

A LAKE DISTRICT CHRISTMAS: Alan Cleaver

Despite the chilly weather, a good audience met at Penrith Rugby Club on Thursday, 15 December for the last U3A monthly meeting of the year. Alan Cleaver who lives with his Cumbrian wife in Whitehaven has been gathering stories of local Christmas traditions from the last century and earlier. Their interest in walking has taken them round various parts of the county and with the evidence thereby gained Alan has written a book to share these old traditions. Armed with a few curious props he opened by explaining the triple hooped decoration in white, red and green he showed us is a 'Kissing bush.' As well as hanging mistletoe throughout the house, the custom was to focus the kissing custom under this 'bush' and sometimes presents and sweets were hung from it. Alan's father-in-law continues to hang the intersecting decorative hoops to replace a tree at his home each Christmas to help preserve the tradition.

Other customs are continued in many places including nativity plays, singing carols round the village or neighbourhood and writing one's present requests to Father Christmas but we don't now usually set fire to the latter, in the belief that the smoke will speed the message on its way to him. Less well-known now is the practice of competitive rolling of burning tar barrels which was popular in Workington, for instance. This was once a sport practised in different parts of the UK. The tradition continues today at Allendale on New Year's Eve and on Guy Fawkes night in Devon. Interestingly, we have a local Tar Barrel Moss summit near Braithwaite.

Corpse roads were also described in relation to Christmas as, for instance, the one between Chapel Stile and Grasmere via Hunting Stile along which the dead of the remote Langdale Valley would be carried to their 'mother church' in Grasmere for burial. A ballad relating to this route at Christmas was described by Alan. In the same area one tradition continues: the singing of carols in Rydal caves. Similarly, ghost stories are often part of the ancient Christmas tradition with the example of 'The Christmas Eve Boggle' at Keswick cited, a scary ballad recorded by Frances Rolleston and describing a rider arriving at night to see his girl-friend before being crushed to death. More stories of Christmas past in Cumberland and Westmorland followed, with references made to the long walks made by postmen on their special 'Postmen's paths between farms to deliver the Christmas post.

Finally, reference was made to the famous Christmas truce witnessed in their diaries and letters home by a number of Cumbrian soldiers serving in the trenches in 1914. It is the homely simplicity described by these men writing to their loved ones back home which is particularly poignant. We can read of their pretence of fighting, the kindly exchange of cigarettes, the swapping of presents, learning that the German troops especially liked English plum puddings. It is perhaps these stories which convey the essence of Christmas: not the official, formal celebration but the simple kindness and goodness of ordinary people sharing their love and enjoyment of a festival celebrating a very special birth.

