

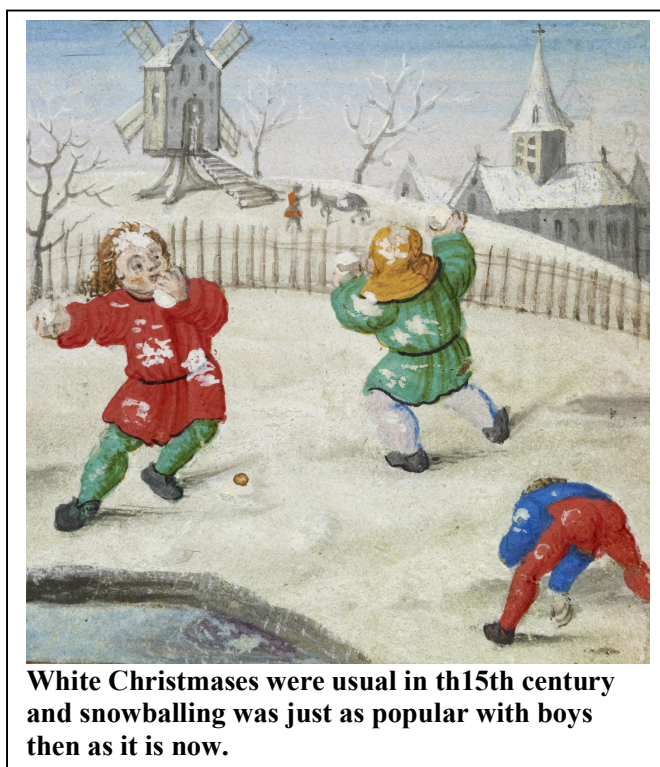
'Festive' Fun? Oliver Cromwell would not approve!

Ewelme News, Oct-Nov 2024

As we cling to the last sunny days of a September, the stores had already raced to promote the annual commercial razzamatazz known increasingly by the inclusive label 'Festive Season'. 'Winterval' is possibly a more apt title, as in the northern hemisphere the midwinter solstice was celebrated for millennia, revolving around fire and alcohol fuelled partying, heralding the return of the sun to dispel the cold, hungry months with light, warmth and abundance. The Roman legions pushing north into the chill, would similarly celebrate the December solstice with their Saturnalia, a wild carousal in honour of their agricultural god Saturn. Various features of this enjoyable distraction were adapted into the traditions of the conquered, and eventually embraced into the religious celebration of the Christian converts.

How Ewelme villagers kept the festival depended largely on their social status. The wealthy could always afford a 'slap up do'. The poor had a day off from their labours to go to church for the familiar age-old story. A few early examples are recorded in the archive.

In 1471 it is very possible that the deposed Queen Margaret of Anjou spent Christmas at the magnificent Manor at Ewelme as the prisoner/guest of Dowager Duchess Alice de la Pole. On January 8th, 1472, Sir John Paston (a family with a contentious neighbour relationship with the de la Pole's in Suffolk), wrote to his mother Margaret detailing his recent merry Christmas celebration with a hint that Alice could have hosted the Royal visitor. *"Most worshcypfull and kynde moodre ... I have been the marier thys Crystmesse, wit Sir George Browen and I now come to my Lorde Archebyssshops when I have hadde as greet cheer ... As ffor Qween Margrett, I understand that sche is remeyved from Wyndesor to Walyngfforthe, nyghe to Ewhelme, my Lady of Suffolk Place in Oxonforthe Schyre."* Alice was Constable of Wallingford Castle, and although a former friend and loyal subject, was responsible for Margaret's imprisonment in the castle. As former Lancastrian supporters, the de la Pole's had a strong connection to Queen Margaret. In 1445 Alice and her husband (then Earl) William were tasked by King Henry VI in fetching the 15-yr old Margaret from France and bringing her to England for her Royal marriage. However the Lancastrian dynasty was doomed to fall. In 1471 the ex-Queen's husband was murdered in the Tower and their 17-yr old son and heir was killed at the Battle of Tewkesbury. (The usurping Plantagenet King Edward IV captured Margaret, finally consigning her to history by sending her in ignominy and penury back to France in 1475). It would have been a Christian



kindness for Alice to take her tragic prisoner from Wallingford Castle to her comfortable Ewelme mansion for Christmas.

Alice probably gave gifts to her two Chaplains (of the Almshouse and Grammar School), and maybe for her 13 Almsmen who daily prayed for her soul, but for the ‘common’ villagers huddling in their hovels, Christmas cheer would have been predictably scant. Worse was to come in 1644 under the Parliamentary rule, when the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell had a mission to clear the country of ‘... *decadence and celebrations that threatened the core Christian beliefs.*’ Anyone caught even cooking a ‘Christmas goose’ was arrested. Ewelme villagers were affected, as there were two successive Puritan Rectors during those years. However, with the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660 the population rejoiced in having their Christmas back!

A record of the 1904 Christmas exists and demonstrates the true spirit of goodwill and ‘giving’ to the less fortunate. Rector Charles Cruttwell reported that “*the gloomy and unhealthy winter season had largely prevented the usual village entertainments.*” He continued in a more cheerful vein, highlighting how the more well-to-do villagers had generously organised and provided Christmas cheer for parishioners – “*There have not been wanting however, several hospitable gatherings. Among them an excellent treat for all the members of the Day School, with tea, followed by a splendid Christmas tree, hung with really charming presents. This was given by several kind friends, the chief burden of the arrangements falling on Mr and Mrs Poupart, [shopkeepers] and Mr and Mrs Samuel Godden [the blacksmith]. A Sunday School treat given by the Rector, followed by carol-singing and a Magic Lantern exhibition. The Ladies of the Manor [the Misses Quinn] entertaining the whole of the district, men and women over 60 in number. Tea was followed by a ‘Punch and Judy Show’ and a present for every guest. Mrs Hampden [The Old Mansion at Cottesmore] also entertained all the occupants of the Cloisters to a handsome refecton. Miss Franklin gave a tea to her district, and the Choir and Bell Ringers had a supper at the Rectory.*”

Times change and often go full circle. If Oliver Cromwell could witness the current secular ‘Festive’ jamboree he would, if he still had one, surely be spinning in his grave!

Carol Sawbridge – Ewelme Village Archive