

PROGRAMME

Quire: *A Hymn To The Virgin* (Benjamin Britten arr. D Newell)

Reading: *Here's to Midwinter* by Robin Williamson

Quire: *The Gower Wassail* (Trad. arr. D Newell)

Reading: *Bethlehem Down* by Bruce Blunt

Quire: *Lay Me Low* (Addah Z. Potter arr. D Newell)

Reading: Adapted from *The Ballad of Mari Lwyd*
by Vernon Watkins

Quire: *Mari Lwyd* (Hugh Lupton/Chris Wood arr. D Newell)

Reading: *'The Frostbound Wood'* by Bruce Blunt

Quire: *Down In Yon Forest* (trad. arr. D Newell)
Christmas Now is Drawing Near at Hand
(trad. arr. D Newell after Dave Townsend)

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

Quire: *Bleary Winter* (Hugh Lupton/Chris Wood arr. D Newell)

Reading: *The Last Mummer* by Seamus Heaney

Quire: *England in Ribbons*
(Hugh Lupton/Chris Wood arr. D Newell)

INTERVAL

Quire: *The Boar's Head*
(trad. arr. D Newell after Coope, Boyes and Simpson)

Reading: From *Far From the Madding Crowd* by Thomas Hardy

Quire: *Rainy, Haily, Windy Night* (trad. arr. D Newell)
The Cherry Tree Carol (There is a Fountain)
(Trad. collected/arranged R Vaughan-Williams and E M Leather
adapted by D Newell)

Reading: From *A Child's Christmas in Wales* by Dylan Thomas

Quire: *Ar Gyfer Heddiw'r Bore*
(anon. From the Plygain tradition of mid-Wales)

Reading: From *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee

Quire: *Glad Tidings*
(Hardy family manuscripts ed. Dave Townsend)

Reading: From *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee

Quire: *While Shepherds Watched ('Otford')*
(Hardy family manuscripts ed. Dave Townsend)

Reading: From *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee

Quire: *See Heaven's High Portals*
(Hardy family manuscripts ed. Dave Townsend)

Reading: From *Cider with Rosie* by Laurie Lee

Quire: *Dunstan Lullaby*
(trad. arr. D Newell after Coope, Boyes and Simpson)

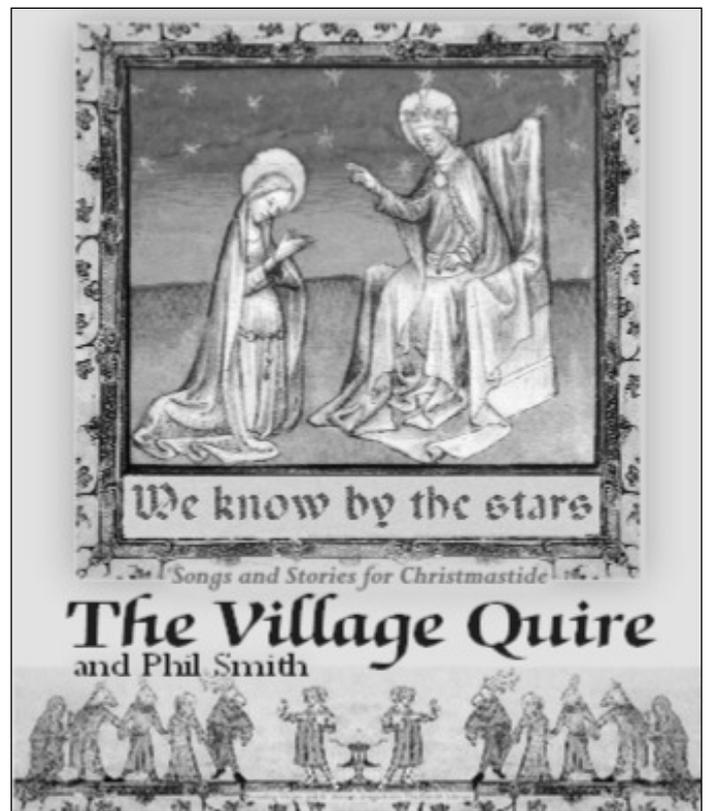
Reading: Reprise – *Here's to Midwinter* by Robin Williamson

Quire: *God Bless the Master* (trad. arr. D Newell)

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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. In our programme, *Glad Tidings*, *While Shepherds Watched (Otford)* and *See Heaven's High Portals* are good examples of this type of repertoire. '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 not to go unnoticed by those within ... even if they happen to be asleep at the time!

