



## December Newsletter

Here's the Christmas newsletter from u3a Wooler. You'll notice that as well as the seasonal frippery, we have a new logo and font: both are part of new national u3a branding. Thank you once more to all our eloquent and enthusiastic contributors and in particular to Veronica, for compiling a fiendish quiz. As usual, contributions for January are warmly invited,

Merry Christmas (in whatever form it turns out to be) from us all.

*Susan Turner and Helen Astley, Editors and the Committee*



### Wooler u3a Updates

Our AGM this year comprised postal and email circulation of papers and voting forms. The results of this ballot were formally recorded at a meeting held over Zoom on 16 December.

32 completed voting papers were returned. At 25% of the total membership, this exceeds the 20% required for a quorum. The minutes of the 2019 AGM, the accounts and the reports presented by the Chair and Treasurer together with proposed changes to Committee membership and role holders were unanimously accepted..

Gloria Connelly, Tony Davies and Helen Astley have resigned from the Committee this year and thanks for their sterling service to Wooler u3a were recorded. Thanks were also noted to Pat, Maggie, Susan and the secretaries for keeping us up and running, to Helen and Susan for the newsletter, to Kelvin for maintaining contact with the wider u3a, and Mo Brown for helpful advice and enabling Zoom sessions.

The date of the next AGM would be agreed at a later date. Minutes will be available on the website.

### Regional u3a Updates

Northumbria Region has produced a digest of really useful information which is available via this link: <https://mailchi.mp/4a6a6d5276b4/december-already?e=a716ef7756>

Particularly interesting bits include news of a Regional Science Round Table and information about how to participate in Zoom meetings with a simple landline.

### Guardian Angel: a Short Story

*Helen Astley tells a tale:*

Maybe I should have said all along it was me. I mean the lad turned out well in the long run, didn't he. It might sound al right now, if everyone knew he was my kid.

But you can never be sure. I mean you can never tell – not 100%. I knew she was seeing the joiner. It could have been his. And he seemed quite willing to take it on. Married her and everything. Never bothered me with the CSA. He was knocking on a bit. Wanted to settle down. And he had quite a good little business.

I always thought the lad would take it over when the old man popped his clogs, though to be honest he didn't show much aptitude. Always had his head in a book. Real clever, some said. Too clever for his own good, maybe. And there was no way he'd be going to university, not with the country still under occupation. There just weren't the resources. Nobody did that, back then.

So he stuck it out in the workshop for a while. I never had much to do with that, of course. Who wants to be telling people they've got a son who makes door posts for a living? No, I kept well in the background.

But I did all right by him at the beginning, didn't I. Of course, I couldn't be at the birth. That's too much to ask of any man! But when I heard... well, you all know... It wasn't the best thing for her. But she did ok. She was fine. Women know how to manage these things.



And I sent some of the lads over – not to see for themselves. That'd be too risky. No, I got them to spin a yarn to some yokels. It wasn't difficult: they were just country types. They'd believe anything! It was a way to make sure she was ok – fit to look after a kid. Well, give us a break. It was the least I could do.

And when that old bugger started planning his terrorist campaign, I went round myself then to warn the joiner and get them out of the way – had to act fast an' all before they started closing the border to refugees. Yes, I did all right by them.

I told her I would. Why else would she listen when I told her I was getting to choose the name?

Yes, you can say what you like: I did all right by them. He had food in his belly and a roof over his head. More than a lot of blokes would do.

And it wasn't easy. He could be a stubborn little sod. Well look at it my way. Just when I thought he could stand on his own two feet what does he do? Leaves his job and goes swanning off with a gang of fishermen and a bloke from the tax office. Dead end jobs if you like.

Then what happens? Getting had up by the law. He didn't even try to deny it. Not so clever after all then. Well, I couldn't be involved in that sort of thing could I? I was sorry for the lad of course, but a man can only take so much.

How was I to know what would happen? All those big names linked with him – my lad? The Pope; all the saints; even the emperor in Rome, eventually. How was I supposed to know he was going to be famous?

Of course, if I'd known at the start I'd have made sure he got my name. I wish I'd done that. Jesus Christ! And was he mine? God knows.

## **An Arthurian Christmas**

*Bob Taylor is entranced by King Arthur:*

When I was young my parents always seemed to be busy. Sunday morning was a particular time, Dad in the garden or his shed, a great DIYer my dad, Mum house cleaning and prep for dinner, Sunday dinner always midday. Me, always under someone's feet apparently, so it became normal for me to be ordered out to Sunday School, as if I didn't have enough trouble with 5 other hated school days. However, this Sunday was rather special. This Sunday, in 1950, was Christmas Eve, and this Sunday was prize day. We kids got a Sunday school prize just for turning up – no special qualities needed. So, just turned 8 years old, blue eyed, blonde hair, short trousers and purple knees! (I hated those short trousers in the winter) wondering what to expect for my prize. Sweets? Games? No, it was a book. Not sure what to think about that, but said thanks and waited until home to examine it. After dinner retired to a quiet corner to read my book which turned out to be a slim volume of *The Knights of the Round Table* as retold by Enid Blyton with some simple but charming black and white illustrations by Kathleen Gell.

