

DISCOVERING WORDS ON WEDNESDAYS DECEMBER 4TH - SEASONAL CHRISTMAS/WINTER THEME

These notes are a patchy record of what was discussed, as an aid to following up words and phrases further if you are interested.

TOASTING

Meaning "a call to drink to someone's health," is said to date from the reign of Charles II), originally referring to the beautiful or popular woman whose health was proposed. The term apparently grew from the common practice of putting toasted or spiced bread in wine which was often of poor quality, to soak up some of the acidity and improve the flavour.

HAPPY v. MERRY CHRISTMAS

"Merry" comes via the Old German for "short-lasting", which evolved to mean "pleasant" or "agreeable" in Middle English. It features in C16 carols like "God rest ye merry gentlemen".

The phrase "Merry Christmas" originated in the 16th century, and its first known use was in a letter from Bishop John Fisher to Thomas Cromwell in 1534. "Merry" gained popularity through the publication of "A Christmas Carol" by Dickens in 1843.

Merry Christmas came to be associated with raucous behaviour, while happy Christmas has a higher social connotation e.g. adopted by royalty.

YULE

Yule comes from the Old English *geol*, for Christmas Day, in turn derived from the Old Norse *jól*, the name of a heathen feast, which began on the December solstice (on what was then December 25th) and lasted for 12 days. "*Jul*" was not only the name given to the Norse god Odin, but also used to describe all the gods associated with the pagan festival: "the Jul or "Yule" ones". In the C10, the Christian King Hakon of Norway incorporated the pagan festival into the Christian ceremony, so people could celebrate whichever they preferred.

The **YULE LOG** comes from the pagan tradition of selecting a tree to be burned from the first day of the festival for twelve days, to encourage the sun to start moving again (having apparently stopped) and bring good luck. A bit was retained to burn the following year.

Regional variations on the custom e.g. **YULE CLOG** in the North-East; "**ASHEN FAGGOT**" is the West Country equivalent, made from a bundle of ash sticks and burned.

YULE BLINKER is a Scottish term for the Pole star; **YULE BROSE** was seasonal version of porridge onto which juices from left-over boiled meat were poured in the 19th Century.

A **YULE- HOLE** is the loosest hole on your belt, to which you resort after Christmas dinner.

TURKEY

The turkey is so-called because of its resemblance to the helmeted guinea fowl, which was imported from Africa by Turkish merchants as far back as C15. So Europeans came to call the guinea fowl the *turkey-cock* or *turkey-hen*.

What we now call a turkey originated in North America, and when explorers and settlers began to send a similar-looking fowl back to Europe, they were called turkeys in England as well.

The Turkish word for a turkey is **hindi**, which literally means “Indian.” The original word in French, **coq d’Inde**, meant “rooster of India,” which has since shortened to **dinde**. This was due to the misconception at the time that India and the New World were the same.

TO TALK TURKEY

First recorded in 1824, this meant “to discuss something pleasantly.” Then, *talking turkey* came to mean “having an honest and frank discussion”.

One legend has it that the phrase originated in a joke where a white man and Native American were hunting together; after killing birds both tasty (turkey) and not (buzzard), the white man tried to persuade his colleague to take the buzzard, not the turkey—to which the Native American hunter allegedly responded, “You talk all buzzard to me, and don’t talk turkey”.

Another theory is that the phrase arose because the first contacts between Native Americans and settlers were so often about the supply of wild turkeys, that whenever they met a colonist, the Indians were said to ask, ‘You come to talk turkey?’”

At some point, it was modified to *talk cold turkey*, which had essentially the same meaning: “to speak frankly and without reserve; to talk hard facts, get down to business,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

COLD TURKEY

In 1920, New York’s Department of Health reported that “Some addicts voluntarily stop taking opiates and ‘suffer it out’ ... which in their slang is called taking ‘cold turkey’”.

GOBBLEDEGOOK

This term was coined by Maury Maverick who was the chairperson of the Smaller War Plants Corporation in 1944 who became infuriated by pompous, wordy jargon. His explanation was:

“Perhaps I was thinking of the old bearded turkey gobbler back in Texas who was always gobbledygobbling and strutting with ridiculous pomposity. At the end of his gobble there was a sort of gook.”

TINSEL

The name of this decoration came from Old French and the verb “*estinceler*”, to sparkle, which in turn comes from the Latin *scintilla*, a spark (also at the heart of ‘scintillating’).

In medieval times until C16, tinsel was a lightweight fabric woven with metallic silver or gold thread and used by the élite for masques and flags. It was cheaper than cloth of gold, which could only be used by royalty. At the wedding of Mary Queen of Scots, her ship had tinsel in the sails.

From the early C17, shredded silver was used to make statues glisten. There was a move to use thin sparkling strips (lametta) to mimic ice. By the C19 Christmas trees were decorated with it to enhance the candlelight. From C20, aluminium tinsel was used, because it was cheaper, lighter and more fire resistant.

TINSEL TOWN

Nickname for Hollywood, dating from the 1970s, to indicate its superficial glitter and glamour.

