A Collection of Carol Stories 2023

Born in the night
Christians, awake, salute the happy morn
Good King Wenceslas
Hark! the herald angels sing
In the bleak midwinter and Love came down at Christmas
O come, all ye faithful
O little town of Bethlehem
Once in royal David's city
Silent night, holy night
The Angel Gabriel from heaven came
The Calypso Carol
Wise men, seeking Jesus

‘Born in the night, Mary’s child,’ by Geoffrey Ainger (1925 – 2013)

Geoffrey Ainger was born in Mistley, Essex, on 28th October, 1925, was educated at Bracondale School in Norwich, at Richmond College, London, then at the Union Theological Seminary, New York, from which he emerged as a Methodist minister.

During a varied ministry, he spent nine years as part of a team ministry at Notting Hill in the 1960s, when it was a very deprived area. He ended his career in the South East London Methodist Circuit, before retiring to Staffordshire, where he died on 25th January, 2013.

This hymn was written in 1960, whilst Revd. Geoffrey Ainger was a Methodist minister at Loughton, Essex and was first published in “Songs from Notting Hill” in 1964. The theme reflected Revd. Ainger’s concern for homeless in the area – an official indifference to the plight of people who lacked a roof over their heads. The melody of ‘Born in the night’ was originally for a guitar, but it has been adapted for keyboards and other instruments.

“Christians, awake, salute the happy morn” by John Byrom (1692 – 1763)

There can be few questions more rash than to ask an average eleven year-old what he or she would like for Christmas nowadays. It an invitation to empty your wallet or, perhaps, to make your ‘flexible friend’ feel the strain. Fortunately for John Byrom, things were different in 1749, because his daughter, Dolly, was not as materialistic as contemporary children are encouraged to be by advertisers. She asked only for a poem written by her father. I don’t think I would have got away with a poem when my children were eleven, though to be fair they have never been too demanding.

I suppose it would not have been a surprise when, at breakfast on Christmas Day 1749, Dolly found a scroll, bound with red ribbon, at her place on the table. When she opened the scroll, she found the words of “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn”. I hope John Byrom bought her something else, but whether or not he did so, young Dolly showed off the poem to friends and acquaintances, one of whom was John Wainwright, the organist at Stockport Parish Church where the Byroms worshipped. He must have been impressed, for he secretly decided to convert the poem into a Christmas carol for the following Christmas.

At one minute past midnight on Christmas Day 1750, the Byrom household was roused from sleep by Mr. Wainwright and his choir singing “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn” outside their house. I trust that John Byrom was gracious enough to rise, dress and offer due hospitality to the singers, even though he may well have been exhausted. Moreover, it is as well that John Wainwright found the correct house: otherwise they might have received the contents of a chamber pot for their pains, Christmas Day or not!

From this small beginning one of our favourite carols came into being. In the circumstances, it ought to be the last hymn of watchnight services, timed so that it is sung on the stroke of midnight – or is that a little too ambitious? I particularly like how the carol retells Luke’s nativity story in the first four stanzas, then encourages us to dwell upon the real significance of the birth in the last two verses. I hasten to add that the original poem was modified from its fifty-two lines to forty-eight by the time it was published, posthumously, in “Miscellaneous Poems”, 1773. It is believed that it was further redacted to something like its current form by James Montgomery when he published it in “Cotterill’s Selection of Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Use”, in 1819, for use in St. Paul’s and St. James’ churches, Sheffield. As with a number of excellent hymns of its era, it found its way into “Hymns Ancient and Modern”, 1861 and has remained popular ever since.

What do we know about John Byrom? Well, he was born in February 1692 in Kelsall by Manchester, to a landed family. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, studied medicine at Montpellier, but does not seemed to have gone into practice. Instead he developed a forerunner of the Pitman Shorthand System and taught it professionally in London. Two of his students were John and Charles Wesley, who used Byrom’s shorthand in their journals, for which we Methodists are duly grateful! He was elected to the Royal Society in 1723 and, upon the death of his elder brother a year later, he returned to Manchester to run the family estates.

With his educational background, he was able to hold his own in theological discussions with the Wesleys and he was a frequent contributor to “The Spectator”. He was also quite imposing to look at, as he was tall and favoured smart, bright clothes – unlike the Wesleys and traditional Methodists.

John Byrom seems only to have written this one carol before he passed away in September 1763. Interestingly, he was a Jacobite sympathiser, supporting the Stuart dynasty, at a time when

Bonnie Prince Charlie made such sympathies most unpopular south of the border. Having said that, Susanna Wesley would have shared his viewpoint, for it was a bitter point of contention between her and her husband, Revd. Samuel Wesley, who favoured William of Orange.

Like John Byrom, John Wainwright's melody for "Christians, awake, salute the happy morn" was a one-off. John Wainwright was born in Stockport on 14th April, 1723, became a 'singing man' at what has become Manchester Cathedral – it was then the Collegiate Church – and deputy organist two years later, in 1748. Some time between 1749 and 1750, he became organist at Stockport Parish Church, then was appointed as chief organist at the Collegiate Church, Manchester between 1767 and his death on 28th January, 1768. The tune he composed was originally called 'Mortram', almost certainly a misspelling of 'Mottram', which is near Stockport. In modern hymn books, the tune is called Yorkshire (Stockport), though how Yorkshire has attached itself is quite beyond me, unless someone mistakenly thought the hymn had originated in Sheffield, after James Montgomery's inclusion of "Christians, awake, salute the happy morn" in "Cotterills Selection" for those two Sheffield churches. I think it is time for me to go and lie down in a darkened room again!

