Backgrounds to the carols sung on 1st January, 2023, their authors and composers (plus three others)

Angels from the realms of glory
Christians, awake, salute the happy morn
Born in the night, Mary's child
See, amid the winter's snow
Brightest and best of the sons of the morning
Wise men, seeking Jesus
Who would think that what was needed
*It came upon the midnight clear
*We three kings of orient are
*Good King Wenceslas

Martin Rider

"Angels from the realms of glory" by James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

This carol often causes embarrassment for the unwary, because the 'come' in the chorus takes a lot of breath and the chorus is often printed as, ***'Come and worship, / Worship Christ, the new-born King'***, whereas when it is sung the first time, we only sing, ***'Come and worship, / Christ, the new-born King'***, so someone, usually me, insists on trying to fit in 'Worship' – and fails. Having said that, the hymn is a favourite of mine and it was written by a remarkable man, James Montgomery, whose statue still stands in Sheffield, where he spent most of his life as a radical newspaper editor and proprietor. James' parents were missionaries who moved from Scotland to the West Indies where they died of Yellow Fever.

James was sent to a strict Moravian boarding school near Leeds, where he failed to shine academically and so found himself apprenticed in a bakery, but hated it so much that he ran away and eventually became a clerk at a radical newspaper, known as "The Sheffield Register". The owner, Joseph Gales was a plain-speaking liberal and was forced to flee the country when his opinions led to his persecution. James admired Mr. Gales, so he first took over as editor, then became the owner, changing the paper's name to "The Sheffield Iris" He was no respecter of authority and was twice imprisoned, once for celebrating the fall of the Bastille and, later, for condemning the brutality of the militia when it dealt with a riot in Sheffield. His newspaper constantly supported the downtrodden and exploited, opposed slavery, poor sanitation, bad housing, the use of boy chimney sweeps and State Lotteries, but supported the teaching of reading and writing in Sunday Schools (State education did not exist until 1871).

One thing that caused him to be furious was the opposition of some Anglican churches to the singing of hymns, rather than metrical Psalms and Thomas Cotterill, Rector of St. Paul's Sheffield, had to go to the Ecclesiastical Court at York to obtain the Archbishop's permission for a hymnal which contained some of James' works to be used, following an attempt by the St. Paul's congregation to have it prohibited. The Archbishop of York allowed it to be used on condition that it was first vetted and the hymnal dedicated to him.

James Montgomery declared at a banquet in his honour, 'I wrote neither to suit the manners, the taste, nor the temper of the age, I sang of war – but it was a war of freedom in which death was preferred to chains. I sang the love which man ought to bear his brother ….. I sang to love of virtue. I sang, too, the love of God, who is love'. Of the four hundred or more hymns James wrote, several are not only still sung regularly, but are popular, too: 'Lord, teach us to pray aright' and 'Hail to the Lord's anointed' are good examples.

"Angels from the realms of Glory" was first printed in 1816 in "The Sheffield Iris", entitled 'Nativity'. It is sung to 'Iris' a Flemish melody arranged by Martin Shaw and echoing the name of James' newspaper.

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

There can be few questions rasher 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! Before I do so, here is an extra titbit: John Wainwright had two sons, Robert and Richard, both of whom were organists at the Collegiate Church. Robert, however, composed two hymn tunes included in "Hymns and Psalms": 'St. Gregory' for Wesley's "With glorious clouds encompassed round" and 'Manchester' for "Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove' by Isaac Watts.

'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.

“See, amid the winter’s snow” by Edward Caswall (1814 – 1878)

Edward Caswall was born at Yateley, Hampshire in July 1814. He was the son of a clergyman and nephew of the Bishop of Salisbury, so it was almost inevitable that, following education at Marlborough College and Oxford University, he took Holy Orders in 1840. However, he was already part of the Oxford Movement and he followed Dr. John Newman into the Roman Catholic Church in 1847, much to his family’s disapproval. It must have been a shock to Edward’s wife, too, but they remained together until she died in 1850, after which Edward left his home in Wiltshire to join John Newman at the Oratory, Edgbaston in Birmingham. There Edward worked with a dozen Catholic priests, serving churches, schools and communities in some of the poorest parts of Ladywood and Hockley.

The work of these priests among the slum-dwellers won them both respect and love – and not only from fellow-Catholics, for they visited the sick, took relief to the poor, visited prisoners at Winson Green Gaol and campaigned for better living conditions. Although his work gave him little free time, Edward translated a number of old Latin hymns, four hundred, in fact, as a result of which we still sing, ‘Jesus, the very thought of thee’ and ‘My God, I love thee’ – though not very often, I confess.

‘See, amid the winter’s snow’ was published in 1871, but had been published in “The Masque of Mary and other poems’ in 1858. It is a fine carol, dealing not only with Luke’s account of the nativity, but connecting Christ’s incarnation to scriptural prophecies and adding the lovely chorus with its ‘hail’. Although it appears in many non-conformist hymnals, perhaps because of Edward’s ‘poping’, it does not appear in ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’, ‘The English Hymnal’, nor ‘Songs of Praise’, but that is their loss.

