The Stinchcombe Wassail

A Stinchcombe Wassail by Jayne Kirkham

A ciderman's granddaughter and local 'squire', ***Jayne Kirkham*** mulls one of her favourite folk traditions.

As with all folk traditions, it all depends.

It depends on where you live and the local dialect. In Gloucestershire it is, in fact, pronounced **WAY SAYAL**, with the emphasis on both syllables because it is two old English (I was told anglo saxon) words; '***waes hael***' meaning 'good health'.

And really, that is all that it's about – wishing your neighbours and those around you good health. It is the forerunner of going carol singing in December. After the period of fasting that was Advent and the celebrations of Christmas, from 12 th night through until Candlemas people would visit the houses of local gentry to wish them good cheer and entertain them. In return they received something to warm them – cakes, ale and often money.

Depending on the district, the entertainment might include a play, a song, or other shenanigans. The revived ***Stroud Wassail*** involves knocking on a door and then sending in The Broad (a bullish sort of hobbyhorse) to chase everyone out of the house to come and enjoy the entertainments. The householders provide warm cakes and mulled ale, more songs are sung and there is dancing too. If you ever get a chance to go to the Stroud Wassail, do go. It is a brilliant day of

spectacle all round the town with dancers, mummers (street theatre) and musicians bringing their traditions from all over the country.

Over the Bridge

Over the Severn Bridge, ***Chepstow*** has an excellent Wassail day as well. It's usually the week after Stroud, so nobody has to miss out. Chepstow's wassail involves a gathering of ***Mari Lwyds***: beautifully decorated horse skull hobby horses from around Wales that fulfil the task of the Stroud broad. Seeing a whole herd of mari Lwyds running into someone's house and out again is quite something. Chepstow also has a 'torchlight meeting of the English' on the old Wye Bridge. Again, with much quaffing of cakes, ale, singing and dancing and both nations wishing the other good health. ***'Waes hael!'***

Waes hael!

When someone calls **'waes hael!'**, the correct response is **'drinc hael'**, accompanied by a large swig of the nearest beverage. You can see why I like this tradition.

Villages, towns and areas each had their own version of the wassail song. Many from this area have been recorded. Like the carols that came after them, they had plenty of verses to give householders time to put on their slippers, dish up the dainties (and their dosh) and come to the front door. They celebrated the members of the household or the locale and often with a less than subtle call for cake and cash. As in Good King Wencelas, Ye who now shall 'bless' the poor, shall yourselves find blessing. Folk traditions are not museum pieces so rather than just digging up something from the past that may or may not be meaningful, the Stinchcombe **Waes Hael** celebrates our village in the 21st Century.

The Stinchcombe Waes Hael

A Stinchcombe Wassail written and sung by Jayne Kirkham, created by Mike Henton, pictures by Stinchcombe Villagers
Download your copy of the Stinchcombe Waes Hael

‘What no apples?’

No not really. The earliest wassails, **waes haels**, were all about spreading good cheer and lighting up the dark days. And dressing up and running around the houses and cadging tasty treats.

There is an apple wassail but there is little evidence that it is as old or as mysterious as is often claimed. But it is good fun and again spreads good cheer and involves tasty treats and definitely lights up the dark days after Christmas. And, as Stinchcombe lies in what is known as the ‘Cider Belt’ (God’s own country running through the counties of Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Somerset, and Devon, where the best apples grow), it is something we can lay claim to as part of our heritage. In fact, given that from the time of Prevost taking on the manor, the village has been officially ‘dry’ (no pub), speaking as a landlord’s daughter, I think we may have some catching up to do.



A Steaming Cup in the Winter Cold

An **apple wassail** is all about “*waking the trees*”. There they are, bare branched and resting in the cold of winter, visited only by the birds looking for grubs hidden under the bark. I

guess somebody at some point got worried that they might not wake up again (cider can do that to you) and thought they had better do something about it.

- First and so as not to appear ungrateful, they gave thanks to the tree for the previous harvest.
- Then they fed it and blessed it, pouring cider around its roots, filling its branches with toasted bread.
- Finally, they asked it to kindly provide another crop in the coming year.

To make sure the tree got the message, they made a lot of noise. This was supposed to wake the tree up and chase away anything lurking in the orchard that could jeopardise the crop: spirits, goblins, ‘piskies’. For some reason, probably known only to the small boys of the area, wrens, robins and sparrows also came in for ill treatment. Which was rather foolish, given that these birds would be eating the grubs that live under the bark of the tree and probably feast on its leaves, buds and fruit.



