

PROGRAMME

Reading: From 'The Distant Scene'
by Fred Archer

Quire

*Gaudete/Down in Yon Forest/
Lordings Listen to our Lay (Early)*

Reading: 'Gawain and the Green Knight'

Quire

*Wassail the Silver Apple/Wassail, Wassail, All Over
the Town/God Bless the Master of This House
(Wassail / Folk)*

Reading: From 'A Christmas Carol'
by Charles Dickens

Quire

*The Boar's Head Carol (Early)
When the Snows of Winter Fall (Folk)*

Reading: 'Jack Frost', from 'Lifting the Latch'
as told to Sheila Stewart by Mont Abbott

Quire

*Bleary Winter (Folk)
England in Ribbons (Folk)*

INTERVAL

Quire

*Joseph and Mary (Folk)
The Farmer (Folk)*

Reading: From 'The Ballad of John Clare'
by Hugh Lupton

Quire:

*God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen (Folk)
Good News (West Gallery)*

Reading: From 'Cider with Rosie'
by Laurie Lee

Quire

Old Foster (West Gallery)

Reading: From 'Cider with Rosie'
by Laurie Lee

Quire

The Holly and the Ivy (West Gallery)

Reading: From 'Cider with Rosie'
by Laurie Lee

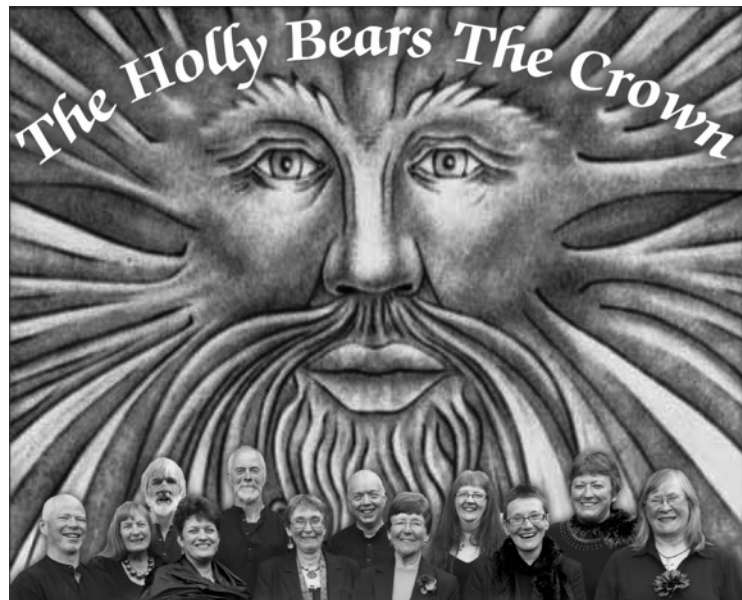
Quire

Remember Adam's Fall (Early / West Gallery)

Reading: From 'The Distant Scene'
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Quire

Malpas Wassail (Wassail)



The Village Quire

and actor Phil Smith

Imagine a Christmas before the inflatable plastic Santa was invented; before the flashing, LED-illuminated Rudolph and the fibre-optic Christmas tree. Imagine a time of fable, folklore and time-honoured custom, when stories were told by candlelight and, by the glow of the blazing Yuletide brand, those gathered in hearthside's ease could sing a good old tune in four-part harmony, fine and full.

This Christmas **The Village Quire** and actor **Phil Smith** bring you songs and stories of mumming and wassailing, of misrule and mirth; rousing West Gallery anthems and intimate festive miniatures to melt your heart; an older Christmas, more stark, more true, glimpsed in the glimmering light of candle flames.

Please check our website for events, concerts
and workshops or ring
01497 847676

www.villagequire.org.uk

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About the Music

West Gallery Music – is energetic, joyful, no-nonsense stuff that is great fun to sing. This is what you would have heard in rural parish churches in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Why is it called 'West Gallery' music? Well, at this point in history much of the floor space of the typical parish church was either rented out or owned by more or less wealthy parishioners. Where, then, to house the choir? The answer was to build a gallery at the tower or west end of the church, hence: 'west' gallery. There is a large body of West Gallery music associated with the festive season. 'Going the rounds', on Christmas Eve night and on into the early hours of Christmas morning, was an old custom with the village 'quires'. Houses throughout the parish would be visited and carols sung to the occupants. This is vigorous music, meant to be sung out of doors and meant not to go unnoticed by those within ... even if they happen to be asleep at the time!