I loved it!

Boxing Day I became Arthur, pulling the sword from the stone and waving it in the air – Dad's plant marker from the garden, actually, followed by shouts from the shed! Rescued damsels in distress – cousin Irene from two doors down who was bigger than me and didn't want to be rescued. Have these people no romance in their souls? Despite the discouraging start I began a lifelong fascination with the Arthurian legends.

Ever since the Romans finally got sick of the British weather in around 400 A.D, and went home, the legends of Arthur began. It is said that after the Romans left, Britain was divided into different kingdoms, all of which were belligerent, so the Welsh Bards found an audience touring the taverns along the border telling stories of a great king who would arise to reunite the country. So, perhaps the first Arthurian art was in songs. How nice if on winter solstice (Christmas Eve, nearly!) and in a tavern.

Moving forward a few hundred years, tales of Arthur became more mainstream when in the twelfth century Chretien de Troyes wrote, or compiled, his *Arthurian Romances*. In this a lot of the characters of legend appear, Lancelot, Perceval, and others looking for the holy grail.



On to the year 1470 – the Wars of the Roses still in full swing and Sir Thomas Malory, a knight of Warwickshire and a thoroughly bad lot, completed his book *Le Morte D'Arthur*. He had ample time for this as he was in Newgate prison at the time.

*Le Morte D'Arthur* is the version we now think of as *the* Arthurian story. Malory introduced us to characters including Tristram and Isolde, an epic love story that became a favourite with artists of all kinds. Wagner wrote an opera about the couple (all 4 1/2 hours of it, phew!) One for the Wagnerian devotees I think? The Pre-Raphaelite painters loved these Arthurian stories, Morris and Waterhouse to name two. Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*, inspired by Arthur, one of the best loved poems in English. Although not one of the stories, this again inspired many paintings by Victorian artists. I haven't left much time for the paintings in this article, but so much has been inspired by the Arthurian stories I could hardly scratch the surface.

I'm sure I've had many much appreciated Christmas gifts over the years, but none have given me so much lasting inspiration and pleasure as my little book. Seventy years later it's still in my bookshelf, and would be in good condition except that at Christmas 1950 I also received a junior printing set and tried, unsuccessfully, to print my name and address over the front and rear fly leaves. Still, I will never part with it. Thank you, Sunday School.

### **Deck the Halls fa la la la la ...**

*Maggie Harker has been botanising:*

Which plant epitomises Christmas for you? There are quite a few to choose from: conifers of varying species (if you like sweeping up needles), holly (handle with care), ivy, mistletoe (if you are feeling sociable), and the list goes on, including those plants obliging enough to flower at this time of year, Christmas cactus and Christmas rose (hellebore).

Top of the pops is poinsettia. That handily sized pot plant grows to a shrub of 12 feet in its natural habitat of Central America. The flaming foliage consists of neither petals or leaves but bracts and long hours of darkness and very bright lights for several weeks are needed to achieve the cheery glow, so if you are able to keep one going for twelve months it will need careful management for up to three months to achieve a repeat performance.

The traditional smouldering Yule log has transmogrified into a cake which is a good thing since not many people still have grates. Ivy symbolises eternity and resurrection, and traditionally it carried spiritual significance and was taken into homes to drive out evil spirits. Its clinging habit symbolises love and friendship.

Holly, sometimes known as Christ's thorn, has been symbolic to Christians since medieval times, though prior to that Druids believed it gave protection from evil spirits and wore it in their hair. They were also much in favour of the parasitic mistletoe, the white berries being symbols of male fertility. Likewise, it played a big part in the Roman Saturnalia festival, and they hung it over doorways to represent peace, love and understanding. The Victorians established the custom of allowing a man to kiss a woman standing under mistletoe and a further variation stated that with each kiss a berry was to be plucked from the mistletoe and eaten. (Either they were unaware or did not care that the berries are poisonous.)

The Egyptians, Chinese and Hebrews long had a custom of using garlands of evergreen trees to symbolise eternal life, and for centuries trees have been a feature of European Christmas. Thanks to Prince Albert, we eventually caught up. Martin Luther is sometimes credited with being the first to add lighted candles to an evergreen tree. The Catholic Church resisted the Protestant custom and it was not until 1982 that a Christmas tree appeared in the Vatican.

As for the pear tree and the partridge, the modern version of the Twelve Days of Christmas dates to 1909 but the origins are pagan, and the birds are symbols of fertility, pagans not being shy of sexuality, amongst other things!

