

## DAILY HOPE CAROLS

### ANGELS FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

I think ANGELS FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY is one of our most glorious and joyful hymns. Mind you, the man who wrote it, James Montgomery, didn't have a very joyful childhood. His parents were missionaries who decided to go off and work in the West Indies, leaving their six year old son in boarding school. It gave him a good education though, because James later became a journalist, running a radical newspaper originally called the Sheffield Register, but which later became The Iris. It was in The Iris, that this hymn of his was first published on Christmas Eve 1816. Nowadays we love singing it because of its wonderful melody written by blind composer, Henry Smart. You need a really big breath before you start singing those l-o-n-g glorias!

### AWAY IN A MANGER

For many years, it was thought that AWAY IN A MANGER was written by the great reformer, Martin Luther, to sing his own children to sleep – but we now know it was actually written in America four hundred years later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Martin Luther was born in 1483, and this carol was written in 1843 by members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America, for their children to sing during the celebrations marking the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. Not long after that, the world first got a glimpse of the words of this much-loved carol when the first two verses were published in a collection of Sunday School hymns, called A LITTLE CHILDREN'S BOOK FOR SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES. I think if Martin Luther HAD known this carol all those years ago, he would definitely have loved to sing AWAY IN A MANGER to rock his own children to sleep!

### BRIGHTEST AND BEST

Although we sing BRIGHTEST AND BEST as a carol leading up to Christmas Day, it was written as an Epiphany hymn to be sung on 12<sup>th</sup> Night, the 6<sup>th</sup> January. For sixteen years, Reginald Heber was the rector of a country church in the village of Hodnet in Shropshire – and he loved writing hymns. In fact, it seems he wrote a hymn for nearly every Sunday and for each special feast day in the Christian calendar. HOLY HOLY HOLY is one of his best-known hymns – but BRIGHTEST AND BEST is just as popular, imagining the journey and the thoughts of the Three Wise Men as they travelled to visit the baby Christ in Bethlehem. Have you ever wondered about the “odours of Edom” that we hear about in Verse 3? Well, apparently that is an oblique reference to frankincense which is found in the Vale of Edom in Palestine. The smoke of incense is symbolic of prayer offered to God, so in presenting frankincense, the Magi were acknowledging was sung Christ as God.

## **CHRISTIANS AWAKE, SALUTE THE HAPPY MORN**

There is a lovely story about the very first time the carol, CHRISTIANS AWAKE, SALUTE THE HAPPY MORN was sung. It was written by John Byrom in Manchester in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. John was an inventor by trade, and he also taught a form of shorthand – in fact, it's said that he taught shorthand to his friend, Charles Wesley, which must have come in handy for a man who probably wrote more than 8000 hymns texts throughout his life! But the role dearest to John's heart was as a Dad to his daughter, Dolly – and as a special gift to her, he placed a copy of the poem made up of the verses of this carol beside Dolly's place at the breakfast table on Christmas morning in 1749. The following year, in 1750, in preparation for Christmas Eve, an organist called John Wainwright set the words to a tune he called YORKSHIRE, and a small choir stood outside Dolly and her father's window, and sang it for the very first time that evening – and then, the next morning, on Christmas Day, CHRISTIANS AWAKE, SALUTE THE HAPPY MORN was sung by the whole congregation at the parish church in Stockport.

## **GOD REST YOU MERRY GENTLEMEN**

Now, I always thought it was GOD REST YOU, MERRY GENTLEMEN – but apparently, it should be GOD REST YOU MERRY, GENTLEMEN – or, as Charles Dickens describes it in his novel, THE CHRISTMAS CAROL, GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMAN! But however many men, and however merry they were, these words probably date back to 1770 to a collection of songs called THE ROXBOURGH BALLADS. There is a thought that this song may have been written to calm nerves after there were 2 earthquakes, both in London on Christmas Eve, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First. Well, certainly those gentlemen wouldn't have been so merry then!

## **HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING**

Perhaps the most glorious of Christmas carols, the verses of HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING came from the pen of that wonderful wordsmith, Charles Wesley – at least, most of them did! When it first appeared in print in 1739, Charles had written the first line as, "HARK HOW ALL THE WELKIN RINGS". Any idea what a "welkin" is? Well, not many people in Wesley's time did either – apparently it's a word to describe the arc of heaven" – but the first line was later tactfully changed by fellow preacher, George Whitefield, to "HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING". Charles Wesley was very firm, though, about what sort of music he wanted for these words – something suitably slow and sombre, befitting the grandeur of the text – but it was a hundred years later that the melody we love to sing today was finally written. Felix Mendelssohn composed a cantata to celebrate the invention of the printing press – and he said he didn't mind how else the melody was used as long as it wasn't partnered with sacred words! Fifteen years later, an English organist called William Cummings realised that Wesley's words fitted perfectly with Mendelssohn's music - and this wonderful carol was born. I suppose neither the author nor the composer would approve – but we love it!

