

Apple Wassail

The word wassail comes from the Anglo-Saxon toast *Wæs þu hæl*, meaning "be thou hale" — "be in good health". There are two different types of wassail – the house-visiting wassail and the orchard-visiting or apple wassail. The house-visiting wassail, also known as caroling, is the practice of going door-to-door singing Christmas carols. Apple wassailing refers to the practice of visiting orchards, drinking the health of the trees and singing to them to promote a good harvest next year.

The first recorded mention of apple wassailing was at Fordwich, Kent in 1585 when groups of young men went around orchards performing the rite for a reward. It was common in the cider orchards of South West England and many of the traditional wassail songs are indeed from this area – primarily Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Herefordshire.

The practice was carried out to 'bless' the trees, to wake them up and scare away evil spirits and so to encourage a good crop for the following autumn.

The date for wassailing apple trees varies widely – from Christmas Eve in some areas, to Twelfth Night Eve (Twelfth night is January 6th) or New year's Day in others. Many areas perform the ceremony on January 17th which corresponds to January 6th before the calendar was changed in England in 1752.

Apple wassailing was sometimes referred to as 'howling' and was historically performed by men. The elements of the ceremony varied and included some or all of the following:

- a wassail King and Queen leading the song and/or processional tune played/sung from one orchard to the next
- lifting the wassail Queen up into the boughs of the tree
- soaking slices of bread or toast in last years cider and lying these on the tree roots or hanging them in the branches – by the wassail Queen if there is one – as a gift to the tree spirits
- pouring cider over the tree roots
- drinking cider from a wassail bowl which was passed round
- singing and chanting apple wassails around the trees
- firing of shotguns to scare away any evil spirits. A newspaper account of 1851 documents Devonshire men firing guns (charged only with powder) at the trees.
- beating the tress with willow rods
- banging pots and pans and generally making a racket!
- there are reports of trees being threatened with the axe if they did not produce well the following year!
- sometimes all trees in an orchard were wassailed, or one tree would be chosen to stand for all

Among the most famous wassail ceremonies are those in Whimble, Devon and Carhampton, Somerset, both on 17 January.

We cannot find any records of apple wassailing being performed in Scotland historically, but the practice has developed in recent years with the upsurge in Community Orchards and interest in local food. In Edinburgh wassailing ceremonies have been held for the last 5 years at the Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens, Granton Community Garden and PEDAL's Donkeyfield Community Orchard in Portobello. The website of Transition Edinburgh South reports the Apple Wassail at the Royal Edinburgh in January 2011 as being the first wassail ever in Scotland!



Wassailing the apple trees at the Donkeyfield Community Orchard, Portobello, Edinburgh January 2012

*Huzza, Huzza, in our good town
The bread shall be white, and the liquor be brown
So here my old fellow I drink to thee
And the very health of each other tree.
Well may ye blow, well may ye bear
Blossom and fruit both apple and pear.
So that every bough and every twig
May bend with a burden both fair and big
May ye bear us and yield us fruit such a stors
That the bags and chambers and house run o'er. — Cornworthy, Devon, 1805*

For further information see:

<http://piereligion.org/applewassail.html>