Whatever your taste in Christmas décor, another tradition – pagan or not – is having a tipple. Wassail, wassail!



## Other people's Christmas

*Susan Turner has been reading other people's diaries.*

The cook and food writer Nigel Slater starts Christmas 2004 with the pudding:

2 December. The day I make the Christmas puddings, stirring the fruits and sugar, tucking in the old-fashioned silver coins, sealing the china basins with paper and string, then boiling them for several hours, is the cooking day I look forward to almost more than any other. The rich, heavy scent of dried fruits and brandy on a winter's day has much to do with it, and the sharp note of citrus peel amid the flat, bland smell of boiling puddings. This is not a day to rush, but one to savour.

Chris Mullin, then a Labour politician, finds 1997's Christmas drinks rather sobering:

22 December. To Downing Street, where Gordon [Brown] and Nick Brown laid on Christmas drinks. The doors between Numbers 11 and 12 were open and we could roam at will. The walls of the halls and staircases are lined with sepia prints of Chancellors and Chief Whips past. Many of the names do not even ring a bell. A constant reminder to the governing classes of how ephemeral they are.

Christmas Eve 1933, and the young author and adventurer Patrick Leigh Fermor halts in Bingen on his solo walk from the Hook of Holland to the Danube:

The only customer, I unslung my rucksack in a little Gasthof. Standing on chairs, the innkeeper's pretty daughters, who were aged from five to fifteen, were helping their father decorate a Christmas tree; hanging witch-balls, looping tinsel, fixing candles to the branches and crowning the tip with a wonderful star. They asked me to help and when it was almost done, their father, a tall thoughtful-looking man, uncorked a slim bottle from the Rudesheim vineyard just over the river. We drank it together and had almost finished a second by the time the last touches to the tree were complete. Then the family assembled round it and sang.

In 1870, the parson Francis Kilvert in the Welsh marches wakes to a bracing Christmas Day:

Sunday, Christmas Day. As I lay awake praying in the early morning I thought I heard a sound of distant bells. It was an intense frost. I sat down in my bath upon a sheet of thick ice which broke in the middle into large pieces whilst sharp points and jagged edges stuck all round the sides of the tub like *chevaux de frise*, not particularly comforting to the naked thighs and loins, for the keen ice cut like broken glass. The ice water stung and scorched like fire. I had to collect the floating pieces of ice and pile them on a chair before I could use the sponge and then I had to thaw the sponge in my hands for it was a mass of ice.

Finally, in 1669 London Pepys brings Christmas to a close with a merry Twelfth Night:

Twelfth Day. Up, and to look after things against dinner today for my guests, and then to the Office to write down my journall for five or six days backward, and so home to look after dinner, it being now almost noon... and very merry we were at dinner, and so all the afternoon, talking, and looking up and down my house; and in the evening I did bring out my cake — a noble cake, and there cut it into pieces, with wine and good drink ... and so we were mighty merry till it was night; and then, being moonshine and fine frost, they went home, I lending some of them my coach to help to carry them, and so my wife and I spent the rest of the evening in talk and reading, and so with great pleasure to bed.

## The Welly Boots

*Bron and John Greig found this gem. Anyone who has ever dressed a child will recognise this one:*

Did you hear about the Pre-School teacher who was helping one of the children put on his welly boots? He asked for help and she could see why. Even with her pulling and him pushing, the little wellies still didn't want to go on. By the time they got the second welly on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, "Miss, they're on the wrong feet." She looked, and sure enough, they were.





It wasn't any easier pulling the wellies off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the wellies back on, this time on the right feet..

He then announced, "These aren't my wellies." She bit her tongue rather than get right in his face and scream, 'Why didn't you say so?' as she wanted to. Once again, she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting wellies off his little feet.

No sooner had they got the wellies off when he said, "They're my brother's Wellies, My mom made me wear them." Now she didn't know if she should laugh or cry. But, she mustered up what grace and courage she had left to wrestle the wellies on his feet again. Helping him into his coat, she asked, "Now, where are your gloves?" He said, "I stuffed them in the toes of my wellies".

She will be eligible for parole in three years!

## Curried Nut Roast

*Lynn Riley keeps us well fed:*

I would like to share an all-time, family favourite recipe with you. I have been making this for at least 40 years and it never fails to please ... vegan, vegetarian and die-hard meat eaters, all tuck in with gusto!

