Put your hand in your pocket we pray and desire  
Put your hand in your pocket and pull out your purse,  
For a little of something will do us no hurt*

*Chorus  
Sing fa the ro raddie, sing fa the ro raddie  
Sing fa the ro raddie ay-aye.*

*Go down in your cellar and see what you find,  
Your barrel's not empty, if you will be kind;  
If you will be kind with a glass of good beer,  
We won't call upon you until the next year.<sup>1</sup>*

However, the concluding song to a mummers play in Gloucestershire was often a non-sequitur of the play. For example, the Sapperton Mummers Play ended with a rendition of the drinking song “All for the Grog”<sup>2</sup> whilst the Snowhill play<sup>3</sup> ended with “Darkies lead a Happy Life” derived from the blackface minstrel genre. Other Gloucestershire plays ended with a broom dance, step dance or three-handed reel. A strong motive for the annual

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mumming tradition, in Gloucestershire as elsewhere in England, was economic. It was always important to choose the more affluent farms and large houses, and any money collected was shared out among the performers to supplement the meagre incomes of the rural community. No reference has been seen in collectors' notes to Mummers plays being performed in pubs, possibly because it was thought that asking peers for money would result in a sparse collection.

### **The Wassailing tradition**

There are many parallels between the mumming and the wassailing customs in Gloucestershire. The geographical spread of the custom of wassailing did not extend all over the county but was localised to the centre and south, extending into Wiltshire. Some twenty six locations in Gloucestershire and six in Wiltshire have been noted as having the wassail custom and there were probably many more instances in the same area that have gone unrecorded. We should also take into consideration the perambulatory nature of the wassailing custom, which means that one group may turn up in several locations. The Tetbury Mummers, for example, did a tour which included the vicarage and the affluent Chavenage House,<sup>4</sup> whilst the Woodchester wassailers called at farms and a local mill. The Oaksey (Wiltshire) wassailers went around the villages of Eastcourt, Crudwell, Pool Keynes, Ashton Keynes and South Cerney on their annual tour.<sup>5</sup> The widespread nature of the custom is illustrated by the following mention from the periodical *The Cheltenham Looker-on*:

“In the neighbourhood of Cranham, Stroud, Painswick and other parts of the Cotswolds the [Wassailing] custom was strictly observed and as recently as Boxing Day 1910 the wassail bowl, prettily decorated with coloured ribbons, fruit and evergreens, was carried around the parishes of Witcombe and Bentham”<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear whether these references are to two groups of wassailers or more, but it does give the impression of the custom being generally known in that area. The centre of gravity of the custom seems to be to the south of Stroud. The time frame and collection venues (i.e. farms, large houses and businesses) and motives were the same as for mummers, as was the stratum of society from which the wassailers were drawn. In the case of the wassailers, the custom revolved not around a play, but around the song and the wassail bowl itself as an object. The bowl was always the central point of the tradition. In most cases, this would be a wooden cooking bowl, decorated with ribbons, holly, mistletoe or ivy. In some cases, such as Leighterton<sup>7</sup> or Acton Turville<sup>8</sup>, the bowl would be fitted across the top with a framework of

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metal hoops in order to support these decorations, particularly when a small decorated tree was placed upright in the bowl. Sometimes the bowl is described as a large washing up bowl or pudding bowl. In Woodchester, where the wassailers were children, it was a decorated chamber pot.<sup>9</sup> The wassail bowl was an essential and central part of the custom.

Just as the Mummers dressed up to perform their play, so the wassailers would sometimes dress up. From Tetbury we have the description:

“The men wore fancy clothes, flowing robes, Arab hats, crowns, and masks, anything to make them look fancy over their corduroys”.<sup>10</sup>

There are also reports of wassailers wearing women’s clothes (Woodchester) or blacking their faces (Woodchester, Badminton, Eastington). However, whereas the Mummers invariably dressed up to perform their play, it seems that the wassailers in many cases dressed in their ordinary winter clothes.