"Good King Wenceslas" by John Mason Neale {1818 – 1866}

This is one of the United Kingdom's best-known Christmas carols, although it does not refer to the birth of Jesus and it was dismissed very shortly in "The Oxford Book of Carols" as no more than 'doggerel', 'commonplace to the last degree'. The critic added that he hoped it would 'gradually pass into disuse', but the carol has long outlived its detractor, pompous fellow that he was! I suppose that Methodists do not approve of it, for it has not been included in either the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book", nor in "Hymns and Psalms"; perhaps we are pompous, too. I certainly used it with success in a Christmas Songs of Praise at my church a year or two ago, for I can see considerable virtue in the work and I shall continue to sing it whenever the opportunity presents itself, whatever critics say.

The carol was written by a great British hymn-writer of the Nineteenth Century, John Mason Neale, who was born in London during 1818. John was a poor mathematician, so he could only receive an ordinary degree from Trinity College, Cambridge. Nevertheless, he was elected a Fellow of Downing College before taking Holy Orders in 1843, becoming vicar at Crawley in Sussex. Respiratory problems forced him to leave after only six weeks at his parish and for the next three years he travelled to Madeira for the winter, immersing himself in architecture, liturgy and, although he never travelled there, he studied the Eastern Orthodox Churches. As a result, he became a real expert in ecclesiastical matters. In 1846 John Neale was appointed Warden of Sackville College, which was a decayed and run-down alms house for twenty elderly men. He immediately began to take steps to restore the place to something like its original condition, despite his pitiful stipend of £28 per annum.

He was High Church by inclination and practice, so when someone reported him for 'Romish activities', the Bishop of Chichester banned him from practising throughout the diocese, a ban that lasted fourteen years. Despite problems with the Bishop and opponents at Sackville, Revd. Neale studied and wrote a great deal. He produced histories, children's books and a host of hymns, some of which were most scholarly translations from Latin and Greek. His hymns covered the Church Year, including "The day of resurrection", "Come, ye faithful, raise the strain", "O come, O come, Immanuel", "All glory, laud and honour", "Jerusalem the Golden" and, not least of all, "Good King Wenceslas"! Such was his output that, one eighth of a version of "Hymns Ancient and Modern" were his compositions, yet suspicions about his practices meant that he was only offered preferment once: to be Provost of the Scottish Episcopal Cathedral in Perth, which he declined on health grounds.

However, besides his hymns, John Mason Neale left a lasting legacy; the St. Margaret's Sisterhood, a convent in East Grinstead whose members dedicated their lives to nurse the sick in their own homes. After he died in 1866, aged only forty-eight, Ermenild, one of John Mason Neale's daughters later became the Mother of St. Margaret's, continuing what he had established. On his coffin was an inscription of his own, written in Latin: **J.M. Neale miser et indignus sacerdos requiescens sib signo Thau – J.M. Neale poor and unworthy priest resting under the sign of the Cross**.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to finish by considering King Wenceslas and why he was 'good'. He was born in Tenth Century Bohemia, part of the former Czech Republic. Wenceslas succeeded his father as King when we was barely twenty and was murdered at his brother's castle when he was only twenty-two. Despite his short reign, Wenceslas instituted many changes to his country. He was a

committed Christian, so he had a church built in every city in Bohemia and read daily prayers at his own castle's services. It is recorded that he was generous to the poor, to widows and orphans. He also ransomed prisoners, especially priests, besides which he was a generous host.

King Wenceslas must have been well ahead of his time, for while we in Britain were still using trial by ordeal, he banned torture and abolished capital punishment. The cynical side of my nature moots darkly that such goodness often leads to personal disaster, which it did at the murderous hand of one of his own family. Thus, apart from a square named in his honour – and this carol – the name of Wenceslas the Good might have faded into the mists of history.

Did he go out with his page to assist a poor man gathering wood by St. Agnes' fountain? I do not know whether or not Revd. Neale had an historic event upon which to base his carol, but it is in keeping with his character and the example of unforced love – grace – is surely admirable for anyone, Christian or not! Whatever the case may be, this carol has a particular purpose – as a means of generating warm-hearted giving.

Remember that John Mason Neale not only had to try to restore Sackville College, (which his meagre stipend and large family prevented him from doing out of his own pocket), but he needed funds to help the residents, too. Thus, they would have visited local gentry as what were called Waits, on Boxing Day / St. Stephen's Day, singing carols before passing round a collection plate. "Good King Wenceslas" not only shows the virtue of giving, but has these closing lines:

'Therefore, Christians all, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing.' ***(Rattle the collecting plate or tin!!!)***

Do you see the point now?

"Hark! The herald angels sing" by Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

It would be interesting to see how both the author and the composer would react were they to hear this, one of the best known carols of all, sung at a service, because neither words nor music were intended to be united. Indeed, if Charles Wesley had had his way, and elder brother, John had not altered it without asking, the opening lines would have remained,

'Hark, how all the welkin rings –
Glory to the King of kings….'