## **IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER**

Most hymns and carols began life as poetry, but IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER was never intended to be anything except a beautiful piece of verse written by Victorian poetess, Christina Rossetti. Christina was a devout Anglican, whose father, Fabrieli Rossetti had fled to London to escape from the authoritarian regime in his native Naples. Christina probably wrote these words soon after 1850 – but it wasn't until after she had died in 1894, that the poem was discovered. She would never imagined her words set to music – but for us, who know and love this beautiful and atmospheric carol, we can't imagine it any other way.

## **IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR**

IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR is such a popular Christmas carol, and yet it was written by Edmund Sears, a minister in the Unitarian tradition which doesn't adhere to the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity, three Persons in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead, they typically believe that God is one being, God the Father – and that Jesus was simply a man, not the incarnate deity. But back in 1849 in Massachusetts, when Edmund wrote these words, he was unusual in that he did believe in the deity of Christ, and he certainly rejoiced in the angels' message of "peace on earth", which was particularly timely for him just then, as across America tensions were rising towards the outbreak of the Civil War. But these verses recognising the difficulties and challenges of the world, and welcoming the angels' message of peace and goodwill for all, are as poignant for all of us today as they were then.

## **JOY TO THE WORLD**

If ever there was a song to sum up the promise of Christmas, this is it – JOY TO THE WORLD, written 300 years ago by the man described as 'The Father of English Hymnody', Isaac Watts. When he was a boy, Isaac got really bored by the only singing he ever heard in church which, at that time, was the chanting of metrical psalms – so his Dad challenged him by saying, "Well, if you don't like it, why don't you do something better!" And he did! Can you imagine a better prayer for Easter than his hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" – or a more glorious song for Christmas than this one, JOY TO THE WORLD, which looks back on the gift of Christ's birth, as well looking forward to His return when we will enjoy the "wonders of his love for eternity"? JOY TO THE WORLD is an emotional hymn to sing along with an organ in church - but then it just grabs you heart and soul when you hear sung by a Gospel choir. There's Christmas joy in it both ways!

## **LULLAY, LULLAY, THOU LITTLE TINY CHILD (the Coventry Carol)**

I imagine that over the years, many a mother has sung her child to sleep with the soothing words LULLAY, LULLAY, MY LITTLE TINY CHILD. These are the words of the first line of a song which is often described as THE COVENTRY CAROL, because the verses come from the Pageant of the Shearman and the Tailors, part of the cycle of mystery plays performed in the streets of Coventry during the Middle Ages. It was introduced in the pageant by the prophet Isaiah, and although the words immediately bring to our minds the image of Mary nursing the newborn baby Jesus, in fact this was sung towards the end of the pageant by the mothers of Bethlehem who were trying to rock their children to sleep so that Herod wouldn't hear them, and seek to kill them.

## **O COME, O COME EMMANUEL**

It's no surprise that this atmospheric Christmas carol, O COME O COME EMMANUEL, so reminiscent of the chants sung by monks down the centuries, has its roots dating right back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when these words were based on the Latin antiphons that were sung in churches one for each of the seven days leading up to Christmas Day. Then, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, five of those original seven antiphons were combined to produce this hymn – and another five centuries on, Cardinal John Henry Newman, who has just recently been declared a saint, translated the Latin words into English. Soon after that, the well-known hymnwriter, John Mason Neale, turned those translations into this hymn, and discovered the old French melody to which we still sing it today.

## **O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL**

Our next carol is O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL, with its original Latin words, ADESTE FIDELIS, which you'd think were definitely written right back in the mists of time. It seems, though, that both the Latin words and the music (which was probably originally a waltz rhythm) were the creation of John Wade, a music copier working in Douai Abbey in France in the mid-1700's. There's even a suggestion that these words were used as a rallying call for the Stuart Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie. Whatever its true history, O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL calls Christians everywhere to come and adore the newborn king.

## **O HOLY NIGHT**

How strange that the most popular carol in the country today should be a song that no congregation can easily sing. O HOLY NIGHT is a performance piece bringing out the very best in soloists and choirs who love to sing it to congregations who thoroughly enjoy hearing it. It's a French hymn, with its words written by the Mayor of the little town of Roquemaure near Avignon. He was Placide Clappeau who was a keen amateur poet, and once he'd written these verses, he went to see his friend Adolphe Adam in Paris who wrote the beautiful melody – and the finished hymn was sung for the first time in Roquemaure church on Christmas Eve in 1847. The authorities weren't keen on this as a Christian song at first, because they said the author was a freethinker, and the composer was Jewish – but what they created together was the most beautiful hymn of praise and awe as we hear the story of the birth of Christ on earth.