Revd. Edward Caswall passed into new life on 2nd January, 1878 and is buried close to his mentor and friend, John Newman near Bromsgrove. ‘See amid the winter’s snow’ was set to ‘Humility / Oxford’ by John Goss in 1871 and fits it perfectly.

‘Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,’ *by Reginald Heber {1783 - 1826}*

Several Years ago, early on a Sunday morning, a programme on Radio 4 captured my imagination and may have sown the seed of my interest in hymn stories. **“Brightest and Best”** not only played hymns, but gave a little history about their background, too. Naturally, its theme song was ‘Epiphany Hymn’, Joseph Thrupp’s setting for ‘Brightest and best of the sons of the morning’, so this hymn has a special place in my affections.

The author of the hymn, Reginald Heber, was born into a wealthy Cheshire family, for whom culture and service were important. He went to Whitchurch Grammar School in Shropshire and then to Brasenose College, Oxford, before becoming a Fellow of All Souls when he was only twenty two. His poem, ‘Palestine’ won the Newdigate Prize, as a result of which he became a friend of Robert Southey and Sir Walter Scott when he contributed to the literary journal, ‘The Quarterly Review’. In 1807 he became vicar of Hodnet in Shropshire, where he worked with Henry Milman to produce hymns to fit the liturgy of the church year. Whilst at Hodnet, Reginald Heber wrote fifty seven hymns that were published in "Hymns Written and Adapted to the Weekly Church Service of the Year”, in 1827, one year after his premature death.

It was almost inevitable that as gifted and conscientious a man as Rev. Heber should rise in the Church and so it was that he was appointed Bishop of Calcutta in 1823. However, his duties were not confined to that one city, as his title implies, but instead to much of the South Pacific, including Ceylon and Australia, for he was the only Anglican Bishop in that hemisphere. {The Church of England has had a habit of giving misleading titles to bishoprics; for example William Walsham How was appointed

Bishop of Bedford, he discovered that his See was East London}. Bishop Heber was a modest and conscientious man, whose sense of duty drove him to travel tirelessly during his three years as Bishop. The heat and hard work took their toll of his health and he died aged only forty two, on 3rd April, 1826, eighteen days short of his forty-third birthday.

The circumstances of his death were tragic: he had just preached a sermon at Trichinopoly, in which he denounced the caste system before a large congregation; he decided to cool off in the swimming pool of the house where he was a guest; shortly afterwards he suffered a stroke whilst swimming there and he drowned before anyone realised what had happened.

Of his hymns the best known are 'Holy, holy, holy!' and 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning'. In the fourth verse of the latter Bishop Heber expressed the same sentiments as Christina Rossetti in the final stanza of her later hymn, 'In the Bleak Midwinter',

Vainly we offer each ample oblation,
Vainly with gifts would his favour secure;
Richer by far is the heart's adoration;
Dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

The last two lines refer to Psalm 34 and I can almost hear Amos saying amen to this verse, which concurs with his,

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Amos Ch. 5 vs. 21- 24

The usual settings for 'Brightest and best of the sons of the morning' are 'Spean' by J.F. Bridge, so named because he loved to fish on the River Spean in Scotland, or 'Jesmian' by George Thalben - Ball, who was born in Sydney before his Cornish parents returned to Britain, where he became organist of the Temple Church after Walford Davies, and later became music adviser to the B.B.C.. However, I still prefer J. F.Thrupp's 'Epiphany Hymn', which was used in the 1933 'Methodist Hymn Book' and which was especially composed for Heber's hymn. Apparently, the great Samuel Sebastian Wesley also wrote a tune called 'Epiphany' specifically for 'Brightest and best', but I haven't heard that version, so if any organist reads this and can help, I would appreciate it.

I must acknowledge the 'Magnet' magazine of December 1991 for most of the information in the next artic

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. Some time 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.

Let us look at a couple of verses from his hymn:

2. **But if we desire him,**
He is close at hand;
For our native country
Is our Holy Land.

5. Fishermen talk with him
By the great North Sea,
As the first disciples
Did in Galilee.

7. **He is more than near us,**
If we love him well;
For he seeketh ever
In our hearts to dwell.

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!

'Wise men seeking Jesus' first appeared in "The Wesleyan Methodist School Hymnal" of 1911, next in "School Worship" of 1926, then in the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book" The simplicity of the words make it an ideal choice as a children's hymn, but the sentiments are a sermon in themselves – for all ages and denominations – a sermon lived out by the author.

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").

'Who would think that what was needed' by John Bell b. 1949) & Graham Maule (b.1958)

This hymn was published in 'Heaven Shall Not Wait' in 1987 by John Bell and Graham Maule, of the Iona Community. They have written many hymns, often using Scots ballad melodies, but this one uses a popular tune, 'Scarlet Ribbons", which was composed in about fifteen minutes by Evelyn Danzig in 1949 at her home in Port Washington, New York. The original words for 'Scarlet Ribbons' were penned by Jack Segal. John Lamberton Bell was born in Kilmarnock and studied at the University of Glasgow in 1974. He was elected Rector at the University in 1977, while he was still a student, as was Gordon Brown.

