

Wassail

The Wassail tradition involves music, toast, and spiced apple juice (or cider). It respects the 'King Tree' in this traditional ceremony to awaken the orchard and encourage a bumper crop of apples for the coming year.

The word *Wassail* comes from old Norse (ves heill) and the Anglo-Saxon (wes hal) words meaning 'be in good health' or 'good fortune'. It was used as a greeting or a toast (which in Anglo-Saxon times was the practice of literally dipping toast in your drink) at celebrations.

Over time, the word Wassail became less used as a greeting and more to name a popular drink during the Anglo-Danish period. It was a mixture of warmed ale or cider and spices thought to bring good health.

Therefore, as the centuries went on, the word became more associated with festive wishes at Christmas and New Year, and especially 12th Night when it was good to have a warm spicy drink and something that would be given to carollers who came singing door to door. This element of a Wassail is still celebrated in parts of Wales where the wassailers go door to door singing and won't leave until the house's occupants give the carollers food and drink.

The idea of wishing good health to the crops and orchards that gave us ale and cider became more popular in the 1800s. Many towns across the UK have their own wassailing traditions and can vary a lot. Most celebrate the spirit of the orchard thought to live in the 'King Tree', which tends to be the oldest or biggest tree; to bring good health and good fortune to the orchard in the coming year, the Bean King and Pea Queen offer up a piece of toast soaked in cider or apple juice. Juice from the previous spring harvest is also poured on the 'King Tree' roots. The gathered crowd sing wassailing songs and makes lots of noise to scare away any bad luck or ill fortune caught in the branches of the trees – ensuring a good harvest in the coming year.

Some traditions involve an animal, usually a horse. This represents nature and is a leftover from ancient winter traditions, where dressing up as an animal was a fun, festive tradition. Others include Morris dancing, with all the stamping on the ground, which was thought to wake up spring and bring on warmer weather.