

Account of Purley on Thames

A Bit of a Tell

R300030 20/2/19

By Rita Denman published in Purley Parish News December 2018

Hello again, I expect you are making some preparations for Christmas. The commercial aspect of the season becomes more frantic every year and it is good to hear the real message of Christmas in the calm and beauty of a carol service.

One of our best known carols is Good King Wenceslas. He was a Bohemian Duke in the 10th century known for his good deeds. The words of the carol were written by J M Neale and put to an old folk tune. It was first published in 1853. The story tells of the good Wenceslas who with his page went out into the deep snow to help a poor man who was gathering winter fuel a task that would have been well known to the Victorian carol singers,. In modern times we have light and heat at the flick of a switch; but not so long ago folk went out foraging for suitable fuel for the all important fire. The tradition of bringing in the Yule, or Christmas log is so old that its origins are uncertain. Remnants of the tradition survive with the sponge cake roll covered with chocolate icing.

It wasn't until the beginning of the 17th century that chimneys were common place and the hearth that we see in old cottages evolved. The fire place was wide enough to burn a large log which could be kept burning for a couple of days. Pots for cooking and boiling water were suspended from a bracket attached to the back wall of the hearth.

We learn from the records of the village school that on the 18 February 1878 the children were given leave to gather wood in Major Storer's park. It would have been a welcome gift for their home fire. The heating in the school was basic with a small fire place in the small room and one stove in the big room which at that time was very high and open to the rafters. On one-occasion it was so cold that ten minutes was allowed for marching to keep warm.

I hope that you will keep warm this winter whatever the weather and wish you all the blessings of Christmastide. Mind how you go.