After working in the Netherlands and doing spells of church youth work, John Bell became employed full-time in the areas of music and worship with the Wild Goose Resource Group. He is a former convener of the Church of Scotland's Panel on Worship and also convened the committee to revise the Church Hymnary. In 1987, he also wrote the hymn "The Summons" – 'Will you come and follow me' which is set to 'Kelvingrove'. You may sometimes hear John Bell on Radio 4's 'Thought for Today'.

The simplicity of this carol's message will, I am sure, make it increasingly popular and the last two lines of each verse are utterly inspired for Christmas:

'God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.'

"It came upon the midnight clear" by Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810 – 1876)

Rather like, 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind', this carol by Edmund Sears was not intended as such, for it was a moral, or protest poem, linking the angels' song to the shepherds to a call for world peace. Edmund Hamilton Sears was born in Sandisfield, Massachusetts in 1810 and became a Unitarian minister, despite which he wrote a book about and even frequently preached on the divinity of Jesus Christ. Like many American citizens, Revd. Sears was concerned about the industrial development in New England which created social problems not dissimilar to those in the United Kingdom during its Industrial Revolution. Then there was the lawlessness of the Californian Gold Rush in 1849, widely and often inaccurately recorded in 'Western' films, but nevertheless generally violent.

'It came upon the midnight clear' was published as a poem in the 1849 book called 'The Christian Register', but we should bear in mind that it was at this time that agitation against slavery led to the build-up of tension between Northern and Southern states in the USA, though it did not explode into the terrible Civil War until 1861. Nonetheless, Edmund Sears might well have foreseen the likelihood of conflict when he penned his verse. The carol usually uses only four verses, the original fourth of five verses having been omitted, but in those verses is a gracious appeal for humankind to

respond to the angels' song, calling for peace on earth – an appeal that ought to be for every day, not just Christmastide.

Edmund Sears suffered ill health in his thirties, so he spent much of his time writing, producing

a number of books, including 'The Fourth Gospel', four years before he died at Weston, Massachusetts, aged only 66. 'It came upon the midnight clear' is usually sung to Sir Arthur Sullivan's 'Noel', based upon a Herefordshire folk tune, but in 2016 Howard Goodall composed a new melody for Aled Jones and I should not be surprised to hear it picked up by choirs, if not church congregations.

"We three kings of Orient are," by John Henry Hopkins (1820 – 1891)

All right, I know that this carol is responsible for Christmas cards depicting three oriental gentlemen on camels as they plod their way towards Bethlehem and I know, too, that there is no evidence in the Bible that they were kings, that their names were Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar, or, even that there were three men. I must admit, I think it is unlikely that only three Magi, an order of astrologers, would have travelled for up to two years in 'bandit country' – even on Roman roads – without an entourage or guard of some kind. Admittedly, there were only three gifts, though their expense might well have been better shared by several people, rather than an individual. What I do take as significant is the inclusion of the Wise Men in the most Jewish of gospels, for Matthew showed that the Saviour was not just for the Chosen People, the Jews, but for Gentiles, even those of a non-Jewish background. Just as importantly, the carol explains the significance of each gift, albeit in terms that need explaining to young children. Moreover, it gives three soloists an opportunity to shine at a Nativity service – not that I am likely to be asked to perform, unless they want a hasty evacuation of the church!

When I was in the 107th Bishop Latimer Wolf Cub Pack, half a century ago, there was a version of the opening stanza which ran thus:

We three kings of orient are,
One on a bicycle, one in a car;
One on a scooter, peeping his hooter,
Going to Perry Barr.

Some of my friends and I walked along the gas-lit streets of Winson Green to Handsworth, singing this version, but when one forgot himself and sang it at a Christmas parade service, he received a swift slap across the back of his head for his pains! Memories like this make me wonder how I ever became a Local Preacher!

"We three kings" was written in 1857 by a priest in the American Episcopalian Church, a man called Revd. John Henry Hopkins. He was the son of a Pennsylvanian ironmaster, who abandoned that trade to become a lawyer, then took Holy Orders and was eventually elected the first Bishop of Vermont. John Henry Hopkins was less adventurous in his calling, but he was a keen poet, composer and stained-glass designer, added to which he edited the "Church Journal". Apart from this, there seems little information about Revd. Hopkins, except that, like his father, he was an Episcopalian Priest, though he was serving in New York when he both wrote the words and composed the melody, 'Kings of Orient' in 1857. There is no record about how or why he wrote the carol, but it was published first in 1863 and became popular in this country, too. I do know that he wrote a number of hymns and tunes for the Episcopal Church in his lifetime and one of the collection of his works, 'Carols, Hymns and Songs', ran to four editions.

Sadly, from my point of view, "We three kings of orient are" has been omitted from 'Hymns and Psalms' and was not in the 1933 'Methodist Hymn Book', probably because its scriptural details are questionable. I would contend that the very fact that the carol deals with the significance and symbolism of the gold, frankincense and myrrh ought to have led to its inclusion – even if we are not sure about the number and names of the Magi. Anyway, it has not stopped us from singing it from printed sheets at Nativity services in several Methodist churches and none of us has yet been struck down by lightning nor turned into pillars of salt!

"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 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?