

Backgrounds to some popular carols, their authors and composers

“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.

‘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 unwise 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 seem 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.

“Come thou long-expected Jesus” by Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

Charles Wesley is one of hymnody’s most prolific writers, having written approximately six thousand hymns, many of which, deservedly, still feature in current hymn books. He wrote ‘Come, thou long-expected Jesus,’ in 1744 and he based it on the accounts of the Annunciation in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. However, he has extended God’s salvation from “thy people” to “all the earth”, to “every nation”, rather than a select few, for one of the central tenets of Methodism is that salvation is offered to everybody as God’s free gift of grace. Notice, too, that Jesus comes not as an earthly ruler, but as One who rules our hearts, for God’s kingdom is not a geographical, nor a political area, but exists wherever Christ rules our hearts, minds and lives. It first appeared in “Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord” and was intended as a Christmas hymn, though it serves wonderfully as an Advent hymn.

Two melodies are commonly used for “Come, thou long-expected Jesus” the first being “Stuttgart” from C.F. Witt’s ‘Harmonia Sacra’ as adapted by Henry Gauntlett for the first edition of “Hymns Ancient and Modern” in 1861, though it was spelled ‘Stutgard’. It was first associated with “Come, thou long-expected Jesus” in the 1889 “Primitive Methodist Hymnal” and has remained a popular choice since then. A rival melody is John Stainer’s “Cross of Jesus” which was used for the oratorio, ‘The Crucifixion’ in 1887, but which was linked to this carol from 1916.

“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 some 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. This is why he wrote this carol, for it would have been sung at some of the great houses around Sackville College at Christmas and on Boxing Day, which is also St. Stephen’s Day. The last verse of the carol has the lines,

**‘Therefore, Christians all, be sure,
Wealth or rank possessing,
Ye who now will bless the poor**

Shall yourselves find blessing.’ (pass round the collection plate or box at this point!)

Revd. Neale 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 he 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!

'In the bleak midwinter' by Christina Georgina 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. The other setting is by Harold Darke, a gorgeous version, but better suited to choirs than congregations.

“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.

“It was on a starry night” by Joy Webb

Joy Webb was a captain in the Salvation Army who, in 1963, formed the Joy Strings, a band with two guitarists, a drummer and vocalist/tambourine-player. The group’s aim was to develop Salvationist music by using pop music to promote the Christian message among younger people.

Despite criticism from Salvation Army traditionalists, the Joy Strings enjoyed chart successes with ‘It’s no secret’ and ‘Starry Night’. Joy Webb wrote ‘Starry Night’ in 1964 and it not only reached number 24 in the charts, but is still popular in children’s nativity productions. Joy was joined as the hymn-writer by the group’s guitarists, Peter Dalziel and Bill Davidson.

The Joy Strings performed to wide audiences, ranging from concerts at city churches to late night cabaret at the Blue Angel Club, appealing to a variety of age groups. Sadly, criticism from within and outside the Salvation Army brought the group to end its public work in 1968, which is a shame for, after all, was it not William Booth who asked why the devil should have the best tunes?

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

The redoubtable 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.

“Love came down at Christmas” by Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Christina Rossetti was born in London, the daughter of an Italian refugee who became Professor of Italian at London University. Her brothers were leading members of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement and Christina first poetical works were printed in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine, “The Germ” in 1850. Indeed, she was a fine Victorian poetess, producing anthologies such as “Goblin Market and other poems” (1862), “The Prince’s Progress” (1866), “Sing-Song” (1872) and “A pageant and other poems” (1866). Alas, despite being strikingly beautiful, Christina was unlucky in love, her fiancé, James Collison, calling off their wedding because he was unable to renounce the Roman Catholic Church and she was a devout Anglican. Worse still, a second suitor proved to be already married and was discovered to be a womaniser, so she never married.

‘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!

“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 ‘popping’, 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.

‘See him lying on a bed of straw’ – “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 over fifty 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.

“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, Such was his playing, Mr. Gruber relented and allowed Franz to study the organ.

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!

"Unto us a boy is born" by Percy Dearmer {1867 – 1936}

This carol was written in a Fifteenth Century Trier manuscript, but may have been written even earlier. It also appears in its original Latin in "Piae Cantiones" of 1582 and it was translated by Percy Dearmer for "The Oxford Book of Carols", 1928. Several other translations have been made, but Revd. Dearmer's is by far the best.

Percy Dearmer was born in London on 27th February, 1867, studied at Christ Church, Oxford, was ordained into the Church of England and became vicar of St. Mary's Primrose Hill, until the Great War, when he served as a Red Cross chaplain and YMCA worker. He became Professor of Ecclesiastical Art at King's College, London and became a Canon of Westminster Abbey in 1931, five years before he died. Revd. Dearmer jointly edited the 1906 "English Hymnal", "Songs of Praise" in 1925 and "The Oxford Book of Carols", already mentioned, so he made quite a contribution to English hymnody!

"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.

'Who would think that what was needed' by John Bell b. 1949) and 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.'*