Moreover, Felix Mendelssohn declared that the melody now used for the carol was unsuitable for any hymn, because of its 'martial' and 'buxom' nature, whilst Charles Wesley insisted that "Hark, how all the welkin rings-" was to be sung to a most 'solemn' tune. Fortunately, time seems to have overcome all objections, for otherwise we would have lost a favourite hymn.

The original carol first appeared, entitled 'A Hymn for Christmas Day', in "Hymns and Sacred Poems", 1739 and consisted of ten stanzas of four lines each. The first time it appeared with the opening, "Hark! The herald angels sing" was in George Whitefield's "Collection" of 1753, in which verses eight and ten were left out. Further modification occurred in the 1831 supplement to the "Collection" of 1780, for the second verse was also omitted. Even so, it is unlikely that the hymn would have endured into the Twentieth Century had it not been for William Hayman Cummings (1831 – 1915). Mr. Cummings was a renowned chorister at St. Paul's Cathedral and Temple Church in London, a tenor who sang at the first London performance of "Elijah", conducted by Felix Mendelssohn in 1847, shortly before the composed died, aged only thirty-eight.

Nine years later, William Cummings was organist at Waltham Abbey, where he adapted chorus 2 of Mendelssohn's 'Festgesang Opus 68', which had been composed in 1840 to commemorate the tercentenary of the invention of printing. The tune was called "St. Vincent" when it first appeared in Richard Chope's "Congregational Hymn and Tune Book" of 1857, but it was called "Mendelssohn" when it was published in the 1861 edition of "Hymns Ancient and Modern", in which it was first linked with "Hark! The herald angels sing".

The current version of three stanzas of eight lines with a two-line chorus was produced for "Wesley's Hymns" in 1877, to be sung to "Mendelssohn". This has remained unchanged, simply because words and tunes not only complement one another, but the cheeriness of the carol is singularly appropriate for the celebration of Christ's birth. If you want to see Charles Wesley's original text, it is printed in "The Companion to Hymns and Psalms" page 95.

There is a hideous irony that a man who wrote more than 6000 hymns, including "Hark! The herald angels sing", who wrote the line 'Peace on earth, and mercy mild' should have led quite a tempestuous life. His father's rectory was razed to the ground by a mob, he entered the ministry most unwillingly, then travelled to America with brother, John, where the brothers so infuriated settlers at Frederica that someone fired at John– the musket ball fortunately missing him! The Governor of the settlement advised them to return to England, adding that they should learn not to drive themselves – and others – so hard.

After the two Wesleys returned, convinced of their failure to serve God faithfully, both experienced a conversion during the Whitsun of 1738 and were thus moved to active social evangelism that became the Methodist Church in time. Despite this Charles considered himself an Anglican priest all his days. Indeed, Charles almost fell out with John when John ordained priests and commissioned local preachers – especially female ones. Mind you, Charles was not above acting contrary to the wishes of bishops: he was rebuked for re-baptising a woman who had originally been given the sacrament by a dissenting minister; he was also censured for preaching in the open air ('most inappropriate') but continued to do so until a landowner sued him for trespass and Charles was fined £20, a huge sum in those days.

Both John and Charles were renowned for visiting prisoners, especially for their support of those condemned to hang at Tyburn. Both often accompanied the poor souls to the very gallows, offering prayers of comfort. A less commendable trait of each was a willingness to interfere with the other's romances; neither John nor Charles emerged with credit. Charles Wesley did not marry until he was forty-two and John objected on three grounds: the age of the bride-to-be; Charles' peripatetic lifestyle and his lack of wealth. Charles ignored John's arguments and married Sarah Gwynne, a daughter of a Breconshire squire and for several took her with him wherever he travelled – riding pillion on his horse. 'Faithful Sally', as called her, was twenty years younger than Charles and bore him eight children. Sadly, five died before they reached adulthood, but the union was a happy one, possibly, because after she first became pregnant, Charles decided to end his itinerant preaching for her sake.

Incredibly, Charles intervened when John seemed destined to marry a Grace Murray, a young Geordie widow. Charles contrived to marry her instead to a Local Preacher from Newcastle, though it is impossible to imagine why he acted in that way. As a result, John married Mrs. Molly Vazeille, a wealthy widow, in February 1751. It was not only the weather that was frosty, for their marriage was a disaster. They quarrelled violently and, on one occasion the angry wife tore a handful of hair from her husband's head. After a relatively short time, the couple separated and the only thing that she bequeathed John on her death was her wedding ring. It seems a long way from 'peace on earth and goodwill to all men'!

Charles' health and mental powers declined noticeably in 1778 and the last decade of his life was a trial for him and his family. He died in March, 1788, three years to the month before John, who remained vigorous to within a day or two of his death, preaching to the end. John Wesley's dying words are reputed to have been, "The best is God is with us." It is, indeed!

'In the bleak midwinter' & Love came down at Christmas' by Christina Rossetti {1830 - 1894}

The question, **'What can I give him, poor as I am?'** and the answer, **'Give my heart',** encapsulate the message of this beautiful Christmas hymn, written by a strikingly beautiful Victorian lady. There are some wonderful carols as well as some over-sentimental, not to say theologically dubious ones, but Christina Rossetti produced two of the finest: 'In the bleak midwinter' and 'Love came down at Christmas', in which love features thirteen times in twelve short lines. Who was Christina Rossetti and what made her produce fine religious hymns?

