

TWO ARTICLES BY TREFOR M. OWEN & D. ROY SAER

from the notes accompanying the LP record released by the Welsh Folk Museum in 1977, 'Welsh Folk Heritage, Plygain Carols':

'The Plygain Service' by Trefor M. Owen, from 'Welsh Folk Customs' 1959; and 'The Christmas Carol Singing Tradition in the Tanat Valley' by D. Roy Saer

THE PLYGAIN SERVICE by Trefor M. Owen

In many parts of Wales, Christmas meant rising early (or staying up overnight) to attend the plygain service at the parish church.

The hour for the plygain appears to have varied between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., the latter becoming more common as time went on. To await the service, young people, in particular, would pass away the time in one way or another. In some country districts they would gather at certain farmhouses to make *cyflaith* (treacle toffee) and spend the night merrily, decorating the houses with holly and mistletoe, as at Marford, Flintshire, in the 1830's. According to Mrs. Thrale's journal of a tour in 1774 the inhabitants of Dyffryn Clwyd kindled their lights at two in the morning and sang and danced to the harp until the plygain.

In other districts, especially country towns, the time was spent playing in the streets. In Tenby, Pembrokeshire, for example, crowds carried torches, shouted verses and blew cow-horns, before finally forming a torch procession in which the young men of the town escorted the rector from his house to the church. A similar procession is recorded in Laugharne, Carmarthenshire, and also in Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire, where candles were used instead of torches.

In the countryside the plygain at the parish church was attended by people from even the remotest farmsteads. Often each person brought his or her candle to help to light the church since, until the nineteenth century, regular services were rarely held at night-time and no provision for lighting was usually made. The brilliant illumination from the candles of the attenders was an important feature of the festival. In Llanfyllin, special candles known as *canhwyllau plygain* were made by local chandlers in the middle of the nineteenth century.

During the service the church was decorated inside with chandeliers holding coloured candles and, in Dolgellau, for example, decked with holly. In Maentwrog, Merioneth, candles were also ‘fixed in sockets on the tops of slifht standards or posts fastened to pews here and there in the building.’ In Llanfyllin ‘the edifice was lighted with some hundreds of candles, placed a few inches apart from each other, around the walls inside which made the building look very brilliant.’ In Maentwrog it was the ‘carollers singing in the little gallery at the bell tower end of the church’ who brought their own candles, for it was too dark in that part of the building to follow the service in the Common Prayer Book.

While no doubt the custom varied in detail from parish to parish, the brilliant illumination of the church appears to have made a lasting impression on the memories of those who have left us descriptions, and to have been a striking characteristic of the traditional plygain. As Gwynfryn Richards has suggested, the spiritual significance of candle-lighting at Christmas as a symbol of the coming of the Light of the World, may be discerned in these practices.

The plygain itself was an abbreviated form of morning service interspersed with and followed by carols sung by soloists and parties. William Payne described the plygain in Dolgellau as he knew it in the middle of the last century in the following words:

“Now the church is in a blaze, now crammed, body, aisles, gallery, now Siôn Robert, the club-footed shoemaker, and his wife, descending from the singing seat to the lower and front part of the gallery, strike up alternately, and without artificial aid of pitch pipe, the long, long carol and old favourite describing the Worship of Kings and of the Wise Men, and the Flight into Egypt, and the terrible wickedness of Herod. The crowds are wholly silent and rapt in admiration.

Then the good Rector, and his curate, David Pugh, stand up, and read the Morning Service abbreviated, finishing with the prayer for All Conditions of Men, and the benediction — restless and somewhat surging is the congregation during prayers — the Rector obliged sometimes to stop short in his office and look direct at some part or persons, but no verbal admonishment. Prayers over, the singers begin again more carols, new singers, old carols in solos, duets, trios, choruses, then silence in the audience, broken at appropriate pauses by the suppressed hum, of delight and approval, till between eight and nine, hunger telling on the singers, the Plygain is over and the Bells strike out a round peal.”

In Maentwrog a sermon was included in the plygain service, but the rector was careful to keep both sermon and service short, as he evidently felt that the chief attraction was not the service but the carolling that followed it. In other places, such as Llanfair Dyffryn Clwyd, holy communion was administered during the plygain.

Seen against its historical background the plygain is a survival of a pre-Reformation Christmas service modified to suit the new Protestant conditions. Richards points out that 'plygain' in the sixteenth century denoted an ordinary morning service and only at a later date came to be restricted to the service held on Christmas morning. The plygain, he suggests, took the place of the midnight Christmas mass of the Catholic period and was originally associated with a communion service held later on Christmas morning. The practice of holding the communion service at eight o'clock ended the earlier association between the plygain (morning service) at six, seven or eight o'clock, and the High Mass at nine or ten o'clock.