A Garden Wassail

The Address to the Apple Tree

Said by Leader:

Oh Apple Tree, we wassail thee, And hope that thou shalt bear
For the Lord doth know where we shall be
Come apples another year.
For to bloom well and to bear well, So merry let us be
Let everyone take off their hat
And shout out to the old apple tree

Said by all:

Old Apple tree, we wassail thee And hope that thou wilt bear
Hatfuls, capfuls, three bushel bagfuls
And a little heap for under the stair
Three cheers for the apple tree!

Download your copy of the Address to the Apple Tree!

Jayne Kirkham "Wassailing" her apple tree!

Sharing a drink

Whether you **waes hael** or wassail, both of these traditions have the common element of communion – sharing a drink from the ***Wassail Bowl***. The songs talk about it being made from the maple (or mapelin) tree although any vessel large enough to hold a lot of mulled booze can be utilised. Stroud has an old enamel washing up bowl but a plastic one would do. As with so many folk traditions, it belonged to the poor so nothing was ever that fancy. The Tetbury Broad was little more than a pair of cow horns attached to a broomhandle with an old sack to cover the person's body.

In areas of commercial orchards, ***Somerset*** and Worcestershire especially, there are some very big apple wassails. They are spectacular and have grown in popularity because the apple industry is still a thing there. On a much smaller scale, I went to a cider maker's wassail in North Nibley a few years ago. Known then as Barnes and Adams, they are now The Wild Cider Company but still right on our doorstep.

Berkeley Castle

Talking of doorsteps, did you know that back in the day Berkeley Castle had its own apple varieties? The Berkeley Pippin, the Bunch Apple, the Councillor, the Holbrooke, the Norman Pippin and Dursley had the Gloucester Royal. Specific to the conditions and climate of not just the Severn Vale, but to Berkeley and environs. That includes Stinchcombe, I would say. Perhaps we have some of those ***old and now critically rare varieties*** growing here in the village. Perhaps in your garden. There's a nice little research project. A great resource for that would be ***The Gloucestershire Orchard Trust***

But to identify apple tree varieties, you need apples, so those trees need waking up, ha ha. Sadly, this wassailing season is in the middle of a national lockdown. We cannot wassail or even **waes hael** together as a village, which would have been fun. But within our own households and over our fences and via the telephone and Whatsapp and by letter and email we can wish one another good health.

For example, Rev. Fiona emailed me this lovely Celtic invocation:
'Creator of the seasons, as the cold and dark winter surrounds us, we ask that you set us in the firmness of the roots of the trees. As they draw the goodness from the earth to sustain them, may we draw on your goodness- the Ground of Being. Set in us the trust of hibernating creatures. As they sleep deeply and soundly, trusting that the sustenance they have

within them will see them through the winter, may we trust that the sustenance you place in us is sufficient for us.' (from ***The Celtic Year*** by David Cole)

Gloucester Wassail Song

We can 'wake our own trees up'. If you want an excuse to get out into the garden, here are some further wassailing suggestions based on the traditional ***Gloucester Wassail Song***

'Wassail, wassail all over the town,
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown'

Toast – you'll need to toast some bread – the songs call for white bread but, heck, it's going to be stuck in a tree for the birds to eat and white bread, while it doesn't make pigeons explode as was once reported, isn't so healthy for anyone. Cut holes in the centre of your slices and it's easier to hang in the tree. Oh and dip it in the cider first – dry bread isn't good for birds (not sure if boozy bread is much better but it will liven up the RSPB's Great Garden Bird Watch…)

Mulled Ale or Cider – the songs call for ale, and pouring any cider round an apple tree does seem a bit cannibalistic but whatever is your fancy, I'd say. Whatever it is, warm is best and something whoever is gathered with you can enjoy. Hot Ribena anyone? It's made in the Forest of Dean.

