

## Christmas Gifting and Caroling

Christmas is a time when we express joy and goodwill to all men which is difficult sometimes but it happened during the first Christmas of the 1914/1918 war under the most unlikely circumstances. Most people have heard this account before but it is so full of the true spirit of Christmas that it is worth repeating. It was Christmas Eve and all was quiet over a small section of trenches on the Western Front where the German and British soldiers faced each other across a deadly area known as No Man's Land. The British sentries on the parapets of their trenches were alerted to unusual activity coming from the German trenches. Lights were shining and music could be heard. The men were singing *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*. The men in the British trenches soon recognized it as the Christmas Carol, *Silent Night, Holy Night* so joined in and in no time a feeling of goodwill to all men had them out of their trenches fraternizing, exchanging small gifts and souvenirs such as buttons off their uniforms, and entertaining each other with folk songs from their homelands. The officers agreed to clear the dead strewn across No Man's Land and have burial services on Christmas morning. Later football games were arranged with crowds of men playing on both sides. The officers decided not have any shooting until the following midnight. When that time came the officers on both sides got out on the parapets of their respective trenches, bowed, saluted, fired a few shots in the air and that feeling of goodwill was over. The British High Command was extremely angry to hear of the event. It would be almost 4 years before it was permanently quiet on the Western front and other fronts. At 11.00 AM on the 11<sup>th</sup> Day of the 11<sup>th</sup> Month in 1918 all fighting stopped. For many years afterwards, 2 minutes of silence was observed while we paused to think of those who gave their lives for their Country.

Much of what we associate with Christmas has nothing to do with the Birth of Christ such as Christmas trees, Father Christmas or Santa Claus, traditional Christmas foods, and many of the carols we sing. Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, is credited with introducing some of these traditions from Germany when he married Queen Victoria. One Carol often sung in Britain was about *Good King Wenceslas*, famed for his generosity to the poor and needy. He was King of Bohemia in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. The last words of the carol were regarding gift giving and advised "Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing".

Many of the old Christmas Carols were lost during the time of Oliver Cromwell when joyful and merry songs were banned as they were considered a pagan tradition. They did not begin to become popular again until Queen Victoria's reign. The titles of most of our carols today express joy and happiness. We liked *Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly* especially as holly was easy to find around Poundstock ; the Christmas Fir tree was more common in Prince Albert's Germany. Christmas carol singers would tour Poundstock Parish stopping at houses and farms where they were sure of a good reception. They would soon be invited in to drink a glass of good cheer with their hosts then on again to the next stop, their harmony and volume increasing as they progressed through the Parish. The choir to which I belonged considered *The Twelve Days of Christmas* a challenge to sing. It was known as an accumulative carol. We were proud to sing through all those gifts correctly that "My True Love Sent to Me". The Partridge, Two Turtle Doves, Three French Hens, Six Geese, Seven Swans, Eight Maids, Nine Ladies Dancing, Ten Lords Leaping, Eleven Pipers Piping, ending with Twelve Drummers. The twelve days of Christmas refer to the Twelve days between Christmas Day and Epiphany, the day the three wise men, The Magi, journeying from afar arrived at the manger each bearing a gift. Gift giving became a tradition at Christmas and O. Henry wrote a beautiful short story he called the **Gift Of the Magi**. It begins by telling us this young married couple, Jim and Della, live in a modest flat and have very little money. They each have one possession in which they take great pride. Della has this beautiful long hair and Jim has a gold pocket watch that belonged to his father. It is Christmas Eve and they are both faced with the problem of getting a gift for their loved one. Della knew a hair-dresser that bought hair for wig makers so she sold her hair and soon found a platinum fob chain for Jim's watch. It cost her about the same price as she obtained for her hair. She hurried home and when Jim comes home he stares at her in an unusual way. Della admits she had sold her hair to buy him a present. Jim then gives Della her present, some expensive combs for her hair that she no longer has. Della then gives Jim the chain she bought for his watch. Jim confesses that he had sold his watch in order to buy her combs. Now they both have gifts for which they had no use, but they soon realized how far they are willing to go to show their love for each other; not unlike the gifts of the Magi who came a long way on their camels with their gifts to worship the Baby in the Manger, Jesus.

Christmas Carols seem to be timeless and can bring people together. We feel that many generations before us have sung the same Carols with the same enthusiasm and joy that is the spirit of Christmas.

When we sit down for Christmas dinner Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*, may come to mind. As poor crippled Tiny Tim Crachit gazed in wonderment at Ebenezer Scrooge's gift of a large Turkey for the Crachit family's Christmas dinner, Tiny Tim exclaimed,

GOD BLESS US EVERY ONE

May The Poundstock Packet extend Tiny Tim's Christmas Blessing to every one of our readers.