The folk material in our programme ranges from music by modern folk musicians (Chris Wood and Hugh Lupton's *Mari Lwyd*), through old songs surviving in broadside ballad sheets (*Rainy, Haily, Windy Night*), to songs and melodies preserved in an aural tradition and more latterly notated ('collected') and arranged for our use (*The Cherry Tree Carol*). The words of *The Cherry Tree Carol* are here set to the tune, *There is a Fountain*, which was collected by Ella Mary Leather and Ralph Vaughan Williams from the singing of Esther Smith in Dilwyn, Herefordshire, in the early years of the twentieth century.

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.

In parts of Wales, the Mari Lwyd (Grey Mare) is still carried from house to house between Christmas and Twelfth Night. She is a beribboned mare's skull, and will only be let into the house if the company carrying her can outwit the inmates in a riddling contest. Historical reports indicate that in some places the Mari Lwyd was welcomed, yet in other villages it was feared, especially by the girls and women and repelled at all costs - one type were made with real horse skulls, the lower jaw being wired and sprung so that it could give its victim a nasty nip. House-holders knew that the Parti Mari Lwyd would come calling with their *pwnco* verses, therefore they could plan their response in advance - giving the travelling party what they wanted, which was food and booze, or locking their doors, bolting their windows and taking up the challenge of the choral sparring match.

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.

Plygain is the name given, by the Welsh, to the church service held early on Christmas morning. And it was early – somewhere between 3.00 and 6.00 am was the custom! After Christmas Eve festivities which went on into the small hours of Christmas morning, the people would make their way to church. To pass time whilst awaiting the service, the assembled company would sing the old carols, unaccompanied and in Welsh. This repertoire became known, collectively, as *plygain*. *Ar Gyfer Heddiw'r Bore* is a much-loved song from the *plygain* repertoire.

Rapper is a short-sword dance. *Rapper* swords have a swivel handle at one end and a fixed handle at the other (no sharp points or edges). Dancers maintain contact throughout the dance by holding the fixed handle of the sword of the dancer next to them. The style is thought to have evolved in the North-East of England. Intricate figures alternate with breaks of clog/step dancing foot-work. *Rapper* sides usually comprise five dancers and two characters 'Tommy' and 'Betty' (this latter ideally being a large, bearded man in drag!). The characters introduce and comment on the dance, interacting with the audience. It is a compact dance which can be performed in the pub or even practiced, it has been conjectured, down the pit. Historically, *rapper* swords are thought to have been improvised from tools used in the mining industry, the present form of flexible metal blade with a handle at each end being derived from an implement used to clean the coats of the pit ponies.

About the Readings

Robin Williamson first sprang to fame in the late sixties as the lead singer, virtuoso instrumentalist and co-founder of *The Incredible String Band* developing a contemporary song-writing style based on Celtic instrumentation and tradition. He is also a wonderful storyteller. Writing of Williamson, the *San Diego Times* said: 'Part poet, part musician, part storyteller, part cultural guardian, he is ... at once, captivating in his artistry, delightful in his wit...'

Bruce Blunt, bon viveur, journalist and writer on wine, gardening and 'the turf', is, probably, 'little known in any capacity, least of all as a poet,' according to Dr. Brian Collins in his essay, *Peter Warlock's Music*. ***Bethlehem Down*** and ***The Frostbound Wood*** bespeak tranquillity in the present moment but with a shrill note of alarm just coming into earshot – and whose is the poetic voice in *The Frostbound Wood*? Little wonder that such verse stirred Warlock's muse; great wonder that Blunt's work is not more widely known.

Vernon Watkins (1906 - 1967) was born in Maesteg, Glamorgan. He knew Yeats, Eliot and Larkin and was a close friend of Dylan Thomas, even remaining so when Thomas failed to turn up as best man at his wedding. ***The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*** (1941) was Watkins's first published volume of poetry.

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.

Poet Seamus Heaney was awarded the *Nobel Prize in Literature* in 1995 for 'works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.' His poetry often deals with the concerns of rural Ulster. 'I learned,' says Heaney, 'that my local County Derry experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to 'the modern world', was to be trusted.'

Thomas Hardy wrote about life in small towns and rural parishes in the early years of the nineteenth century – years just before the novelist's birth. Hardy is a particularly apt addition to our list as his father, uncle and grandfather were all members of the Stinsford Parish Quire. West Gallery music was in his blood!

Although Dylan Thomas wrote exclusively in English, the Welsh accent is very clear in his writing. He is probably best known for *Under Milk Wood*, which he described as a 'play for voices'. ***A Child's Christmas in Wales***, is full of vivid and witty imagery, and characters who are at once caricatures and the real and loveable *dramatis personae* of our own memories.

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 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.