After the Reformation, carol-singing in the vernacular, which had hitherto been excluded from the Latin service of the church at Christmas, was incorporated in the early morning Christmas service, and, as nineteenth-century descriptions plainly show, had become the main attraction of the plygain. John Fisher has drawn attention to the similarity between the Manx festival of *Oiel Verrey*, held at midnight on Christmas Eve, and the Welsh plygain. He points out that both became popular carol-singing festivals soon after the translation of the Bible into the respective vernacular tongues.

Far from disappearing under the impact of Nonconformity in the nineteenth century, the plygain was one of the few traditional church festivals not discarded by Welsh Nonconformist chapels, although the character of the service was sometimes changed by making it a variation of the ordinary week-night prayer-meeting.

As a general custom, the early-morning Christmas plygain ceased towards the end of the last century*, although in some cases it survived to a later date.

* *The nineteenth century*

THE CHRISTMAS CAROL-SINGING TRADITION IN THE TANAT VALLEY

by D. Roy Saer

It was around Christmastime, 1964, that the Welsh Folk Museum began to focus attention upon the valley's carolling tradition. The natural starting-point for its researches was to take along recording equipment to the *plygain* service itself, which is there found in church and Nonconformist chapel alike.

Each local carol-service retains the name *plygien* (in dialect form). This term derives from the Latin *pulli cantus*, so that basically it relates to the crowing of the cockerel at day-break. However, the services still called *plygeinie* in the adjoining areas of Denbighshire, Montgomeryshire and Merioneth are now held not in the early morning, but in the evenings, around six or seven o'clock. Neither are they on Christmas Day, but somewhere within the limits of mid-December and mid-January*, making use of Sunday evenings and week-nights alike.

** Note: Towards the end of the 20th century, this had become the beginning of December until the end of January*

On attending a *plygain*, a stranger is immediately struck by the unusual form of the service. In church it might begin with a curtailed version of Evening Prayer; among Nonconformists the preliminaries will be a hymn (or carol) from the congregation, a reading from the New Testament, and a short prayer. After this, for the next hour-and-a-half to two hours, the service is completely in the hands of the carol-singers. No programme has been prepared beforehand and no one acts as announcer but, each in turn, the carol parties walk quietly and leisurely forward on to the chancel step or into the area enclosed by the seat of the chapel deacons. On average there will be eight to fourteen parties present and one is likely to hear between twenty and thirty Christmas carols during the service - all in Welsh (except for two or three, perhaps) and all different, since it is a point of honour not to offer a carol already heard that evening.

To conclude, the parson or minister will thank all who have taken part, a collection is made, a final hymn or carol sung, and Benediction pronounced. Once the service is over, most people head for home, but for

the carol-singers a special supper is available at the vestry, the vicarage or in nearby houses, after which there will be spontaneous carol-singing around the fireside that might well last until midnight.*

** Note: This custom is no longer upheld*

Several features in the plygain draw attention in addition to its easy-paced informality. The carol parties are nearly all small in number, with a marked preference for quartets (mixed) and trios. The latter (with 'top' or 'lead', tenor and bass voices) are almost invariably all-male - in fact, male domination of the service is apparent throughout. Nine out of every ten adult parties sing unaccompanied, their usual concession to mechanical aid being to strike a 'pitchfork' before they begin. The carol-books used also invite curiosity: a good fifty per cent of the parties (more especially the male trios) sing from personal exercise-books, often significantly well-worn in appearance.

During the Christmas seasons of 1964-66 the five regular plygeiniau remaining in the valley were recorded. Two facts emerged: that Non-conformity is the present mainstay of the plygain locally, and secondly, that (except for the weak plygain of Llanarmon Church) the same carol-groups were being recorded everywhere. In other words, the majority of the groups appearing at any one plygain were not members of that place of worship but representatives of others in the locality, and it became obvious that the plygeiniau, however informal in themselves, are in fact based on an accepted reciprocal system quite firmly upheld. No doubt, this system is largely responsible for the sustained vigour of the valley's carolling tradition.

The carol-sources used — both handwritten and printed — were examined in detail. It transpired that those intriguing exercise books frequently contain texts only (together with an indication of the recommended key-note, perhaps), although on occasion appropriate music has been included as well, in Tonic Sol-fa notation, and usually in three or four parts.

