

Growing Orchard Communities

COMMUNITY ORCHARD TOOLKIT



How to host a Wassail!

A guide to the background and folklore of a Wassail

Background

The word Wassail has its origins in the Anglo Saxon *wes hal, was haile, wase hail*. Meaning to be in good health or to be fortunate. Traditionally, it takes place on old twelfth night (in the Julian calendar) which is around 17th January. Although, anytime between Christmas and mid-January is a typical time for wassailing. Its main purpose is to wake up the trees, protect them from bad spirits and ensure a plentiful crop the following harvest.

Wassail is one of many folk traditions that mark the turning of the year, sharing similarities with other popular ceremonies around the world. The departure of darkness and return of the sun is celebrated through fire, light and sound, e.g. Diwali or Christmas. British orchards are full of folklore and popular tradition which has been shaped and practiced at grass roots level over hundreds of years. Coming from the people for the people gives rise to geographical variation around key elements. Wassail is more common in the south west and south east of Britain. It's a joyous, rough and ready event, full of hope and meaning yet make-shift and rudimentary and no less serious for being so.

The dictionary tells us also that Wassail is 'A riotous festivity characterised by much drinking'. But to the true countryman, particularly in areas where apples are grown and especially in rural Devon, this is not just a 'riotous festivity' but a ritual which is taken extremely seriously as the apple is an important part of the local economy. So, anything that can be done to help the trees produce a generous harvest is wholeheartedly encouraged and the skill and dedication of the 'Wassailers' is all important." Whimble History Society. <http://www.whimble.org/wassail.html>

Elements

Oldest tree - the best and oldest tree is chosen to represent the whole orchard. This tree becomes the focus for the wassail.

Procession - a group walk to the orchard and chosen tree with music and sound making. Lanterns can be carried and used on the ground to light the way.

King and Queen - a young girl and boy are chosen to represent new life. They wear a rustic crown, special clothes to mark them out and the king and queen lead the procession. Sometimes the queen is lifted up into the branches of the tree to put the toast in the tree as a gift to the tree spirits. In Devon, a young boy is put in the tree. Known as the Tom Tit he's told to say 'tit, tit more to eat.' He represents the robins who are guardians of the apple tree.

Evergreens - Dressing and adorning hats and clothing in natural, evergreen material, like holly and ivy with shiny elements symbolises the return of the light and green and red as colours of life.

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Toast - This is a piece of toast, cider soaked toasted bread! Put up in a high branch of the tree as an offering to the robins.

Chant - Variations on: Here's to thee old apple tree, long may you bud and long may you blow and long may you bear apples enow. Hats full, caps full, bush bushel sacks full, and my pockets full too. Huzzah!

Song - Various versions of specific wassail songs exist. See song sheets.

Loud noise - The gathering make a huge din to wake up the apple tree and scare away the bad spirits using pots and pans and bashable, clanging objects or blowing horns. Gun shots fired through the trees were once popular, but now replaced by general noise making. Sometimes the trees are rapped with sticks too.

Libation - cider from the previous season is poured around the roots of the chosen tree

Story - A story from Somerset called 'The Apple Tree Man' is a wassail story. It talks of Christmas Eve when animals can speak and how the best son finds hidden treasure.

Wassail cup or bowl - a large cup or bowl used for shared drinking and passing round the group, sometimes beautifully crafted and/or with several handles. The wassail bowl can be taken door to door as part of the wassail, where the offer of drinking from the cup was returned with alms.

The toast of 'Was hael! was replied with 'Drinc hael' - drink and be healthy.

Wassail cup recipes vary regionally, generally it's warm, spiced ale brewed with roasted apples.

Our wassail we do fill
With apples and with spice
Then grant us your good will
To taste here once or twice
Of our good wassail.

Travelling Wassail -

Door to door - The wassail procession goes door to door around the houses, offering a drink from the cup and asking for refreshment or money in return. It's also a way of gathering people to join you along the way and swelling the crowd when they arrive at the orchard.

Orchard to orchard - Travelling from orchard to orchard to wassail the trees.

Suggested order of Wassail around one tree

Opening - Crown king and queen - Procession - Gather round oldest tree - knock the tree - sing - queen near or up tree - cider soaked toast in the tree for the robins - chant - libate the tree - make noise - sing again.

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Old traditions

"In some orchards, the men showed the trees what was required of them by bowing down to the ground three times and rising up slowly, miming the actions of lifting a heavy sack of apples.

Yer's to thee, old apple-tree
Be zure yu bud, be zure yu blow
And bring both apples gude enough
Hats vul! Caps vul!
Dree bushel-bags vul!
Pockets vul and awl!
Urrah! Urrah!
Aw'ess, hats vul, caps vul
And dree bushel-bags vul
Urrah! Urrah!

The Gentleman's Magazine, published in 1791, of "The custom with the Devonshire people to go after supper into the orchard with large quantities of cider, having roasted apples pressed into it".

Books

Wassailing, by Simon Reed
Apple Games and Customs, by Common Ground.
Sacred Celebrations, by Glennie Kindred.
The English Year, by Steve Round
British Folk Customs, Christina Hole
Stations of the Sun, by Ronald Hutton.

There are **loads** of wassail films on YouTube. Also, see the resources section of this toolkit for example songs, a story and lots of other information and help!