

'Peeps into the Past' article in *The Courier [Isle of Man] 1965*

by Syd Boulton

*Christmas is Coming and... Old Customs Recalled*

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## CHRISTMAS IS COMING AND ...

### Old Customs Recalled

#### Singing Of Carvals (Carols)

**REMEMBER** the old saying "Christmas is coming and the geese are getting fat" - and the passer-by is exhorted to "Please put a penny in the old man's hat?" It seems appropriate to recall the old rhyme at this time and other customs connected with the festive season.

The Oie'll Veree, or Feast of Mary, was observed in Christmas Eve by the singing of carvals (carols) and in bygone days we read of farmers and fishermen attending the service in Church and then they would go to a public house and have a spree on Manx ale. It was called 'Jough-Vie' (or good ale).

A recent article in the Courier drew attention to the number of ale house in the Island – they were "ten a penny" as the saying goes and one did not have far to go as a rule to quench one's thirst.

It was traditional in the old days for every house to have a big candle made for the Oie'll Veree celebration.

The men would enjoy themselves with singing and jokes – and drinking – until the large candle burned down in the socket.

It was fairly customary too for the congregation after singing the carvals to adjourn to the nearest inn where they would partake of such fare as hot ale, flavoured with spice, ginger and pepper and the like.

After this the parting song would be rendered. "It is time to go home, to go lie down. It draws towards bedtime."

An account of 1844 gives the recollections of the Manx poet, William Kennish, in regard to the Oie'll Verrey at Maughold Church.

It was usually a very long service on Christmas Eve because of the length of the carvals.

Each member of the congregation brought his or her own candle so that the church would be brilliantly illuminated. Decorations in those days were primitive and consisted mainly of huge branches of holly and gestoons [sic. festoons?] of ivy.

Prayers would be read by the Parson, then a hymn was sung, and often the Parson would go home

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leaving the Clerk to take over.

Each person who had a carol to sing would do so in turn so that the service went on to a very late hour.

And there was concern sometimes too because the proceeding in Church became unseemly.

**It was sometimes the custom for the ladies in the pews to provide themselves with peas which they flung at their bachelor friends!**

The carvals too were composed sometimes with a local flavour and brought in topics calculated to give offence.

William Kennish's account mentions the supply of parched peas and of course the carvals.

One of this [sic. these?], he recalls, was on the wicked priests of Baal in Aprozypal Book of Bel and the Dragon.

It was written and sung by parishioners with a grievance and contained a veiled attack on the parson at Maughold who was said to have encroached on their rights or something of the sort.

A carval on the Wicked Priests was preserved in manuscript but on examination one finds that in its original form it was harmless enough. The vocalist however may have read his own meaning and perhaps added a verse or two to serve his own purpose.

The pelting of worshippers with parched peas was so often the cause of disturbance that it ceased in the 1860s.

Kennish also mentions jocular remarks from "wags round the door" while a dull carval was in progress of being sung and this is complained of also in one of the carvals.

We are told that the old religious poems were written by men of all classes, including several clergymen, a sumner, two vicar-generals, a privateersman, several farmers, etc.

They were usually long and strange to say some of the longest were the best. They were often from a hundred lines to twice that length; two or three contain 360 lines. An incomplete version of one entitled "Lhig da'n slane seihil cur clashtyn" ("Let the whole world hearten") contains forty lines not found in the usual versions, thus making 400 lines for the complete poem.

The subjects are various. The nativity is not the most common topic though a few deal with it, one being a mere translation from the English carol of The Black Decree. Joseph's story is the basis of one of the most popular carvals. The evil woman mentioned in the Bible is the theme of another popular one (by the privateersman). Paradise Lost inspired another, and the influence of Pilgrim's Progress is obvious in more than one.

**A grim subject, hardly to be expected in a Christmas Carol, is a dispute between a**

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**disembodied soul and its corpse in the grave as to which of them was to blame for their joint damnation!**

But one view of it is that it is "written with restraint, thoughtfulness and feeling which raises it far above a mere 'fire and brimstone' sermon. It reminds one of a Latin poem on a similar dispute between the eye and the body, written in the time of Henry III and printed by Camden in his *Remains concerning Britain*.

In spite of a few carvals written in this gloomy tone, the majority are cheerful enough.

They are many in number. A. W. Moore published some 11,000 lines, and Philip Caine printed 5,000 more in the "Isle of Man Examiner" between 1915 and 1917. The books in which they were usually found were home-made volumes, bound in rough leather, brown paper or sail cloth – the pages often so much stained with damp and smoke that it is hard to read the faded ink, and the spelling is weird and wonderful. As to the authorship - "written by William Callister" at the end of the carval, may mean that he merely copied it into a book; but such a statement as "mettered by John Lewin" may be taken as proof that John Lewin put the chosen subject into metre.

The dates are mostly between 1760 and 1840, though a few may be as early as 1700 or earlier. They were sung in various ways. One way for the singer to start at the west end of the church and take one step forwards towards the altar at the end of each verse. Sometimes two men would get up, one on each side of the church to sing a carval. Probably it would be one of the carvals which have "Questions and Answers" in alternate verses.

One curious carval is ascribed to Dr. Walker, who was Bishop Wilson's Vicar-General, and shared the Bishop's imprisonment in 1722. He died in 1729, so the carval is at least as old as that year. Several customs are mentioned in it.

Christmas lasted twelve days in his time and for long afterwards, and the twelve days of Christmas are mentioned. Christmas customs therefore include all the festivities up to January 6<sup>th</sup>. He referred to the candles with which the churches were lighted up on this night as already stated, the "leggards" [DJR: See Note 1] card playing, friendly chat, fiddlers, and so on.

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**Dates In Manx History**

**December 24<sup>th</sup>** – Oiel Verree.

Rev. Dr. Carpenter died, 1865.

Bishop Straton appointed, 1891.

**December 25<sup>th</sup>** – Laa-yn-Ullick. (Christmas Day.)

**December 26<sup>th</sup>** – Laa'l Steavin. (St. Stephen's Day). "Hunt the Wren".

St. Thomas' Church closed, 1867.

Foundation stone of Braddan Church laid, 1871.

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**December 27<sup>th</sup>** – Laa'l ny Maccain. (Innocents' Day.)  
Kitterland explosion, 1852.

**December 29<sup>th</sup>** – Act for making and repairing highways and bridges promulgated, 1810.

**December 30<sup>th</sup>** – Heavy Gale.  
Several wrecks round the coast, 1873.

**December 31<sup>st</sup>** – William Christian  
(Iliam Dhone) condemned, 1662.  
Rev. F. B. Hartwell, chaplain of St. George's, buried, 1846.

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Note 1: [leggad = legacy, bequest, endowment; sweetheart, beau, partner, Valentine (sweetheart), boy (sweetheart), amour propre] Source: <http://www.ceantar.org/Dicts/Manx/mx28.html>