Another fairly early discovery was that the carol-texts in the personal notebooks derive, directly or otherwise, from the printed books still to be found in the area. (On the other hand, their music is not always traceable to a printed source.) Neither are the oldest texts that remain in

use exceptionally ancient: no more than a handful of them can be dated, even hypothetically, before 1800. At the same time, though, whatever their age, it seems that many of the carols yet sung in the valley and some adjacent areas are not as well-known in other parts of Wales. Equally interesting is that the texts of a few of these carols reflect the metric techniques formerly favoured by carol (and 'ballad') writers in north Wales since the seventeenth century or earlier.

Those writers' products were in regularly accented free-metre verse, but free-metre verse with a difference, since it contained *cynghanedd*, an ordered system of elaborately woven sound-patterns in alliteration and rhyme. This was written to be sung, and sung (again, like the 'ballad') to popular secular tunes, some of which were used for dozens of different sets of words. (The name of the appropriate tune would be noted above the published or written carol: 'Greece and Troy'; 'Crimson Velvet'; 'King George's Delight'; 'The Belle Isle March'; 'Betty Brown'; 'Gwêl yr Adeilad'; 'Mentra Gwen'; 'Y Ceiliog Gwyn'; 'Ffarwél Ned Puw; and so on — there were dozens of them, if not a hundred or two.) Thomas Parry has thus described the art of traditional carol-writers in north Wales:

The tune dictated the form of the metre. These poets developed their own particular method of setting words to musical airs. To begin with, the words coming at the end of each phrase of music were rhymed. The feat then was to include in those phrases regular *cynghanedd* and euphony, and to join all the phrases to form a single stanza, bearing in mind that the completed stanza was to sing smoothly to the tune for which it was intended. They succeeded miraculously.

Some of their metres formed exceedingly complex structures. Nonetheless, here were folk poets applying to free-metre verse, set to music, an intricate alliterative device adapted from the poetic embellishment perfected by the professional Welsh *cywyddwyr* of the late Middle Ages. And their songs never lacked a ready market. Plygain carols, for example, were annually welcomed; they were produced in their hundreds, and later disseminated widely through manuscripts, pamphlets, almanacs and printed books, as well as through oral transmission. Their literary verse,

if technically sophisticated, had been taken up by the people and become a living organism in folk-tradition.

The subject-matter of *plygain* carols has been dealt with at length by Miss Enid P. Roberts. The primary concern of carol-writers, she states, was to sing praise to celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, at the same time stressing how wonderful and infinite is the mercy of God. Hand in hand with this went the urge to instruct society, so that their carols are often heavily loaded with moral advice and exhortation (to repent, more specifically). With the passage of time they tended to become more and more doctrinal. Several of them trace the life and acts of Christ, thereby exhibiting a ballad-like narrative development; many attempt to summarise the entire history of Man from the Creation till Doomsday.

Inspiration and content are drawn direct from the Scriptures, in particular the four Epistles. No Apocryphal folk-carols, such as 'I Saw Three Ships'; 'The Cherry Tree Carol' or 'The Carnal and the Crane'; appear among them. Neither are certain other types of carols popular elsewhere found in the Welsh tradition: lullaby carols, carols of Nativity and Incarnation, Annunciation carols, or Shepherd or Epiphany carols. It can be added, with reference to form, that long-windedness is a standard feature, many Welsh carols extending to fifteen and twenty lengthy stanzas. It can be noted also that only occasionally do they include a *byrdwn* or refrain. (Where this is so, the *byrdwn* might be inserted only after every other stanza.)

During the course of the nineteenth century, the traditional Welsh Christmas carol underwent a major change. On the literary side it was to turn towards simpler and more regular metres, to abandon gradually the complex alliterative system, and to become increasingly lyrical in approach. In other words, it fell increasingly into line with hymn-writing. With this came a transformation on the musical side. After the middle of the century, steps were taken to provide alternative music to the old 'ballad' tunes, and the systematic 'purification' of the carol tradition can be clearly observed in the musical publications of such as J. D. Jones, the Reverend Owen Jones, Owen H. Davies ("Eos Llechid"), Richard Mills and T. Cilwern Davies (of Llanymawddwy).

An integral part of the Museum's fieldwork in the Tanat Valley region was the interviewing of carollers upon various aspects of local tradition. It became immediately apparent that these singers are intensely proud of their carols, and the oldest materials they regard as a rare inheritance to be prized. Naturally, carollers strive to gain as large a singing repertoire as possible. This is not merely a coveted mark of high attainment in the science; it is also a practical necessity, since a group needs reserves at the plygain in case its first selections are unexpectedly sung by others.

Many are quite possessive of their carols, almost as if they hold copyright – an understandable approach, since some enthusiasts have been known to trail a party from one plygain to another in order to pick up a much-fancied carol. Very few parties will give away carols to other singers, unless they are themselves retiring from the field. Even then, the tendency is to retain material within the same family. (Many of the carol-parties are family units, of course.)

