



# IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

## MEMORIES FROM KEN REWCASTLE (1949)

CHRISTMAS IS FAST approaching and a few nights ago we had our first Carol singers (and probably our last if the Christmas before is anything to go by). "Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the feast of Stephen" they sang - then "We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year" - followed by a knock on the door. I opened the door and one of four small boys about ten years old said, "Can you help the Carol singers please?"

"You haven't sung a Carol yet, only the first couple of lines," I said.

"We don't know any more" said one of the boys.

"I'll tell you what", I said, "there's fifty pence each, learn all the verses, come back tomorrow night and sing the complete Carol and I will give you another £1 each".

My wife, who was listening in the kitchen shouted, "Don't be such a Victor Meldrew!"

"Are you kidding" I replied "I have given them £2 with a promise of another £4 tomorrow night, if they sing a Carol all the way through."

Needless to say, the boys didn't come back the following night!

Now what has this to do with Houghton-le-Spring's heritage or history? Nothing at all! Unless we delve back into memories of the past again! That way we can compare



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today's children's idea of Carol singing, to what Carol singing meant to us as children growing up in Houghton in the 1940s and early 1950s. As kids we would be out every night leading up to Christmas - and one particular night comes to mind.

Here I go again, harping on about the past. Houghton is a different place now, it has moved on – and I think sometimes, so must I. A well known celebrity said recently that the past doesn't exist; but the past does exist in our memories, be they happy memories, or sad ones. If the past doesn't exist, then we haven't lived!

It must have been 1949 and it was nearing Christmas. A neighbour called Joe, who was about fourteen years old, had promised to take me Carol singing. I would be ten years old at the time. Joe duly arrived to collect me at our house in Wordsworth Avenue on the Hetton Road Estate and I noticed he was carrying a 'Tilley Lamp' (this was a paraffin fuelled, lantern type lamp.) I had thought we would be Carol singing around the streets of the Hetton Road Estate, but Joe had other ideas.



Off we went and headed straight up the Seaham Harbour Road which is what we always referred to as Gillas Lane East. Joe told me that we were going Carol singing where no one else would think of going. The 'Tilley Lamp' kept blowing out so he decided to light it only while we were singing. It was a bitterly cold and windy night when we called first at the 'Bungalow'. This house may have had another name but was always referred to as the 'Bungalow'. It had an allotment at the back which ran the whole length of the field behind Dunkirk Avenue on the newly built Racecourse Estate. The 'Bungalow' was where most people in that area bought their vegetables. We sang 'In the Bleak Midwinter' which was the only Carol to which I knew all the words. After leaving there we trudged on to our next stop, which was the Copt Hill Pub.



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We stood in the pub doorway and sang 'In the Bleak Midwinter' again until someone came out and gave us a handful of change, which was probably more than we would have got from all the streets on our estate. "That is only a start" said Joe, as we set off over the level crossing and headed for Houghton Golf Club. When we arrived there, Joe lit the 'Tilley' and we sang 'In the Bleak Midwinter' once again. This time we were rewarded with a few shillings and sixpences among the collection. No one had expected Carol singers up there on such a night.



Further on we went and I began to realize what Joe had in mind. We were heading for the remote houses and farmhouses towards Warden Law. We weren't dressed for the weather. I remember wearing a navy blue Burberry Mac, short trousers and boots with studs in the soles, and heel plates. Joe had his Dad's cap and an overcoat. All that could be heard apart from the wind, as we walked along that dark and lonely road, was the sound of my boots, clip clopping on the tarmac.

I remember us singing at a large house set back from the road, which I believe belonged to Greenshields. As we started to sing 'In the Bleak Midwinter' once again, an elderly lady opened the door and said, "Where have you come from and how did you get here?" When we said that we had walked up from Houghton we were ushered inside to sing in the hallway, given a hot drink and came away with half a crown.

I remember crossing a field to reach one house and along tracks to others. We left the main road at one time and walked down a lane to a row of houses; and I can also remember us singing at Holmes Farm, which I think was up near the engine winding house which pulled the coal trucks from Hetton. The response from everyone was total surprise at having Carol singers up there on such a night, and we were well rewarded.



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I think our last call was Sharpley Hall Farm, and as we came back up Sharpley bank it started to snow, which soon turned into a blizzard. We decided to head back home and set off, battling against the driving wind and snow. If anyone had seen us coming over the level crossing back down towards the Copt Hill, they would have thought we were two snowmen come to life. The snow was blowing straight at us and we were white from head to foot. The sound of my studs on the road by now had been deadened by the covering of snow, and I remember being excited with the thought of sledging the next day and hoping it would snow all night.

Soon the welcoming lights of the Hetton Road Estate appeared and we arrived back at Wordsworth Ave; but to my dismay the snow had turned to sleet and we were dripping wet. A good telling off came first, we were supposed to be out for an hour which had turned into four or five hours. Joe counted out the money on our kitchen table. We couldn't believe that we had made over £1, which was a lot of money then, probably about £30 - £40 at today's value. My share was more than ten shillings, which I had to share with my two brothers. More than three bob each was more than we had ever had. I don't know how many miles Joe and I had walked that night; but at a guess I would say nine or ten, in freezing cold and a blizzard; but due to Joe's entrepreneurial spirit, it had been well worth it.



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I think I remember that night so clearly after so many years because of the Carol itself. Through all the years since, whenever I have heard 'In the Bleak Midwinter' being sung or played, it has always brought back to me so vividly, the memory of that night. The Bible tells us about three Kings following a star over moor and mountain; and I remember two boys trudging over track and field, following the light from any distant window that came in sight.

I don't think today's children have the desire or the need to do what we did then. They seem to be on a different wavelength now with their laptops, iPods, iPhones etc.; but to be fair, I wonder if we would really have been any different to the children of today if we had had access to everything they have now. Would we have walked for miles in the cold and snow to go Carol singing? Maybe not! Who knows? The only thing certain is that we had so very little by comparison.



On another occasion nearing Christmas, with my two brothers, we were heading for the 'Pictures' (cinema) when we decided to go Carol singing in the doorway of the old Glendale Club on Church street. We started singing and a committee man came out and led us into the bar. We were lined up and had to sing in front of a room full of men. A cap was passed around and we came out with more money than we had ever imagined. We shared the money out under the street light at the bottom of Church Street and then went whooping along

the Broadway into Newbottle Street with our pockets jingling - first stop Betty's! Now which Carol did we sing in The Glendale Club that night? Oh yes! I remember now, it was:

'In the Bleak Midwinter'!

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to everyone.

Ken Rewcastle

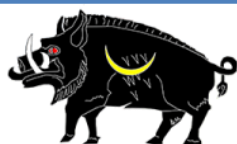
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These memories relation to 1949 and were written down in the year 2015.

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