CAROL

Known from c. 1300, to mean "joyful song, also a kind of dance in a ring", from Old French *carole*, a "kind of dance in a ring, round dance accompanied by singers". Once sung in all four seasons with popular secular themes, only the tradition of singing carols at Christmas has survived. The Victorians revived the custom of singing Christmas carols, with new ones being composed.

WASSAIL

Evidence of use from the mid-C12, derived from Old Norse *ves heill* "be healthy," a salutation, from *ves*, imperative of *vesa* "to be" + *heill* "healthy," from Proto-Germanic *haila*). Use as a drinking phrase "wassail...drinkhail" appears to have arisen among the Danes and spread to Britain.

The tradition of **WASSAILING** took two forms. One involved groups of merrymakers going from house to house e.g. on Twelfth Night, wassail bowl in hand, singing traditional songs and collecting for charity. The wassail bowl contained a drink generally consisting of warmed ale, wine or cider, blended with spices, honey and perhaps an egg or two. Many old wassail bowls date from the late C17, because wassailing was banned by the Puritans when Cromwell was in power, so earlier ones were often destroyed.

The other form of wassailing, still practised in the countryside, involves blessing of the fruit trees, with drinking and singing to the health of the trees in the hope that they will provide a good harvest.

SCURRYFUNGE

Scurryfungle is to dash about the house tidying up (shoving things into cupboards, under beds or behind the curtains) just before guests arrive.

MISTLETOE

The name is derived from two Anglo Saxon words: "*Mistel*" meaning dung, and "*Tan*" meaning stick or branch, because the seeds of this parasitic plant grow in bird droppings on trees.

The Romans associated mistletoe with peace and love, so warring armies negotiated treaties under branches of mistletoe. These were hung over doorways to protect the household from evil spirits, as part of the Saturnalia festival which lasted from 17–23 December and later morphed into Christmas.

Mistletoe became a sacred symbol of fertility to the Druids who saw it flourish in harsh winters. In Norse culture, mistletoe was a sign of love and peace. According to legend, the goddess, Figg lost her son, the god Baldur, to an arrow made of mistletoe, and white berries formed from her tears. She proclaimed that all who met under it would embrace and become friends, in memory of her son. This led to the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, recorded in Tudor times, with one berry being removed from the bough for each kiss.

TIDINGS

Used from late C12, plural of tiding to mean the "report of an occurrence or event," from Old English *tidan* "to happen" or "befall", as in "Woe betide". The Puritans referred to "Christide". Link tidings to **TIDE** e.g. Old English *tīd*, "portion of time, due time, period, season; feast-day"; also to **TIDY** from mid-13c., *tidi* or "in season, timely", which came to mean "proper" or "in order".

Note originally "slang" of "**A TIDY SUM**" i.e. money accumulated by a well-organised person.

TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

The best known English version was first printed in *Mirth without Mischief*, a children's book published in London around 1780, with many illustrations.

The best known melody comes from a 1909 arrangement of a traditional folk melody by English composer Frederic Austin.

The song used to have regional variations: mention of “bears a-baiting” or “ships a-sailing”; some name the singer’s mother as the gift giver instead of their true love. “French hens” could be “foreign” hens, “calling birds” could be “colly” birds, old name for blackbirds,

It is most probable that it originated from a children's memory and forfeit game.

Yet even now, on religious sites you will find the claim that the song has two levels of meaning: the surface meaning plus a hidden meaning known only to members of the Church. From 1558- 1829, Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. The theory goes that someone during that era wrote this carol as a catechism song for young Catholics. The fact-checking website Snopes.com debunked the theory in 2008, since all the “hidden references” were used by Protestants anyway.

What do the gifts in “The 12 Days of Christmas” represent?

It is still fascinating to see how these numbers so perfectly align with biblical references.

- **Partridge in a Pear Tree:** The partridge represents Jesus Christ, who is seen as a symbol of salvation and peace.
- **Two Turtle Doves:** The two turtle doves are the Old and New Testament in the Bible.
- **Three French Hens:** The French hens are interpreted as being the virtues of faith, hope and love.
- **Four Calling Birds:** The birds represent the four Gospels in the Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- **Five Golden Rings:** The five golden rings are thought to represent the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Torah or Pentateuch.
- **Six Geese a-Laying:** The six geese refer to the six days of creation, as described in the Book of Genesis in the Bible.
- **Seven Swans a-Swimming:** The swans represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit also known as the seven sacraments in Christianity. These gifts are understanding, wisdom, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.
- **Eight Maids a-Milking:** The maids are meant to represent the eight Beatitudes—the blessings listed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.
- **Nine Ladies Dancing:** The ladies dancing are the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, including love, joy and peace.
- **Ten Lords a-Leaping:** The 10 lords represent the Ten Commandments.
- **Eleven Pipers Piping:** The pipers represent the 11 apostles (excluding Judas Iscariot).
- **Twelve Drummers Drumming:** The 12 drummers are meant to represent the 12 points of belief in the Apostles’ Creed.