Christina Georgina Rossetti was the youngest of three children of an Italian émigré, a clever man who had despaired of politics in his native land and who became Professor of Italian at Kings College,

London before he married a vivacious, equally-clever lady. Christina's elder brothers were Dante Gabriel and William Michael, the former becoming a notable artist and poet, a leading member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. As was customary in upper middle-class homes, Christina was educated by her mother, Frances, whose love of literature and spiritual convictions were passed on to the daughter. Christina developed into a strikingly lovely adolescent, so striking that an artist friend of her brother, Holman Hunt, used her as a model for the face of Christ in one of his paintings!

Naturally, someone as beautiful as Christina had many suitors and she was engaged to another artist, James Collinson for some time. There was an impediment to their marriage, however, as he was a Catholic and she a devout Anglican. Originally, Mr. Collinson declared that he would convert to the Church of England, but his conscience would not let him fulfil his promise and so the engagement was broken. The consequences of his decision effectively blighted Christina's life, for soon afterwards, she was courted by the urbane Mr. W.B. Scott, who not only won her heart, but gained the affection of the whole Rossetti family - until it came to light that he was already married and had a string of mistresses! Despite this discovery and although it precluded any physical relationship, Christina could not bring herself to finish completely with the roving Mr. Scott, so she befriended his long-suffering wife and contented herself with a platonic relationship. Nevertheless, her unhappy experiences with men left psychological scars, so when another man - a suitable, honourable one - proposed to her, she politely declined and turned her attention to writing poetry, some of which dwelt with unrequited love, others of which dealt with matters spiritual. Clearly, she preferred agape to eros.

Christina never married and was said by some to be a lonely figure as she reached middle age. She lived a good Christian life and brought joy to those around her, not just through her words, but by her deeds. She died shortly after Christmas 1894 when only sixty four, leaving a legacy of good verse and a number of fine hymns, including 'None other lamb, none other name' which, though frequently neglected, is worthy of note.

'In the bleak midwinter' is set in Victorian Britain, with its imagery of snow and yet the subsequent verses refer to cherubim, seraphim, the Virgin Mary, the shepherds and the Magi. Clearly, she demonstrated that Christmas is for all people, everywhere and NOW! The final stanza is a reminder that Christ does not desire our riches, does not ask for wisdom; all he asks of us is our love - for him, for the Father and for our neighbours everywhere. That final verse is almost a sermon in itself.

The carol is usually set to one of two melodies : Gustav Holst's 'Cranham', which was written for the 1906 "English Hymnal" in which 'In the bleak midwinter' first appeared as a hymn, even though it was written before 1872. This version has an extra verse, beautiful in its contrast between the glorious choir of angels and the simplicity of Mary's worship as she kissed the infant Lord.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air -
But his mother only,
In her maiden bliss,
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.

The other setting is by Harold Darke, a gorgeous version, but better suited to choirs than congregations.

'Love came down at Christmas' was first published as a poem in "Time Flies: A Reading Diary' in 1883, but was not used as a carol until it was published in the "Oxford Hymn Book" of 1908. The most popular tune is "Hermitage" which was specifically written for this carol by Reginald Morris when it was used in the 1925 "Songs of Praise". It first appeared in Methodist circles when published in the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book". Eric Routley composed "Love Incarnate", another popular setting, during the 1930s, though it was not combined with Christina's words until both appeared in "The BBC Hymn Book" in 1951.

I am not only attracted to the hymn by its message and setting, but because it uses the word 'love' or 'lovely' twelve times in its twelve lines and, after all, love – divine love – is at the heart of Christmas!

“O come, all ye faithful” by Frederick Oakeley (1802 to 1880) et al.

I ought to have seen the warning signs when I noted that this hymn was not the work of one person, but I thought that such a well-known hymn would have a straightforward, if ancient, history. I presumed that, as it has a Latinised form, ‘Adeste fidelis’, it was at the latest a medieval hymn, but I was wrong. Verses 1, 2, 5 and 6 of “O come, all ye faithful” first appeared in Latin form in an Eighteenth Century Jacobite manuscript, ‘A Prayer for James’. The James alluded to was probably James III, the ‘Old Pretender’ and the author is believed to have been John Francis Wade, a member of a colony of exiled Roman Catholic revolutionaries, living in Douai, France. Certainly, the manuscript is in Wade’s own hand. This Catholic colony had fled Britain after the enforced abdication of King James II in 1688 and it retained its British character until the late Eighteenth Century, when it was either assimilated in French society, or simply disintegrated. The title was John Wade’s secret rallying call to fellow Jacobites to rise up, hoping to put James III on the English throne! Jesuits are believed to have brought back the manuscript when they were allowed to return at the dawn of the Nineteenth Century.

John Wade specialised in writing beautiful manuscripts, including music, which were highly sought after by wealthy families, colleges and choir leaders. He was a gifted linguist, producing manuscripts in a number of languages and teaching both music and Latin. It is believed that the manuscript ‘Adeste fidelis’ was held by Jesuits until it appeared with the chorus, ‘Venite adorate’, at a college in Lisbon, Portugal. Shortly afterwards, the chorus was altered to ‘Venite adoremus’, in which form it was discovered by Rev. Frederick Oakeley.

