

## PROGRAMME

**Quire: *Malpas Wassail*** (*Wassail / Folk*)

*Reading from The Folklore of Herefordshire*  
by Ella Mary Leather

**Quire: *See Heaven's High Portals*** (*West Gallery*)

*Reading from The Diary of Parson James Woodforde*  
1740 – 1803

**Quire: *The Coppers' Christmas Song*** (*Folk*)

*Reading: Extract from the 'Brecon & Merthyr Silurian'*  
December 1838

**Quire: *Time to Remember the Poor*** (*Folk*)

*Reading from Peter Kennedy's 1952 interview with*  
*singer Arthur Lewis (1876-1961) in*  
*'The Folklore of Shropshire'* by Roy Palmer

**Quire: *Sound, Sound Your Instruments of Joy***  
(*West Gallery*)

*Reading: The Welsh Custom of Mari Lwyd, preceded by*  
*The Ballad of Mari Lwyd* by Vernon Watkins 1906-1967

**Quire: *The Mari Lwyd*** (*Folk*)

*Reading from Gentleman's Magazine* (1791 & 1820)  
reprinted in *The Folklore of Herefordshire*  
by Ella Mary Leather

**Quire: *Wassail, Wassail all over the Town***  
(*Wassail / Folk*)

*Reading from The Folklore of Herefordshire*  
by Ella Mary Leather

**Quire: *Gaudete*** (*Early Music*)

## INTERVAL

**Quire: *Wassail the Silver Apple*** (*Wassail / Folk*)

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

**Quire: *Ar Gyfer Heddiw'r Bore*** (*Plygain*)

*Reading from The Folklore of Radnorshire*  
by Roy Palmer

**Quire: *Rejoice All Men*** (*West Gallery*)

*Reading from Cider With Rosie*  
by Laurie Lee

**Quire: *While Shepherds Watched*** (*West Gallery*)

*Reading from Cider With Rosie*  
by Laurie Lee

**Quire: *Shepherd's Rejoice*** (*West Gallery*)

*Reading from Cider With Rosie*  
by Laurie Lee

**Quire: *Dunstan Lullaby*** (*Folk*)  
***Malpas Wassail*** (*reprise*)

# A Village Christmas



## The Village Quire and actor Phil Smith

Imagine a Christmas long before the telly; long before the marketing of Christmas as a gigantic commercial 'bean feast'. In every farmstead, in every village, dwellers would have celebrated the festive season with music and song; with dancing and feasting. Stories would have been told by candlelight by those gathered around the fire and a draught would have been drunk from the wassail bowl to toast the season.

This isn't the usual Christmas story.

This is the Christmas of the country people; the folk of the Welsh Marches. These are the songs that our forebears would have heard and would have sung with such '*hwyl*'.

***A Village Christmas*** sums up what a cold winter really meant and how Christmas was a time to bring light, life and hope to the working people of the countryside in times gone by ... and what was truly behind the Christmas traditions.

## 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 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. West Gallery music was associated with the singing schools that sprang up all over the land at this time. Church authorities had become dissatisfied with the way in which the psalms were sung by congregations. These singing schools were intended to set matters to rights in this respect. 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 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 (*Time to Remember the Poor*), to repertoire preserved aurally in such singing traditions as that of the Copper family of Rottingdean, West Sussex (*Coppers' Christmas Song*). The versions of this music which we sing have been arranged by modern musicians, but in a style 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. This is celebrated in the song *Wassail, Wassail All Over the Town*, which was sung in Herefordshire. Wassails then, are the songs associated with wassailing in its various incarnations.

**Early Music** – *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.' (Andrew Greenhill).

**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*.

## About the Readings

**Parson James Woodforde** held the living of Weston Longeville in Norfolk from 1774 until his death in 1803. He was a disarmingly unselfconscious diarist, presenting the minutiae of his thoughts, feelings and actions without varnish or 'spin'. We get to see Woodforde, 'warts and all', and we cannot help but like the man.

**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.

**Ella Mary Leather** lived in Weobley, Herefordshire. She was one of a number of folklorists working in the early years of the twentieth century who took a deep interest in folk beliefs and customs. Her book, *The Folklore and Witchcraft of Herefordshire*, is a fascinating read revealing evidence of very different habits of mind to our own – and remember, Leather was writing in the same century in which most of us were born!

**The Brecon and Merthyr Silurian** was a forerunner of the *Brecon and Radnor Express*. It was published as a weekly paper between 1838 and 1853.

**Roy Palmer** is the local historian par excellence. He has written on the folklore of many different places in the country. If you want to know about the places and people of Radnorshire, Shropshire or Herefordshire in days of yore, then the first place you may wish to look is one of Roy Palmer's books.

**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.

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.

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

[www.villagequire.org.uk](http://www.villagequire.org.uk)