

Celebrating Rivers Wassail

Elizabeth Waugh

Volunteers gathered in the mid-1990s to carry out the plan, the vision, of restoring the remnant of an orchard planted by the renowned Rivers Nursery. Saving the orchard preserved a part of this once agricultural area, which then, as now, was being engulfed by housing developments. As well as cutting away the brush and brambles from the gnarled but potentially still productive trees, replacing old variety trees were being planted to fill in the gaps, and marking boundaries with woven brush fencing, there was also a determination to restore many of the old country traditions, drawing on local knowledge and some of the shared information put out by newly formed regional groups like Common Ground. There was to be an annual Apple Day, which would draw the public, especially children, at harvest time and would serve to introduce the Rivers Orchard to the community as their place: to pick fruit, to walk, to experience the countryside and country ways, to help build a new local amenity.

A second annual festival day was soon introduced of a more anarchic nature, a Wassail event. This, timed for its traditional point after Christmas, around 12th night, had one practical function, to clear the great heaps of undergrowth cut during the orchard restoration process by making a mighty bonfire. There was another aim of a more pre-historic nature, to evoke the ancient ritual of serenading the winter-bare trees with Wassail songs at the moment of the first stirrings of new spring life in order to summon and safeguard an eventual fine harvest.

This event, like Apple Day, soon became a favourite community gathering, with excited children and lantern-carrying singers coming to the bright warm fire in the cold. often damp darkness for this unfamiliar, uncomfortable but ancient human gesture to the forces of life. The Rivers event began to establish its own traditions: Nick Bright, local wood craftsman, made a Rivers Wassail cup of cherry wood from a fallen tree (*see below*); Zoe Taylor began to bring her flute as a portable instrument to lead the singing and local folk singers were encouraged to participate. A specific Rivers Wassail song was written to add to the list of 10 or so traditional songs from various apple-growing regions of England; mummers came with their tatters and ribbons and noisy bladders and little drums. The apple juice or cider was mulled; cakes were made. After the tree serenade the children were gathered to beat on buckets to scare birds from the fruit and pour a libation of juice was all wild and wonderful.



This was a great spectacle, with darkness highlighted by red and orange flames, with swirling smoke, with bright lanterns and voices raised to simple jolly rhythms in the black night. One particular year there had been a light covering of fresh snow, so, as the bonfire was placed on the edge of the orchard facing the fields leading to the Crest area of Sawbridgeworth, the fire lighted the walkers coming over the white ground. Children cavorted and spun round on the



snow as the bonfire was scattered and put out, a great Bruegelsesque scene. It was wildly festive but safe; the great fire was tended by the people who had made it, children kept out of reach of sparks by the fire guards and their own families. The fire was a focal point but the whole orchard was a playground as well, as a place that would, over the season, attract insects and animals with blossom and fruit, as well as people.

In 2014, the volunteer committee maintaining the site became a steering group within the Sawbridgeworth Town Council, dedicated, as before, to managing the site, now to be known as the Rivers Heritage Site and Orchard (RHSO), and with the Council's support, continuing to protect the area from commercial development. With a closer Council involvement came benefits from being able to draw on some council services such as archive and tool storage, such as help with some transport and other costs. However, orchard activities became subject over the years to increasingly strict guidelines on public gatherings, such as health and safety requirements in particular. The culture, fostered perhaps by social media and instant publicity of legal cases and instant blame, has meant that government bodies and local groups alike cannot allow the freedoms and pleasures in their own festivals that were once the main focus in organising local events. The RHSO now has to undertake lengthy, and sometimes costly, measures to light areas and confine the bonfire. These necessary

arrangements are involved and the volunteers whose time is so generously given are drawn further from the central orchard tasks. Last year, for the first time since 1997 when the first Wassail took place, the issues of safety did not get solved and Wassail was cancelled. It is the hope that the celebration will take place next year, watch out for signs after Christmas!

However evocative the Wassail celebrations may be, we know that what ensures a fine harvest is the monthly maintenance of trees, enjoyable in itself, but crucial for the crop. If you wish to safeguard the orchard and take part in activities, see the website: www.rhso.co.uk for news.

The Rivers Wassail Song

*Come worthy folk of Sawbridgeworth a wassail for to go
To bless the trees and hurry growth to help a good crop grow.*

*And it's up and down the twitchells see the people throw
A drink to the left, a drink to the right as onward they all go
To Wassail, Wassail, Wassail as onward they all go.*

*The stars shine bright in heav'n above and light the apple trees
The Rivers plums and pears we love, bad spirits we displease*

Chorus

*The wassail cup anoints the trees, the amber liquid flows
The drums are beaten with such glee to help the orchard grow.*

Chorus

*Build bonfire high and set alight, the sparks will rise up high
With red and gold to silver go as they reach to the sky.*

Chorus

*The future lies ahead of us, a health unto you all
With apple cake and cider too a frolicking home we fall.*

Chorus

Author's note

The information in this article was drawn from the Rivers archive, stored in Sawbridgeworth Town Council Offices but available for all to see. The archive is a chronological compilation of old information drawn from family history, the Hertfordshire Archive Rivers holdings, articles from horticultural journals of the past and contemporary records of the on-going development of the Rivers Orchard, past and present.

Elizabeth Waugh, November 2018