

## Hark to the waits

Washington Irving, in his 'Sketchbook' of 1820, makes some timely comments on the Christmas customs he observed when

visiting Bracebridge Hall in Britain. "I had scarcely got into bed", he comments on his experiences of Christmas Eve, "when a strain of music seemed to break forth in the air just below the window. I listened,

and found it proceeded from a band, which I concluded to be the waits from some neighbouring village. They went around the house, playing under the windows."

Not all commentators were as kindly. In Lincolnshire in 1832 a citizen noted: "Our ears are saluted with the dissonant screaming of Christmas Carols, which the miserable creatures sing who travel from house to house with the vessel cup." All the same, it was once considered to bring bad luck if one dismissed a caroller without a present of some kind.

Waits were originally bands of musicians, usually playing wind but sometimes stringed instruments, who paraded the streets at night to soothe and reassure the local citizens by noting the passing hours. The hautboy (oboe) was known as the "wait" or "wayte", being the favourite instrument. The term "carol" was originally applied to a round dance, later to a joyous hymn. Wynkyn de Worde published a collection of carols suitable for Christmas in 1521.

In my college days a group of us would make the rounds on a flat truck and with a piano, entertaining our neighbours for a week or so before Christmas. And we always made a point of accepting the invitation from a remote village church to stumble in pitch darkness along a narrow lane with the gurgling of a little creek by way of company, to sing to a few local villagers.

Later on, while working as a resident pharmacist in a hospital, I would marvel at the noise made by a local Salvation Army band as it toured one of the corridors with a joyful programme of carols. And there was one year when I was one of a hospital group touring wards to amuse patients with our music. On that occasion I had been persuaded to attire myself in a tartan kilt and progress from piano to piano giving extempore recitals. On Christmas Eve I encountered in the corridor a

well-known consultant surgeon, who stopped and pointed sternly at my kilt. "Do you realise," he remarked in his authoritarian voice, "that you are wearing my tartan?" And I suddenly recollected that, indeed, he was the hereditary chieftain of the clan.



## The human touch

In a world hell-bent on acquiring and consuming more and more goods and services, where (to quote a well-remembered politician) "there is no such thing as society, only individuals", nothing is barred that might prevent an individual from gaining advantage over others. Such an atmosphere is well calculated to inculcate the notion that no one can take any responsibility for the welfare or the bane of his or her neighbours. The "I'm all right, Jack, blow you!" syndrome, which makes us callous to the less fortunate and the less arrogant, cannot serve in any way to improve our social world.

It seems to me salutary, at this season of goodwill toward men and of looking towards a better future, to meditate on the desirability of the human touch in all our affairs. It is time to consider the virtues of compassion and empathy. Compassion signifies pity and inclination towards helpful or merciful conduct. Indeed, it means sympathy. Empathy involves the power to project one's own personality into the people and problems one encounters, and by so doing to arrive at a better comprehension of what is involved. Such a process gives us power to reach a sounder judgement when a situation confronts us and to take a more constructive approach to solve it.

Unfortunately, we cannot develop compassion or empathy if we are always in a tearing hurry. The first requisite if we seek improvement is to relax over things. That will give us time and opportunity to think things out, and will at the same time remove stress from our troubled lives and overtaxed bodies.

## Christmas garlands

The decoration of homes and churches with evergreen plants when the midwinter solstice arrives is an ancient custom that long antedates the Christian observances of Europe and Asia.

The fact that some plants maintain the characteristics of life when most of our vegetation has shown every sign of decline has long been taken as a symbol of the essential continuity of life on the planet. The Romans made their seasonal garlands from the Mediterranean bay, the pine, the evergreen oak and box and rosemary. In the West we have used our native holly, ivy and mistletoe rather than any other foliage plant or berried bush, sometimes separately, sometimes in combination in the form of a wreath or garland.

Our medieval forebears favoured the so-called "kissing bough", which was a crown-shaped ornament with paper rosettes, candles and sometimes added fruit. The bunch of mistletoe that hung from the centre of the bough was an essential ingredient, since it indicated permission to kiss anyone who stood beneath it. This was viewed askance by the incumbents of churches, however, who generally regarded mistletoe as a sign of pagan ceremony, since it was a plant that druidic priests of old gathered ceremonially and had become associated with fertility rites. There is an old superstition that mistletoe must never be brought into the home before New Year's Day, but there is little evidence to show that such a rule has been observed.



Holly and ivy, introduced into the home, should, it was thought, never be carried over the threshold until Christmas Eve — another ancient rule seldom obeyed. There were rules also governing the disposal of the evergreen decorations after they had served their purpose. Holly, ivy and laurel should be burned, but not before Candlemas Eve (1 February). Alternatively, they could be kept until Shrove Tuesday and then used as fuel to fry pancakes. They should never be thrown into the garden to rot down, but it was permitted to feed them to the cows.