## **O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM**

It was towards the “little town of Bethlehem” that American minister Phillips Brooks was travelling on Christmas Eve in 1865 on his way from Palestine to visit the town in which he knew Christ had been born. The experience moved him so deeply that three years later back in Philadelphia, he wrote the words of O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM for the pupils in his Sunday School class – and the world has been singing it ever since.

## **ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT ALL CHRISTIANS SING (the Sussex Carol)**

We probably would never have heard about ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT ALL CHRISTIANS SING, if it weren't for the friendship of composer Ralph Vaughan Williams and his friend Cecil Sharp, who shared a passion for traditional English folk songs and music. Between them, they collected hundreds of melodies and verses which may well have been lost forever if they hadn't saved them for publication in a variety of books in the early years of the 20th century. This lovely carol is also known as The Sussex Carol, for the very good reason that they collected it in 1919 from Mrs. Harriet Verral, who lived in Horsham in Sussex. It had been handed down through her family, and can traced back to when it was probably written by an Irish Bishop, Luke Wadding, way back in 1684. How lovely that we are still able to enjoy singing it now!

## **ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY**

Is there anything more moving than hearing a solo chorister singing the first verse of ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID'S CITY unaccompanied from the back of the church, before the choir and clergy process in to start the Christmas service? The person who wrote these words, CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER, who was a lady in spite of CECIL being her first Christian name, was married to the Primate, or Archbishop of the Church in Ireland, but never lost her love for Sunday School children – and in fact she wrote these words to help children understand the words of The Creed, in this case, “born of the Virgin Mary”. For the same reason, she also wrote “THERE IS A GREEN HILL FAR AWAY” and “ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL” – and years after her death, her husband William said that even after a lifetime of ministry right up in to the highest echelons of the church, he knew he would always be known as the man who was married to the woman who wrote “ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL”!

## **SEE HIM LYING IN A BED OF STRAW (The Calypso Carol)**

SEE HIM LYING IN A BED OF STRAW is also known as The Calypso Carol, with its infectious rhythm that brings to mind blue skies and swaying palm trees. In fact, both the words and music were written in England by Anglican minister, Michael Perry, who edited most of the books issued by Jubilate Hymns. The story goes that one year the BBC lost the tape of “CAROLS FROM KINGS”, and in a hastily arranged alternative programme, Cliff Richard sang this carol – and it became an instant hit. Heaven knows if that's true, but it's a lovely story!

## **SILENT NIGHT**

There are so many moving stories surrounding the dearly-loved carol SILENT NIGHT, starting with the first occasion when it was performed in the little Austrian village of Oberndorf when, on Christmas Eve in 1818 the church organ had been damaged by flooding. The young Catholic priest at the church, Joseph Mohr, had written some words which he quickly took to the local school teacher and organist, Franz Gruber, so that he could compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for the song, STILLE NACHT, that could be sung for the very first time during that Christmas Eve Mass. Almost a century later, during the First World War in 1914, a tentative truce was announced on Christmas Eve. Along one side, the German soldiers, and on the other, the Allied troops, sang together, each in their own language, this carol telling the story of the holy SILENT NIGHT when Christ was born.

## **THE FIRST NOWELL**

THE FIRST NOWELL is surely the most classic of Christmas carols – but it is possibly the oldest commonly sung carol in the English language, although it wasn't seen in print until 1833, when it was described as a West Country carol for Christmas Day in the morning. The carol certainly has its roots in Cornwall, where apparently in long ago days the first line was, "Oh well, oh well, the angels did say", rather than the word "Noel" (or "Nowell" as the English usually spell it) based on the French word for the Christmas season.

## **THE VIRGIN MARY HAD A BABY BOY**

The word "carol" used to suggest a dance rather than just a song, so THE VIRGIN MARY HAD A BABY BOY fits the bill perfectly, as it's hard not to find yourself swaying with the rhythm of this Caribbean favourite. Back in 1942, a hymn enthusiast called Edric Connor was on the island of Trinidad when he heard this being sung by a man who was working on a grapefruit plantation for one shilling and eight pence a day. He was James Bryce who was 94 years old – but he still loved working, singing – and sharing this song with someone who really loved it, like Edric, who made sure the whole world had a chance to hear it and sing it too

## **WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS BY NIGHT**

Whenever I hear WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS BY NIGHT, it always conjures up memories of all those years of nativity plays I been to, with our youngsters lovingly dressed up as shepherds clutching fluffy lambs, or as angels, complete with wings and halo, who appear and sing in the skies above. And it's a very old carol, based on a poem that had the pedigree of being written by one of England's Poet Laureates, Nahum Tate, some time around the year 1700. For most of the following century, this was the only Christmas hymn to be approved by the Church of England, because most other carols had their roots in folk music, so were considered too secular to be used in church services. We all love the traditional melody, but I have to admit that I do enjoy hearing this carol as it's often sung in Yorkshire to the tune "ON IKLEY MOOR BAH TAT". If you've never heard it, trying singing the words to that melody. It works!