



The Twelve Days of Christmas - Wotton 1634

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Christmas Day, or Yule-tide, and the ten or twelve days following it, appear, in bygone years, to have been entirely given up to the reign of fun and merriment, feasting and pastime; the revels, as they were called, being the occasion of an immense amount of preparation and arrangement for weeks beforehand. And of such importance was it considered that these arrangements should be properly carried out, that in the royal household, in the mansions of noblemen, "either spiritual or temporal", and the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs, a special person was appointed to superintend and direct them. This person was named "The Lord of Misrule" or Master of Merry Disports", and commenced his rule generally on Christmas Day (sometimes as early as All Hallows' Eve), continuing it till Twelfth Day, or even Candlemas Day, during which period a perfect round of gaiety, feasting and amusements was kept up with great ardour and spirit.

In the year 1634, Richard Evelyn of Wotton (father of the celebrated "Sylva") was appointed High Sheriff of Surrey and Sussex, "before they were disjoyned". This circumstance appears to have been the occasion of the following Christmas being kept with more than the ordinary degree of magnificence at Wotton. A record is still in existence of the account of the particular charges attending it, amounting to no less a sum than £802 7s 8d, and even this did not include the whole expense of the entertainment. It was as usual, it appears, in these hospitable times, when absolutely open house was kept to all the country round, for tenants and neighbours each to contribute their quota towards the general bill of fare. A list has been preserved of what was, on this particular occasion, sent to Mr. Richard Evelyn, which is as follows:- Two sides of venison. Two half brawn. Three pigs. Ninety capons. Five geese. Six turkeys. Four rabbits. Eight Partridges. Two pullets. Five sugar loaves. 1/21b nutmegs. One basket of apples and eggs. Two baskets of pears.

Let us endeavour, for a moment to picture ourselves this Christmas of 1634 at Wotton. The tenants and neighbours, rich and Poor, all flocking to the hospitably opened doors of "the Hall" - dressed, doubtless in their best array - at "seaven of the clocke", to begin the day soberly and devoutly with prayers. The Lord of Misrule, in gay and grotesque attire, sounding his trumpet, with plenty of vigour, we doubt not, to summon the mummers (actors in a performance, usually a dumb-show) and masquers, musicians and others, in order, to their severally appointed places. The great tables laden with

the weight of good cheer, the turkeys, capons, and venison contributed by the guests, besides the noble barons of roast beef, and, foremost and principal dish of all, the boar's head, which was placed upon a board, in a dish of no meaner metal than gold or silver, to the strains of merry music, and heralded in by a flourish of trumpets. This delicacy was decked and garnished with sprays of rosemary and bay, while between the formidable tusks was placed a large orange or pippin, and was served with mustard sauce. Then there was the national dish of frumenty, or furmenty, served with the venison - a marvellous compound of flour, broth, milk, and yolk of egg, beaten up together, and boiled. Plum-porridge, or pottage, also served with the meats; and the Christmas pies, to say nothing of the strong "beere of Old England", which we have no doubt was plentifully provided.

Now the great tables are cleared and the holly-decked hall made ready for the evening revels. We can picture, thanks to the admirable word-portrait given by his son in the first page of the "Diary", the dignified figure of the host, also described there as "a lover of hospitality", presiding over these, attended by his retinue of "divers gentlemen and persons of quality", garbed in their "greene sattin doublets" and his hundred and sixteen servants in their livery of the same colour. Masques and mummings including doubtless, the old Christmas play of St. George on his hobby horse, with his antagonist the Dragon; the games, the dancing, fun and laughter, over which the Lord of Misrule kept, we hope, judicious as well as mirthful rule - all these combine to present a striking and most interesting picture of a Christmas at Wotton in olden times. A Christmas, too, we would remind our readers, which was familiar to the eyes of John Evelyn, then a boy of fourteen.

How widely different to the one he afterwards witnessed, some three-and-twenty years later. When a gloomy and puritanical rule, not content with abolishing the merry pastimes and feasting with which Christmas was celebrated through the length and breadth of England, strove even to close the doors of her churches on that blessed day of rejoicing and thanksgiving. In "The Diary" of 25 December 1657 we read "...The chapel was surrounded with soldiers and all the communicants surprised and kept prisoners by them, others carried away ... As we went up to receive the sacrament, the miscreants held their muskets against us as if they would have shot us at the altar..."

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