In a handful of villages in the very south of the county and into Wiltshire, namely Uley, Tetbury, Kingscote, Horton, Oaksey, and Cricklade, there was an additional element, that of the “Broad” or “Bull”. This would be stylised figure of a beast, said to be a bull. In some cases, such as Tetbury, the Bull was a round two-dimensional white face with large glass red eyes and real horns, held up by a wooden framework covered by sacking.<sup>11</sup> This enabled the person carrying the Bull to put the sacking over his head and to walk around. The description of the Bull or Broad as a stylised head with horns and a sacking skirt holds true for most of these beasts but at Leighterton the Broad was a big swede hollowed out with eyes, nose, mouth and ears, with a candle inside, decked in ribbons and set on a pole.<sup>12</sup> The function of the Broad was to thrust his head into the door as soon as it was opened, making roaring noises. This provided a dramatic entrance for the wassailers and presumably also caused a scare, or at least a mock scare, to the person who opened the door, often the maid. So the whole performance of the wassail consisted of announcing your presence, sometimes with a dramatic entrance by the Broad. Secondly, singing the wassail song and perhaps other seasonal songs. Thirdly, requesting money, food or drink and finally moving on to the next location. So, in fact, it was a very simple custom very much akin to perambulatory carol-singing.

### **The overlap of the two traditions**

We have therefore two distinct traditions carried out at the same time of year by the same stratum of society and to the same end. Would it not be logical to combine the two customs? One might think so, but the evidence is rather to the contrary. As previously stated, there are twenty six locations in Gloucestershire known to have had a wassail tradition and probably many more unrecorded. In the same area of the southern part of the county we find Mummers plays in twenty locations. In eight of those locations we find both a Mumming and a wassailing tradition. Now, this is based on a small and incomplete sample, but it does enable us to draw up the following table:

Number of locations with the wassail custom	26
Number of locations in the same area with a Mummers play	20
Overlap	8

The eight villages boasting both traditions are: Ampney Crucis, Avening, Badminton, Bisley, Minchinhampton, Nailsworth, Stroud and Tetbury. Of these, Stroud and Tetbury are large enough conurbations to allow for one group not knowing the existence of another, whereas the other locations are of a size that it would be difficult for one group not to know of the existence of another. We have already stated that the Mummers plays often ended with a song, so what would be more natural than to sing the wassail song, which many of the Mummers would have known anyway? However, when we look more closely, we find that only three, possibly four, of the twenty villages in what we might call the wassail area ended with the wassail song, namely Ampney Crucis, Badminton, Stroud and possibly South Cerney. The other plays either ended with a different song or with no song at all.

The Ampney Crucis Mummers play could also be called the Driffield Mummers Play.<sup>13</sup> The two villages are very close and the text was learnt by Mr Riley Wall in Driffield. The play ended with just two verses of the Gloucestershire wassail song, but it is not known whether the Mummers carried a bowl or not. The Badminton wassail song was sung at the end of the Badminton Mummers Play.<sup>14</sup> The performers blackened their faces with burnt cork and dressed in comic clothes. The bowl was carried at the end of a long handle, presumably for collecting purposes, with holly, ivy and mistletoe twisted around the handle. For the song,

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one man sang the verses and the rest joined in the chorus. Thus at Badminton we have evidence that the two customs were combined into one.

In the 1870s the Stroud Mummers used to finish their play with various songs, including “Till to the Wall” (sic) or the “Wassailing Bowl”, of which one verse is given:

*Wassail, wassail all over the town  
Our bread it is white our ale it is brown  
Our bowl it is made from some maplin tree  
With my wassailing bowl I drink to thee*<sup>15</sup>

We are also told that one version of the South Cerney Mummers play ended with a song and a dance and that the song was “Here we come a-wassailing”.<sup>16</sup> However, this first line is more commonly found in Yorkshire versions of the wassail song, whereas all the collected versions of the Gloucestershire wassail start “Wassail (or Waysail) all over the town”. This fact makes this evidence very tenuous. So clear evidence of performers combining the wassail and Mumming customs comes from one locality only, namely Badminton, a surprising conclusion when one considers how much is now known about the two parallel customs. Why weren’t wassailing and Mumming combined more often?