Frederick Oakeley was born in Shrewsbury at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. He took his degree at Christ Church, Oxford, becoming a Fellow of Balliol College in 1827, after which he was ordained. He became Vicar of St. Margaret’s Chapel, London, (now called All Saints, Margaret Street). In time he rose to become Prebendary of Lichfield Cathedral, but he had become an active part of the Oxford Movement and he followed John Newman into the Roman Catholic Church after 1845. He spent much of his time as a Catholic working among the poor of the districts around Islington, before he ended his days in 1880 as a canon of Westminster Cathedral. It is worth noting that, at a time when the Church of England seemed to have lost impetus, the Methodists and Salvationists at one extreme and the Anglo- Catholics at the other saw outreach to the poor and marginalized as an essential part of their faith.

“O come, all ye faithful”, or “Ye faithful, approach ye” as it was originally, was translated for the congregation at St. Margaret’s Chapel and first appeared in “The Hymnal for Use in the English Church” in 1852. That line and the opening line of the second stanza, (originally ‘God of God, Light of Light’) were changed by Cooke and Denton for the 1853 “Church Hymnal”. The present third stanza was written by Abbe Etienne Jean Francois, the Monsignor de Borderies at the start of the Nineteenth Century, after he had been exiled to England because of the French Revolution. The fourth stanza was written by someone unknown to celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. These two verses became part of the hymn we now sing in “The Altar Hymnal” of 1884.

The melody, “Adeste Fideles”, is believed to have been written by John Francis Wade himself to accompany the Latin text. It appeared in duple form in a 1760 manuscript that is preserved at St. Edmund’s College, Ware. It was first connected to the English version in 1844, but was adapted by W.H. Monk for the 1875 “Hymns Ancient and Modern”. Methodists, I know, use the harmonisation from the 1906 “English Hymnal”, which is very similar to Monk’s version. Despite its complex origins and some of its language which may defeat young children, “I like nothing more than to see the organist pull out all the stops as we sing the final verse on Christmas day!

“O little town of Bethlehem” by Phillips Brooks (1835 – 1893)

For years I laboured under the misconception that ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ was a Victorian English carol, because it has been a staple part of carol services, sung to the lovely ‘Forest Green’. In fact, I thought it rather a cheek that it is usually sung in American films to ‘St. Louis’, a melody by Lewis H. Redner. Well, it just goes to show how wrong I can be, for both author and composer were Americans and ‘Forest Green’ by Ralph Vaughan Williams was first used thirty years afterwards. I think I had better put away the hair shirt and tell you this carol’s story.

The author of the carol, Revd. Phillips Brooks, was a huge man, six feet six in his socks and broadly- built, too. He spent his life in Massachusetts, having been born in Boston during 1835. He was a gifted linguist, graduating from Harvard University, but although he set out to teach Latin, he found

that his gift was not in teaching, although he loved children and they enjoyed his company. Instead, he swiftly turned towards the ministry and studied at Virginia Theological Seminary. He became famous for his direct, compelling preaching, although he spoke extremely quickly, over two hundred words per minute, which would certainly have tested the concentration of his congregations! He could also sing more than two hundred hymns from memory, which is a considerable feat.

Phillips Brooks admired President Lincoln and was a fervent supporter of the anti-slavery movement, even when it led to the carnage of the US Civil War. So moved was he by Abraham Lincoln that he made a long speech in his honour after the President was assassinated. Shortly afterwards, in the summer of 1865, Revd. Brooks travelled widely. He arrived in the Holy Land in December and visited the Old Church at Bethlehem on 24th December, 1865. The town was not as commercialised then as it is now, so the tranquillity and beauty of the place impinged itself in his mind, yet nothing came of his experience for two more years.

As Christmas approached in 1867, he began to plan a service for the Sunday School of Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia, where he was vicar. As often seems to happen, in my case at least, he felt the need for a fitting carol, could not find one and went to bed frustrated. As he lay meditating, he thought about that Christmas Eve in Bethlehem and the words we sing now came to him. He rose and composed his carol the same night, then approached his Sunday School Superintendent, Lewis H. Redner, asking him to find a suitable tune for the carol to be sung to. Although Lewis Redner was musical, he failed to arrive at a suitable melody, until in the middle of the night on 23rd December, he woke with a melody in mind, so he wrote it down before retiring to his bed once more. I hope that he was a bachelor, like Phillips Brooks; otherwise his spouse would not have been amused!

On Christmas Eve, Mr. Redner not only finished the harmonies for the tune, ‘St, Louis’, but rehearsed the Sunday School, so that ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ was sung with great success on Christmas Day. Revd. Phillips Brooks remained at Holy Trinity, although the church had grown much bigger during his incumbency and he had turned down a number of bishoprics. His preferment had been opposed by some Bostonians, partly because his father had been a merchant and he was deemed Low Church, partly because Phillips Brooks preached at churches belonging to other denominations and partly because his uncle, the richest man in Boston had been a Unitarian. In 1891, he succumbed at last and was appointed Bishop of Massachusetts, though he did not last long in post, for he contracted what is usually a non-life-threatening illness and died, aged fifty-seven. Bostonians were shocked by Bishop Brooks’ unexpected demise, so a number of stained-glass windows and educational foundations were established in his memory.