Jayne's Wassail Bowl recipe:

(serves 8 people, yeah right)

- 6 dessert apples (I'm currently eating 'Hoary Morning')
- 12 cloves
- 225g (8oz) light brown sugar
- 570ml (1 pint) medium-dry sherry
- 15cm (6 in) cinnamon stick in 2 pieces

- 2.3 ltrs (4 pts) brown or ruby ale
- Thinly paired rind 2 lemons

Preheat the oven to 180°F (190°C, 375°F, gas 5).
Core each apple and then score from top to bottom six times and stud with 2 cloves each.
Put the apples in a big casserole and spoon the sugar into their centres and on top of the apples.
Pour over the sherry, add the cinnamon stick and bake in the oven until just beginning to soften and brown. Don't over cook.
Remove from the oven and transfer the contents to a large saucepan.
Pour over the ale and add the lemon rind.
Heat the ale until it just begins to simmer.

Serve immediately.

Jayne's Mulled Cider or Apple Juice:

(serves 4 ish)

- 1.15l (2pts) cider/apple juice (not too sweet and not sparkling)
- 1 level tablespoon sugar
- ¼ level teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 4 cloves
- 150ml (¼pt) calvados or brandy (or apple juice)

Put everything, bar the calvados or brandy in a large saucepan and stir over a low heat until the sugar is completely dissolved. When it is almost boiling, remove from the heat, stir in the calvados or brandy and serve immediately.

Jayne's Mulled Ale

Serves 4 unless they're very thirsty

- 1.5l (2pts) strong English ale

- 2 level tablespoons dark muscovado sugar
- Pinch of ground cloves
- Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
- 1.3cm (¼in) piece of root ginger, peeled and shredded
- 150ml (¼pt) dark rum

Pour all ingredients, bar the rum, into a large pan and heat gently until hot but not boiling and all the sugar has dissolved.
Remove from the heat and stir in the rum and serve immediately.

'Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree.'
A bowl to put your mulled beverage in – anything that doesn't leak, is heatproof, can be decorated with greenery and still drunk out of (or individual cups dipped into- keep it covid-safe).

'With our wassailing bowl, we'll drink unto thee'

Jayne's Mum's Apple Cake

- 8oz (225g) self raising flour
- 8oz (225g) butter
- 8oz (225g) soft brown sugar or any sugar actually, said my mum.
- 4 large eggs
- A couple of large apples, maybe one cooker, and some dessert ones to give it crunch
- A large pinch of cinnamon, or ground ginger or both if you fancy.

Preheat the oven to 170°Fan (180°C, 350°F, Gas4).
Peel, core and slice the apples.
Sift the ground spices into the flour.
In a separate bowl, cream the butter and sugar together
Beat in the eggs.
Stir in the flour.

Then,
Either stir in the apples and pour the mixture into a lined cake tin.
Or
Pour the mixture into a lined square cake tin and arrange the apple slices on top.
Or
Do a mixture of both (my mum liked ringing the changes).
Bake in the centre of the oven for about 25 minutes until golden on top and a skewer comes out clean.
Sprinkle brown sugar over the top and serve warm.
Then it's up to you:

Download Jayne's Recipes

The ceremony

I have tried to remember how the ceremony has been performed exactly but each wassail and each year seems to be different. Some by day, some in the twilight, some in full darkness and lit with flaming torches. I've done all those. All have a certain amount of parading round the trees – 3 times? Singing? Banging loudly? I've done all those.

Somebody dishes out the toast and people hang it in the trees- Sometimes just the children, sometimes just the ladies. Somebody reads out the Address to the Apple Tree and pours a bit from the wassail bowl around its roots. The bowl is passed round the people, sometimes gathered in a circle, sometimes just in a drunken heap (you'll see why in a moment). Everyone makes a lot of noise, some people hit the tree or shake the tree, let off fireworks, shoot guns, or party poppers, or blow kazoos.

Note the dangerous stuff tends to be in organised events. *The NHS is stretched enough without having to cope with wassail-related injuries so I'd stick to party poppers and banging*.

Then there's the lovely 'cakes and ale' – warming and sustaining and full of good cheer and the satisfaction of a job well done. In fact, in both traditions, this is the most important part: the communion and sharing of good things and good wishes. Whatever you make into your tradition, this part you must get right: If… If? WHEN (now you'll understand the 'drunken heap' previously mentioned). When someone shouts **'Waes hael!'** the reply is **'Drinc hael!'**, accompanied by a swig of whatever you're drinking. Which translates as, 'I wish you good health!', 'Back at you, my lover and I drink to your good health an' all. Proper job.' (Google translate should include West Country).

Waes Hael!