As previously stated we only have a small but consistent sample on the subject and nothing has been noted down by collectors on the subject of why Mumming and wassailing were not more frequently combined but we can offer some conjectures. The first point to note is that we talk glibly about “The South Cerney Mummers Play” or the “Uley Wassail” whereas in fact there were at times multiple groups from the locality performing these customs: in the case of Uley<sup>17</sup> and Stroud there were certainly several groups of wassailers going around the town.<sup>18</sup> So whereas one family might have guarded their wassail tradition, as with the Wilkins-Wood-Cleaver families in Tetbury, another separate group might have guarded their Mummers tradition. It would make economic sense for one group to appropriate a particular tour as their own and to be defensive about others “queering their pitch”. Secondly, both customs need a modicum of preparation, i.e. rehearsing songs or words, or of making props. Therefore, it might occur to a particular group that having prepared a Mummers play, there would be nothing to gain by putting in further effort to rehearse the wassail song or obtain or prepare a wassail bowl. We must never forget the economic driver behind these customs and apply the law of diminishing returns on extra effort.

### **The situation post the folk revival**

The traditional mumming and wassailing customs in Gloucestershire had to all intents and purposes died out by World War II but the mumming tradition was picked up again as a consequence of the 1960s folk song revival which saw a great increase in folk clubs and folk festivals. One immediate result of this was that many folk song clubs and subsequently morris dance groups sought out and performed local versions of mummers plays.

Gloucestershire was no exception, with the City of Gloucester Mummers being formed in 1969 from the Gloucester Folk Song Club and continuing to this day. However, no such revival happened in the case of the Gloucestershire wassail custom, possibly because it was not as visual, exciting or potentially humorous as a mummers play, or possibly because it was too close in character to straight carol-singing. The Gloucestershire wassail song, however, or rather the one version of it that was published in the Oxford Book of Carols, has continued to be performed within many musical genres including folksong, choral and pop.

The picture has been confused, or perhaps enhanced, by the rise in popularity in recent years of the orchard wassail. This West Country tradition has now been taken up by many groups throughout England and invariably consists of singing a wassail song, or wassail chant, to a tree in an orchard that is encouraged to bring forth good apples for cider the following year. Often the occasion is graced with Morris dancers and usually ends in general feasting and merriment. The result of this harmless 'revival' is that it has detracted from what the old Gloucestershire wassail tradition was, so that many now believe that the Gloucestershire wassail custom was an orchard wassail rather than a house-to-house wassail. At these wassails, a version of the Gloucestershire wassail song may or may not be sung, and there is almost never a decorated wassail bowl, that having been replaced by a wassail bowl for drinking which is passed around the company. The focal point of this revival is now the tree rather than the bowl. The time frame for wassailing in Gloucestershire has therefore moved from around the Christmas period to January, as is the case in wassail customs further south and west.

But over the last four decades or so, since the start of the folk revival, mumming in the county has flourished. Gloucestershire can now boast nearly twenty different mummers groups appearing around Christmas time, many organised by Morris dance groups or folk enthusiasts in general. What could be more natural then to end the performance of the play

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with a song, and what more natural song, one might suppose, than the Gloucestershire wassail? However, surprisingly, only a handful end the play with the wassail song, in some cases this being driven by the efforts of local folklorists. The only Mummers groups in Gloucestershire that end their play with the wassail song are the following:

The Waterley Bottom Mummers from near Dursley, who were formed in the 1970s, perform a version of the Dursley play learned from a printed source and always end their play with the wassail song, in this case based on a version collected from Leighterton by one of the performers, namely Richard Chidlaw. Richard leads the singing at the end of the play and varies the length of the song according to the venue and the audience attention, so before each verse starts, he will call out, for example, “leg”, “horn”, “eye” or “landlord” and the Mummers will sing the corresponding verse, e.g. “Here’s to the ox and to his right horn” or, “Now, Landlord, come fill us a bowl of your best.” and so on.<sup>19</sup>

The Waterley Bottom Mummers also sport a handsome decorated wassail bowl complete with metal hoops, based on one found at Hillesley. The performers of the Dursley play are not, by and large, drawn from the folksong community but are a body of friends who meet every year to rehearse and perform the play. The group also take with them a hobby horse, namely a horse’s head on a pole with a large skirt to hide the bearer – this is clearly an echo of the “Broad” described above.