Inevitably, carols of the old alliterative type are but a tiny minority in the active Tanat Valley tradition of today. Having hitherto displayed astonishing resilience, they are now in danger of having to give way completely to newer material. However, among many people they are still the most venerated items in the community's plygain repertoire. For some, suspicion that a certain carol is old will automatically elevate it into a superior category.

The older material is especially associated in the popular mind with the singing of male trios, and the latter evokes respect on other ground as well. Whereas quartets invariably seem to sing direct from the fixed compositions or arrangements of printed books, a male trio will occasionally have drawn its melody from oral tradition and added its own tenor and bass parts. Indeed, some singers taking pride in their own improvisation have been known to find four-part harmony restricting. Perhaps, too, this is one reason why having organ accompaniment for carols is sometimes frowned upon. (To sing unaccompanied is also considered traditional practice – although the harp was, in fact, used to accompany carol singing in some Welsh churches during the early part of the last century and perhaps earlier.)

Older carollers take a lively interest in their carols' music. The traditional viewpoint firmly held among them, however, sees the text as unquestionably the most important element involved. The singer's part is to tell a story, to

convey a message. It is stressed that everyone must hear the words, and as it happens, the carollers' clarity of diction is usually striking. 'The carol is the important thing, not the voice', added a Llanrhaeadr singer, and the lack of an eisteddfodically acceptable voice has not prevented some local singers from still being considered exceptionally fine carollers.

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In enquiring after the history of the carol service it was found that the reciprocal network between plygeiniau has been operative in the area for some generations past. Actually, before the time of its present-day inhabitants, the valley had witnessed one extraordinary arrangement on Christmas Day: carollers sang at Bwlch-y-ddâr Chapel in the early hours, walked down to Llangedwyn Church by 7 a.m. (some say 10 or 11 a.m.), appeared in Llanarmon Church in the afternoon, and ended the day at the great church of Llanrhaeadr in the evening.

One major development affecting the plygain — and perhaps, indeed, its salvation — was the switching of the service from its initial position early on Christmas morning. While the words of many of the carols still heard in the Tanat Valley reveal that they were originally intended to be sung around day-break, it is known that no early-morning plygeiniau remained in the valley by 1900.

Hand-in-hand with the early-morning service went the practice of singing plygain carols from door-to-door on the night before Christmas. Carollers, men only, set out in groups of three or four on the previous evening. In earlier times they arranged their routes so as to reach church or chapel in time for the service, but when the morning plygain had been abandoned this custom was sufficiently popular to live on alone. Some sang the whole night through, covering six miles and more in the process, and two or three carols were sung at each house, earning some money, or mince-pies and a drink, perhaps. Further night-visits might be undertaken during Christmas week. At the time of the First World War the custom faced considerable condemnation as a form of personal begging, but survived in the valley for a further decade or more before disappearing altogether.

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Additional sources — Churchwardens' Accounts, printed carol-books, almanacs and manuscripts — convey that Tanat Valley people have known the Welsh carol intimately for over three hundred years. Furthermore, a brief glance at carolling tradition in the British Isles as a whole after medieval times seems only to emphasise the uniqueness within these islands of much that has been discussed above.

It is true that the Manx *Oie'l Verrey*, with its carvals, was in many ways identical with the plygain, and carol services are known to have been formerly very popular in West of England churches. However, England generally does not appear to have known a traditional service corresponding to the plygain, whereas in Wales the latter was a dominant feature of the Christmas festival in recent centuries.

With reference to the Irish language, presumably, Donal O'Sullivan states that "the custom of carol singing does not appear to have existed in Ireland, and no carols have been collected." Erik Routley affirms that "in Scotland, puritanism laid a heavy hand on carol singing". In England, on the other hand, many features found in the Welsh tradition were also familiar — such as door-to-door carolling, publication of carols on broadsheets and in chap-books, and even the hoarding of carols as valued personal possessions. Despite this, by comparison with developments in Wales, the two centuries from the mid-seventeenth century onwards appear to have been a period of lower esteem for the traditional carol in England.

Within Wales itself, the scene has not been artistically uniform. Regional variation here is pinpointed by Miss Enid P. Roberts:

In the eighteenth century the folk-poets of the Conway and Dee valleys were composing ballads and interludes, and the folk-poets of Carmarthenshire and other parts of the South composing hymns. During the same period, and on into the beginning of the following century, the folk-poets of the Banw and Efyrynwy valleys and the upper reaches of the Tanat and Dyfi valleys were composing carols; plygain carols mostly, with an occasional example of an Easter carol.

It is from these last-named valleys and their hinterland, of course, that the items heard on the present record were initially obtained.