‘O little town of Bethlehem’ was first published in the United Kingdom during 1896 in “A Treasury of Hymns”, then in “The Church Hymnary” two years later, after which it has been included in most hymn books and deservedly so. I presume it must have been sung to ‘St. Louis’ until 1906, because The ‘English’ setting, “Forest Green”, was not adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams from a folk song called “The Ploughboy’s Dream” until 1903 and was first married to Phillips Brooks’ words in the 1906 ‘English Hymnal’. Incidentally, Forest Green is near Ockley in Surrey, where Vaughan Williams discovered the tune.

“Once in Royal David’s city” by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818 – 1895)

The gifted and prolific hymn-writer, Mrs. Alexander, was the wife of William Alexander, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, then, after her death, Bishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland. Two years before her marriage in 1850, ‘Fanny’ Alexander (she was Christened Cecil Frances after a family sponsor – a quaint Irish custom) published ‘Hymns for Little Children’, after complaints from children in her Sunday School class that learning the Catechism was difficult and ‘boring’. Fourteen of the hymns in her book deal specifically with the Apostles’ Creed, including ‘All things bright and beautiful’. Other hymns include ‘There is a green hill far away’ and ‘Once in royal David’s city’.

Fanny was serious-minded from early childhood. She swiftly learned to read and write, producing poetry of her own when she was nine. She received an excellent education at home and was encouraged to write by Sir Walter Scott whom she met while staying with her mother’s relatives in Scotland. Her uncle, who lived in Hampshire, introduced her to Revds. John Keble and Edward Pusey, members of the Oxford Movement, who influenced her religious belief. In fact, it was John Keble who

wrote the preface for ‘Hymns for Little Children’ which became such a best-seller that it was reprinted over a hundred times. Money raised from this book’s sales enabled Fanny to help run a home for deaf and dumb children in Strabane. Fanny’s good works earned her many admirers, as much as her writing did, so when she died in Derry in 1895, thousands lined the streets as her funeral cortege passed by.

‘Once in royal David’s city’ is usually sung to open the ‘Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols’ at Kings College, the opening verse by a boy soprano – an awe-inspiring sound. It was set to Henry Gauntlett’s ‘Irby’, composed specifically for it in 1849. The marriage of the two was effectively cemented when they were included in the first edition of “Hymns Ancient and Modern” in 1861.

“Silent Night, holy night” / “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” by Joseph Mohr (1792 to 1848)

One of the nightmare situations for a local preacher like me is to arrive for a service to find that there is neither an organist, nor any other musician. I have been saved twice at one church by a fine baritone, who acted as cantor. At another church where there was no organist for the evening service, I announced that, unless there was anyone confident enough to lead, I would try, adding mischievously, (but sadly truly), that my daughter said that I wander off key and invariably begin to sing flat. Miraculously, three delightful, musical ladies from the congregation volunteered and, as they are choristers, the singing that night was excellent! There is a secret in handling news that there is no organist: choose hymns that are simple to sing and which are well-known, even if they are not your original choice. If all else fails, you can read them in unison as poems: even I can manage that!

Imagine that it is Christmas Eve when your organist announces that some distinctly unholy mice have gnawed holes in the leather bellows of the church organ. It is long before the age of electronic keyboards and all you have is a guitar. It dawns on you that you will have to conduct worship with that instrument when your congregation will be expecting the usual fare of carols. What do you do? If you were Father Joseph Mohr, you would persuade the organist to set to music a carol that you had written recently. Unlikely as it sounds, this is the origin of one of the best-loved Christmas Carols, ‘Stille Nacht, Heilige Nact’, or, depending upon the translation, ‘Silent Night, Holy Night,’ or ‘Still the Night’.

Joseph Mohr was born in Salzburg in 1792. He progressed to the ministry from the choir of Salzburg Cathedral, being ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. It was when he was assistant priest at the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, on Christmas Eve, 1818 that the organist, Franz Gruber, bore him the dire news that mice had punctured the leather organ bellows and not even an asthmatic wheeze could be drawn from the instrument. Father Joseph was nonplussed for a moment only; then he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, on which he had written a poem that he had hoped to turn into a children’s carol. With admirable faith, he handed it to Herr Gruber, his friend, and invited him to set it to music which could be accompanied upon the guitar and sung by children.

Franz Gruber was five years older than Father Joseph. He was a gifted, natural musician, but he must have been surprised how quickly the melody for ‘Stille Nacht’ came to him. Upon Christmas Day the two men and twelve children gave the maiden performance of the carol and, like most innovations, it received a mixed reception. However, when the organ repairer saw the composition, he begged a copy and circulated it round his village of Fugen in Zillertal. Soon it had become extremely popular and its fame increased when the Austrian concert singers, the Strasser Sisters, sang it round Europe. It was translated into several languages, the first English translation being by Emily Eliot of Brighton in 1858 and another was by Jane Campbell in 1863. It may be worth noting that the translation used in both “The Methodist Hymn Book” and “Hymns and Psalms” is by Stopford Augustus Brooke in “Christian Hymns” of 1881. “The United Methodist Hymnal” of the U.S.A. uses the “Silent Night, Holy Night” translation of John F. Young.