The Cheltenham Mummers, who perform the play collected in Longborough, Gloucestershire, end their performance with the Gloucestershire wassail from the *Oxford Book of Carols*.<sup>20</sup> Longborough is outside the area of the wassail tradition and so the song is not traditional to this version of the play but an add-on by the performers, who come largely from the folk community, having been formed by the now defunct Old Spot Morris Men.<sup>21</sup>

The Gloucestershire Morris Mummers, formed about 10 years ago, perform a play compiled from various printed texts collected in the county, and always end with a version of the Gloucestershire wassail. In this case, the version is based on that collected by the author of this article in Arlingham in 1977. Needless to say, the performers are all morris men and although the song has undergone the ‘folk process’ of variation over time, it is still recognisably that collected in 1977. The Gloucestershire Morris Mummers also display a

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very similar decorated wassail bowl to that displayed by the Waterley Bottom Mummers, made for them by one of the Mummers.<sup>22</sup>

Needless to say, the context of Mumming has changed. The economic imperative is no longer there, although many of the sides do collect for charity, rather than themselves. The performance venues are now more likely to be pubs rather than large country houses or farms. Now that the rural farming population of yesteryear has been dispersed, the performers for Mummers plays are drawn from a broad cross-section of the population.

## Conclusions

So what conclusions can we draw from this? I suggest several: In the tradition, mumming and wassailing were carried out at the same time of year and in the case of south Gloucestershire in the same general locality. Despite that the two traditions rarely combined and reasons for this may be economic or practical. In the revival the old Gloucestershire wassail tradition has disappeared replaced, in people's minds at least, by a recent growth in orchard wassailing. Mummers' plays are flourishing in the county, but within a different social context. The Gloucestershire wassail song is still held dear by many people in the county, who sing it every Christmas, be it in choirs, folk clubs and brass bands or, in the few cases we have seen, at the end of a Mummers play.

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<sup>1</sup> Page 02816- 02821: The Mummers [play text] Thomas Bunting (contributor), Sherbourne, Glos, James Madison Carpenter collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC, USA. <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter/ginit.jsp?src=box1pac3.xml&id=p02816.0> accessed 27.01.2013. and <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/93su09hw.htm>. This material is also held in the Peter Kennedy collection which is presently held in the British Library Sound Archive.

<sup>2</sup> Held privately in the Gwilym Davies collection - contact [gwilymd@cmarge.demon.co.uk](mailto:gwilymd@cmarge.demon.co.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Included in Gerald Tween, *Step In: Traditional mummer's plays from Gloucestershire*, Glosfest, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> History of Tetbury Society Public Archive at <http://www.tetburyhistory.com/archives>.

<sup>5</sup> Held privately by Richard Chidlaw as part of the Richard Chidlaw / Andrew Kennett collection – contact [chidlaw@talktalk.net](mailto:chidlaw@talktalk.net).

<sup>6</sup> Parker, T.H. 'Some Gloucestershire Songs, and Old Time and Present Day Christmas Customs', *The Cheltenham Looker-on*, 21st December 1912.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Chidlaw collection – see note 5.

<sup>8</sup> Archibald Standish Hartrick, *Man with wassail bowl*, coloured chalk drawing, 1898, British Museum. Hartrick undertook a series of four studies of the wassailers in Acton Turville and Tresham.

<sup>9</sup> Gwilym Davies collection – see note 2.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Chidlaw collection – see note 5.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Chidlaw collection – see note 5.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Chidlaw collection – see note 5.

<sup>13</sup> Page 02697- 02702 : The Mummers [play text] Riley Wall (contributor), Driffield James Madison Carpenter collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC, USA. <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter/ginit.jsp?src=box1pac3.xml&id=p02697.0>

<sup>14</sup> Richard Chidlaw and Andrew Kennet collection – see note 5.

<sup>15</sup> Godsell, information provided to the *Evesham Journal*, 24 May 1913.

<sup>16</sup> The South Cerney Mummers' Play from Peter Kennedy collection at the British Sound Library, <http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=116635> and also available at <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/93su09hw.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Richard Chidlaw and Andrew Kennet collection – see note 5.

<sup>18</sup> Gwilym Davies collection – see note 2.

<sup>19</sup> Gwilym Davies collection – see note 2.

<sup>20</sup> *New Oxford Book of Carols*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.534.

<sup>21</sup> Gwilym Davies collection – see note 2.

<sup>22</sup> Gwilym Davies collection – see note 2.