225g hazel, Brazil or walnuts, finely chopped  
225g fresh tomatoes, peeled and chopped  
1 medium-sized green pepper, deseeded and finely chopped  
2 medium-sized onions, finely chopped  
75g breadcrumbs  
1 clove garlic, crushed

1 teaspoon dried mixed herbs or 2 teaspoons fresh mixed herbs  
1 tablespoon mild curry powder (or a heaped teaspoon of hot Madras curry powder)  
1 egg, beaten  
Cooking oil  
Salt and freshly-milled black pepper

One 18cm square tin, greased

Pre-heat the oven to gas mark 7, 425F (220C)

Begin by gently frying the onion and chopped pepper in a little oil until they're softened – about 10 minutes. Meanwhile, mix the nuts and breadcrumbs together in a large bowl, adding the garlic, herbs and curry powder. Then stir in the onion, pepper and tomatoes, mix very thoroughly and season. Now add the beaten egg to bind the mixture together. Finally, pack the mixture into the prepared tin and bake for 30–40 minutes until golden.

This can be served hot with spiced pilau rice, yogurt, mango chutney, or a fresh tomato sauce. It's also very good served cold with a salad.

Gluten-free – For the breadcrumbs, use gluten-free bread or blitzed gluten-free porridge oats.

Vegan – To replace the egg use Chia egg = 1 tablespoon chia seeds with 2.5 tablespoons water and leave to soak for 5 minutes. When making this nut roast, I use 2 x chia eggs.

I hope you enjoy this as much as our family and friends do!

## Music and Visual Art Online

If you'd normally be enjoying a trip to a seasonal concert or two, online streaming may help fill the gap. *Classic FM* has a good list of what's available [here](#). Most require the purchase of tickets or donations to charity. Given the interest stimulated by our speaker from Macmillan last year (seems like another world), a concert by the Oxford Bach Soloists with readings by Joanna Lumley, Stephen Fry and Jeremy Irons looks promising. The concert will be available to view from 11 December at 20:00 until 31 December and is free, but viewers are invited to donate to Macmillan Cancer Support. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/followthestars](http://macmillan.org.uk/followthestars). In the visual arts, the Times art critic thoroughly recommends the exhibition of the work of the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi at the National Gallery. The Gallery has launched a curator-led on-demand film of "the most imaginatively gripping exhibition to come to Britain this year" at [nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk), £8 until January 24.

# CHRISTMAS QUIZ 2020

Points mean prizes! For your chance to win, email, post or hand-deliver your answers, with contact details, to Veronica Gilbert, 39, Glendale Rd, NE71 6DL [veronica.gil@btinternet.com](mailto:veronica.gil@btinternet.com)

**Deadline 5pm on Twelfth Night**

## **A. Can you identify these classic novels and their authors?**

1. D C by C D
2. T K A M by H L
3. A I W by L C
4. T O T D'U by T H
5. E by J A
6. P P by J M B
7. T M O T F by G E
8. T J by H F
9. W H by E B
10. P O A L by H J
11. D Z by B P
12. T T L by V W
13. T D by J J
14. W A P by L T
15. S A A by A R
16. T H O T B by A C D
17. T L T W A T W by C S L
18. W D by R A
19. T W I T W by K G
20. L O T F by W G
21. T W O T W by H G W
22. B B by A S
23. T H T by M A
24. O M A M by J S
25. G T by J S

## **B. From which Christmas carols or songs do these lines come?**

1. Let us our homage show
2. And our eyes at last shall see him
3. Now bring us some figgy pudding
4. On a cold winter's night that was so deep
5. Ye who sang creation's story Now proclaim Messiah's birth
6. As with joyful steps they sped To that lowly manger-bed
7. The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes
8. And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ For to redeem us all
9. Sacred Infant, all divine, What a tender love was thine
10. How silently, how silently The wondrous gift is given
11. You girls and boys won't get any toys if you don't pull me out

12. Five gold rings
13. So be good for goodness sake
14. Your boughs are green in summer's glow
15. What will your daddy do when he sees your mamma kissing Santa Claus?
16. And Man will live for evermore because of Christmas Day
17. Let every heart prepare Him room
18. Snowin' and blowin' up bushels of fun Now the jingle hop has begun
19. When the kids start singing and the band begins to play
20. Bells on bobtail ring Making spirits bright
21. And all the bells on earth shall ring On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day
22. Love and joy come to you, And to you your wassail too
23. Through the rude wind's wild lament And the bitter weather
24. For when they placed it on his head he began to dance around
25. Pray you, dutifully prime your matin chime, ye ringers

## **C. Anagrams: Can you work out these symbols and traditions of Christmas?**

1. TCISGSOKN
2. GSERSNTRCGEIA
3. NAECSTDOOI
4. EHITSAECSRMT
5. YRUETK
6. PAYDSHOMNJRAE
7. IIEENPMSC
8. AEDCSLN
9. MNERAG
10. OARSCL
11. ULNIEMLDWE
12. RSNEETSP 1
13. HERESPSD
14. SEEITLMOT
15. WRSNHMTREEEI
16. AAALTNUCSS
17. NIELST
18. DDDHHNNITULEEEEEOOEEERRRRSP
19. LYAYHVDLONI
20. EAGLSN