One of the most moving stories of this hymn is from Christmas 1914. British troops in their trenches were astounded to hear their German enemies singing “Stille Nacht” and other carols. True to the courtesies of the age, the British replied with English carols; then greetings were shouted and, on Christmas Day soldiers actually left their trenches and fraternised with men who had been trying to kill them hours before. Had matters been left to their natural conclusion, the Great War might have ended that first Christmas, but the senior officers decided that this was not the done thing and the truce was ended forcibly. Had hearts ruled heads, millions of lives might have been spared.

Although Joseph Mohr seems to have led an unspectacular career, dying at only fifty six whilst an assistant priest at Wagrein near St. Johann, more is known about the organist, Franz Gruber. He was the third son of weavers from Unterweisburg on 25th November, 1787. He displayed a gift for music from an early age, but his parents objected to his studying the organ and he was apprenticed as a weaver for a short time. The village schoolmaster, who was also the organist, argued passionately for Franz to be allowed to study the organ at night and he prevailed. It was as well, for the organist was taken ill and twelve year old Franz deputised for him.

As a result, Franz became schoolmaster at Arnsdorf, before becoming organist at St. Nicholas' in Obernsdorf, where he remained until 1829. In that year Franz Gruber was appointed Headmaster at Berndorf. In 1833, he became organist and choirmaster at Hallein, remaining thus until his death in 1863. He founded the Hallein Choral Society, for which he is still remembered, as well as for the sweet melody to which "Stille Nacht" is set. It is worth considering that it only took a couple of hours to compose a tune that has gone round the world and shows no sign of going out of fashion nearly two hundred years later. Now that is success!

'The angel Gabriel from heaven came,' by Sabine Baring-Gould (1834 – 1924)

Sabine Baring-Gould, as his names may suggest, came from an illustrious family. His father was a former cavalry officer and a Squire in Devon, whilst his mother was a daughter of Admiral Baring, which is where the double-barrelled surname comes from. Sabine was derived from Sir Edward Sabine, a relative who had been a noted soldier and explorer. Born in Exeter in January 1834, Sabine Baring-Gould only had three years' formal education, because his parents toured Europe extensively, taking their children with them. As a result, Sabine spent two years at Kings College School, London, between 1844 and 1846, followed by a year at Warwick Grammar School. Nevertheless, in 1853 he was accepted at Clare College, from which he graduated in 1857, a considerable feat for someone with so little formal education.

The devout, shy graduate spent some time teaching, including a spell in a slum area in London, after which he was ordained on Whit Sunday, 1864 at Rippon, Yorkshire. Sabine was fortunate that, at his first curacy in Horbury, near Wakefield in Yorkshire, the incumbent, Rev. John Sharp shared his outlook. Horbury was a coal-mining and cheap cloth-making district, the inhabitants of which were largely poor and uneducated. Rev. Sharp directed Sabine to open a mission at Horbury Bridge, or Brig, as it had been corrupted to locally. He rented a cottage, turned the upstairs into a chapel and the lower floor into a night school, in addition to which he ran a Sunday School for the local youngsters. Despite reservations, because he was at first deemed to be 'a toff', Sabine Baring – Gould's commitment soon won most of the locals' trust, if not their love, so within a short space the cottage was full of learners and worshippers.

It was during this time that the River Calder burst its banks and romance entered the curate's life, for he carried a sixteen-year-old girl to safety from the waters and was deeply smitten by her. The girl, Grace Taylor, came from a large family that lived in such poverty that not everyone could go to church together, because they did not have sufficient 'respectable clothing' to go round. Grace worked at a 'shoddy' mill, where the cheapest and roughest cloth was made and lacked the social graces expected of a vicar's wife. Indeed, when they were seen together at first, tongues in the village wagged scurrilously. Sabine was nothing if not openly honest, so he arranged at his own expense for Grace to attend a finishing school near to York Minster. While she was there, he paid her family the equivalent of her income, so that they could survive, such was their poverty. When she returned, as a 'proper' lady, in 1868, she and Sabine were married; I have no idea what his parents thought about his choice of wife!

When his father died in 1872, and Sabine became Squire of Lew Trenchard, he remained at his living in Essex until he was able to be appointed to be both vicar and Squire of Lew Trenchard in 1881. He moved into the manor house, which was just as well, for he and Grace had produced fifteen children together. Somehow he managed not only to attend to his family, but to perform his parish duties conscientiously, to produce one hundred and nineteen non-fiction and forty fiction books, and to write several hymns, including "Now the day is over", which was sung at his funeral. In addition, he collected old Devonian folk songs, including 'Old Uncle Tom Cobley' – I marvel at his energy.

'The angel Gabriel from heaven came' was written in 1922 and published in the "University Carol Book", set to a Basque traditional carol melody. Grace Baring-Gould died in 1916, eight years before

Sabine and such was his sense of loss that her tombstone is inscribed, 'Half my soul'. Not a bad epitaph after forty-eight years of marriage!

