

Village Echoes

Beer & Cheer

It's that time of the year which brings feasting and drinking. Everything we need is available at the local shops or supermarkets but in the past it was very much a time to prepare everything in the home, especially drinks.

Our locally grown hops meant beer was easily made. The first ones to be grown commercially was around 1510 although an English dictionary of 1440 has an entry – 'hoppe – seede for beyre'. The 17C herbalist Nicholas Culpepper said that 'hops will kill or cure anything'. A Mr Baker of Little Horden, Goudhurst recalled in 1937 that many years before, farmers used to brew beer for their own households and for their farm labourers. It was described as small beer and called 'swipes'. The brewing was carried out in 'coppers' in the scullery. These were also used for washing clothes or boiling puddings!



A multi-purpose copper

Likewise, a Mr Hodge of Goudhurst said that the beer was also known as 'tip' and sold at 1½d a quart. Apparently, it could be sold without a licence and on Sundays the men sat around outside the paygate at Broadford drinking it. A Mr Waters remembered a similar thing at Combwell where there was an actual brew-house. There were little tubs and a large beer cooler. He called the poorer beer, that was watered down for the workers, 'swikey'.

As well as beer the coppers were used to make wine, mostly for medicinal purposes, allegedly. Elderberry wine was used against coughs and colds, cowslip wine for insomnia, celery against gout and rheumatism, and parsnips as a laxative. Each wine was made in the season of the year that the ingredients came to fruition. Wine making was a skill that all girls had to learn. The fruit, flowers or vegetables were boiled in the copper, strained into a cask and the yeast added, which is when the fermentation started. It is said that homemade wine improves with age and doesn't give the drinker a hangover!

Gooseberry Champagne could be made and likely to be ready just in time for Christmas. This was so good that in the 18th century it was sold as real champagne by innkeepers both French and English, which led to a 'grave dispute'. The need to wire the corks into strong glass bottles might have been outside the scope of ordinary folk but elderflower champagne would serve almost as well. Unfortunately, it takes only a week to make and must be drunk within two weeks therefore being too early for Christmas.

Two Kentish recipes were Cherry Bounce and Kentish Cordial. The former was made with Morello cherries that can be harvested into September. As Mr Jingle said in Pickwick Papers - 'Kent, Sir? Everybody knows Kent – apples, cherries, hops and women'! Made in a similar way to sloe gin the cherries are pricked, sugar added and topped up in a jar by old beer or draught ale. By adding more of the ingredients each week, the fermentation could keep going for two months. Kentish cordial was made with a mixture of damsons, together with their cracked stones, and elderberries with an addition of cloves. After becoming cold and been strained a teaspoonful of honey was added to each pint of liquid.

There is evidence that Celts in Britain made cider from crab apples as long ago as 3000 BC. The ingredients for cider would have been easy to obtain in Kent. Apart from the many orchards in the County most people would have had a tree in their garden. It was one of the last drinks of the year to be made at home. Recipes were uniquely tailored to each family's taste.

The word waes-hal (or wassail) dates back to Anglo-Saxon times and means 'to be in good health'. Wassailing or Howling, as it was called in Kent and Sussex, is a celebration performed on twelfth night by locals to awaken the apple trees from their winter slumber, scare away evil spirits and ensure a good harvest the following year.



Kentish Howling

Finally, we come onto mulled wine, which was invented by the Ancient Greeks. They made use of the grapes that didn't quite come up to standard so they added spices and heated it up to hide the taste. The Romans copied in much the same way but the concept really became popular in the Middle Ages. In those days people believed that the added spices made you healthier as well as improving the taste of the wine, which wasn't too wonderful in those days, although safer than water. It is written that the first use of the word 'mull' was in 1618, meaning to heat, sweeten and flavour with spices. Its association with Christmas was sealed by Charles Dickens in 1843 in his book 'A Christmas Carol' when he gave his version the name of Smoking Bishop.

Some sections adapted from 'Fallen Leaves of Wealden History' gathered by Ann Olley and Gordon & Betty Batchelor in 1982 in aid of the fund for the restoration of the organ in Christ Church, Kilndown. Betty's Elderflower Champagne was legendary

SEASON'S GREETINGS

from GOUDHURST & KILNDOWN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY