

## CHRISTMAS CAROLS at BATCHWORTH LOCK

By Ian Welland

When I was a child, every year we would gather at Batchworth Lock on Christmas Eve for Christmas Carols. The Lockkeeper would invite the local vicar of St Mary's and his Church choir to stand on the eastern bank, and we would gather on the western bank in front of the lock houses and on the expanse of the bridge that led to the lock gates.

Barges and small boats would moor all the way along the canal side from Batchworth to Stockers Lock heading south, and Batchworth to Croxley Moor heading north. The smell of burnt cinders from the moored vessels and roasting chestnuts on grills topping hot barrelled coals filled the night air and warmed the chill of the evening.

Mother would wrap us up in winter coats made from old blankets joined at the seams by strips of leather and tied across the front by wooden toggles; and knitted woollen hats, scarves and gloves. Father would light a slow burning candle inside a Christmas lantern that would be hung on a hook and raised to a position just above our heads by father holding a long piece of strong tree wood. The lanterns would provide just enough glow to enable our faces to be seen.

There was always an excitement among us children of Batchworth in the lead up to Christmas and the Carols was certainly a main attraction of the season. People would come from all around - from Moor Park, Mill End, and of course Rickmansworth. Sedgwick the Greengrocer would bring apples and oranges to give out to us children - I used to save my orange for Christmas Day as a real treat.

The last time I can recall Christmas Carols at Batchworth in the good old days, was the Christmas before the war came. Must have been 1913. It had been a particularly cold early winter, indeed, I can recall Guy Fawkes Night being the first cold snap of the year, meaning that the whole of Ricky Park was covered in frost with a patch of burnt ground where the bonfire had burned long and bright. On Christmas Eve, snow flurries ensured a dusting of snow and I can remember the canal towpath being a little slippery. Father and other elders of the village formed a chain down one side of the steep steps from Church Street and helped our mothers and us children safely down to the canal side. The old spinster who lived in the first house along the towpath would serve hot mulled wine to mother and father from a hatched doorway, and mother used to say that she knew not what was added to the wine but it was rather potent. By all accounts, it certainly warmed the heart.

The vicar would call his choir together having suitably warmed their voices, and *O Come All Ye Faithful* would unite each and every one of us, and in turn announce the real start of Christmas. Of course, we all knew the words and the meaning of the Carols sung on this special evening, and there was undoubtedly a sense of community festive spirit. Old Burt Miller of Croxley, who would always stand at the bow of his small boat at the Lock, would then take the lead for *I Saw Three Ships come sailing in* and he would precede his recital with a story of Tudor voyages on the high seas and how the ships, missing for most of the year, would be glimpsed in Plymouth Sound sailing home for Christmas.

A favourite of mine was, *In The Bleak Midwinter*. Originally a poem by Christina Rossetti, Gustav Holst set it to music in 1906 and it was adopted by our village choir. All through my life, this one carol takes me back to my childhood - a time of innocence, a time of honesty and goodwill. We as a family did not have much in the way of wealth and riches, unlike you all today; but we had the comfort of family and faith. This feeling of comfort was all around us - as we roamed in the wild flower fields of summer, fished in the rivers and canals, attended fetes and participated in country dances, and made a snowman on the village green.

There is such thing as the colours of Christmas. They are with us and within us. We sometimes refer to such nowadays as the "spirit of Christmas" - sadly, this spirit is undone all too often by greed and gluttony; but in the wispy strains of choirs and carols and the Christmas service, it can be found - the spirit of Christmas that is.

The sepia photographs will continue to tell the Christmas story long after we are gone; and, I hope and pray the Batchworth Christmas Carols will carry on much in the same way as they did during my time.

At Batchworth Lock on Christmas Eve,  
*Angels and archangels*  
*May have gathered there,*  
*Cherubim and seraphim (Cherubim - celestial figures; throne bearers of God) (Seraphim -*  
*angelic celestial being)*  
*Thronged the air.*

Happy Christmas to you all and your family.