"The Calypso Carol" – Michael Perry (1942 – 1996)

"See him lying on a bed of straw," echoes across the auditorium at many children's services in schools and churches, as it has established itself as a favourite carol since it was written nearly sixty years ago. "The Calypso Carol" was written by Michael Perry for an end-of-term concert at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, in 1964 and was first published in 1969. Michael Perry was born in Beckenham, Kent in 1942 and was educated at Dulwich College before studying at University College London; Oak Hill Theological College, London; Ridley Hall, Cambridge; and the University of Southampton.

After his ordination in the Church of England, Michael Perry served at St Helens, before moving to Bitterne, Southampton, where he was curate and then vicar. During his time at Bitterne he was on the committees that produced the popular hymn books *Psalm Praise* (1973) and *Hymns for Today's Church* (1982). From 1981 to 1989 Michael Perry served as Rector of Eversley, Hampshire. In 1982 he became Secretary of Jubilate Hymns, and was involved in editing most of their books. In addition, he worked as Chaplain and lecturer at the National Police Staff College, Bramshill..His last posting was as Vicar of Tonbridge in his native Kent from 1989 until 1996. He was appointed Chairman of the Church Pastoral Aid Society in 1993. He died in December, 1996.

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night" by Nahum Tate (1652 – 1715)

This carol is a simple but exquisite retelling of Luke's nativity story and, whilst it almost certainly doesn't rate as Nahum Tate's finest work, it has stood the test of time, for 'While shepherds watched' first appeared in a supplement to Mr. Tate's Psalm book in 1700 and has remained a popular carol ever since. It has often been parodied by so-called humourists and I'm sure we've all heard verses such as 'While shepherds washed their socks by night', if not other versions! I say it was not likely to have been his finest work, because Nahum Tate was Poet Laureate from 1690, some might say more the result of his influence at Court than of his talent.

Nahum was the son of an Irish priest, Revd, Faithful Brady, and after graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, came to England, where he published a book of verse in 1677. Nahum Tate befriended the playwright and poet, John Dryden and completed the second part of Dryden's controversial poem 'Absalom and Ahithophel' when John Dryden had to work on a new play. After rewriting 'King Lear' with a happy ending – the mind boggles – Nahum wrote some plays of his own, produced a poem praising tea and wrote the libretto for Purcell's 'Dido and Aeneas'.

Some of Nahum Tate's work were of a spiritual nature, for he collaborated with a fellow Irishman, the Revd. Nicholas Brady to produce 'A new version of the psalms of David', dedicated to King William III in 1696 and the enduring hymn, 'Through all the changing scenes of life'. Nicholas Brady was Chaplain to King William at that time and he lived a successful, profitable life, outliving Nahum by eleven years. Unfortunately, Nahum became addicted to drink and fell into such serious debt that he had to spend his last days in a debtors' refuge. Indeed, he died in June, 1715, hiding in the Royal Mint in Southwark where debtors were protected from arrest.

Although 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night' is usually sung to "Westminster Old", it is sometimes sung to 'Lyngham', though I like it sung to 'On Ilkley Moor baht' at'. I have been told that it can be sung to the chorus of 'Sweet chiming Christmas bells'! I have sung 'Sweet chiming Christmas bells' to its original words, so I feel I must try that melody to 'While shepherds watched' sometime.

"Wise men seeking Jesus" *by James Thomas East (1860 - 1937)*

James East was born on 28th January, 1860, in Kettering, Northamptonshire and was ordained as a Wesleyan Methodist minister in 1886. Like most itinerant ministers, he travelled a great deal, serving in the following circuits : Glasgow ; Daventry ; Peterborough ; Redruth ; Frome ; Driffield ; Cradley (Staffs.) ; Neath ; Clayton-le-Moors ; Rochdale and Blackburn. Now James East had an ambition, to visit the Holy Land to tread where Jesus had trodden, to see the countryside where our Saviour had lived. Also like most ministers, his stipend was frugal, so he saved for many years to amass the sum he needed to fulfil his ambition.

Just as he had raised the necessary amount of money, a close acquaintance was found to be seriously ill and, as it was long before the National Health Service, in desperate need of financial

assistance to pay for the treatment – a real matter of life or death. Although it must have profoundly grieved James East, he immediately went to his friend's aid, sacrificing his chance to visit the shores of Galilee. Sometime later, he took a humbler holiday and, as he walked the cliffs on the East coast of England, he came to terms with his frustrated wishes when he realised the truth that you do not have to travel to the Holy Land in order to establish a close relationship with Christ.

I sometimes preach at High Town Ragged School in Cradley, where some members of the congregation remember Revd. East. Indeed, one of the men there recalled that his grandparents were caretakers of the Cradley Wesleyan Methodist Church (now demolished), that his parents played with Revd. East's children and that some of the imagery from the carol may have come as a result of walked outings to Clent with the Sunday School. The exercise would certainly have tired them out!

Two tunes are associated with this hymn. The first is 'Worship' by A.H. Mann which was used in both "The Wesleyan Methodist School Hymnal" of 1911 and the "Methodist Hymn Book". The alternative melody, 'Glenfinlas', by K.G. Finlay, was first used with 'Wise men seeking Jesus' in 1951. (This glen runs into Loch Lomond - a useless fact that I offer gratis to those who like "Trivial Pursuits").