Folk Song – The folk material in this programme comes from a variety of sources. The versions of this music that we sing have been specially arranged in a style which is not unlike that of the old West Gallery music.

Wassails – The term *wassail*, comes from the Saxon *waes hael*: 'be whole', or 'have good health'. Over the years, wassailing came to refer to a group of related, mid-winter customs associated with keeping body and soul together. Very loosely, *wassailing* was used to refer to the visiting of houses in the locality over the Christmas period, to sing for money, food and drink. A wassail bowl would be taken along, which hosts would fill with a heady mixture of hot cider, gin, spices and sugar for their musical guests. Toast would also be eaten. More specifically, apple trees were (and still are) wassailed to ensure a good crop of fruit and plentiful cider in the coming year. Similarly oxen – important for food and work on the farm – were wassailed. Wassails then, are the songs associated with wassailing in its various incarnations.

Early Music – *Lordings, Listen to our Lay* is an original Anglo-Norman carol. The translation into modern English was made by Francis Douce (1757-1834). *Gaudete* was first published in a Finnish/Swedish book of hymns called *Piae Cantiones* in 1582. No music was given there for the verses but these are derived: 'from the Bohemian song *Ezecheelis Porta* which Finnish clerical students would have encountered in Prague and which shared a tune with a Czech vernacular Christmas song that still survives.

Note on Mumming

The Mummer's Play is a traditional, mid-winter entertainment. Stock characters such as St. George, the Turkish Knight (*Turkey Snipe*), Beelzebub and Bold Slasher act out their roles speaking lines in doggerel verse. They will slay and be slain during the course of the play, only to be raised to life again (for a fee!) by The Doctor whose bottle has such powerfully restorative properties. The old year must die before the new can be born; the seed must be buried before it can germinate; death is inevitable, but life goes on from generation to generation. The mummers play has a decidedly glass-half-full feel to it. It is worth noting that the Doctor's bottle is very often charged with strong cider or ale.

About the Readings

The Distant Scene was Fred Archer's first book. Described as 'The plain man's historian of village life', the local history of the Vale of Evesham was Archer's area of research. This he presented in novels written in warm, humorous prose. Vivid characters act out their roles in a setting which, whilst undeniably nostalgic is never cloyingly so.

The story of ***Gawain and the Green Knight*** was written in the late fourteenth century. One of the better known of the Arthurian stories, it was written in a North West Midlands dialect of Middle English by an anonymous author, usually referred to as the 'Pearl' or 'Gawain' poet, after the best known of his works. The idea of the death of the old year that the new might be born seems to be an important theme in *Gawain*.

It is difficult to think about Christmas without thinking about Charles Dickens' ***A Christmas Carol***. We have chosen to give you a glimpse of the wonderful, jolly, green Ghost of Christmas Present – a Victorian take on the Green Knight, perhaps, who takes Dickens' misanthropic hero, Scrooge, on a voyage of self-discovery not unlike that of his Middle English predecessor.

Lifting the Latch is the biography of Montague Abbott. "They asks me," said Mont, "what I'd like put on my tombstun when I snuffs it. For why? I en't nobody famous to sign off with a flourish. Just scratch: OLD MONT, ENSTONE, OXON, ENGLAND." What they actually did scratch was: "MONTAGUE ABBOTT, CARTER AND SHEPHERD IN ENSTONE 1902-1989." *Lifting the latch* is the story of a life lived in rural Oxfordshire by a real old countryman and, in the truest sense of the word, a gentleman. Old Mont's biographer is Sheila Stewart.

The Ballad of John Clare is the first novel by Hugh Lupton. For thirty years he has been a central figure in the British storytelling revival. His interest is in the hidden layers of the English cultural landscape and the stories and ballads that give voice to them. Structure is given to *The Ballad of John Clare* by the stations of the English rural calendar, over the course of a single year.

Cider with Rosie is perhaps the best known of Laurie Lee's books. Laurie Lee grew up in the Cotswold village of Slad. Although he was born some seventy years after the demise of the last of the west gallery quires, Laurie Lee writes about a way of life which would not have seemed so very strange to the ancients who once inhabited those old galleries. Laurie Lee's prose is delightfully vivid and as jam-packed full of images as poetry.