



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Just as night follows day, spring follows winter. But relying on such basic principles of life on Earth hasn't always been our approach to the changing of the seasons

There's something exciting about this time of year. Since the midwinter solstice on the 21st of December, the countryside has been climbing back out of the depths of winter as the days begin to draw out and the nights get shorter. At last our snowdrops have appeared in the copse and the early signs of daffodils are peeking out above the gentle frost. It finally feels as if spring might re-appear and usher in the start of another year.

These days, of course, we can rest assured the annual cycle of life will keep turning. But imagine for a moment a time when, without the certainty of science, we had no idea that all would be well. Our pagan ancestors, whom I've always somewhat revered, recognised that a gentle nod to the spirits of fertility would never go amiss. Keeping the gods on side throughout the year would, it was hoped, placate the lottery of uncertainty and – most importantly – ensure a bountiful harvest.

Living on the Borders in Herefordshire hasn't just introduced us to some wonderful new friends, neighbours and countryside, it's also surrounded us with a rich tradition of cider making. Of course Herefordshire isn't alone in championing the good stuff, but without a doubt its ancient orchards now underpin some of the best producers in Britain. And, as you might expect, long-held traditions bring with them the sort of rural festivals and frolics I just love.

It was therefore with great pleasure that I accepted an invitation to our local Wassail recently, at the request of the PTA of our nearby school in Kingstone. This homage to the humble apple tree was an inspiring event, complete with gallons of Watkins cider, Morris men and music, all merrily combined to thank the trees for last year's crop, and shower them with good wishes for a bountiful harvest in the months ahead.

The business of Wassailing is centuries old, and in the best traditions of rural folklore there are many local variants, but the key ingredients and aims are the same. Ideally it's held on Twelfth Night, and you need an orchard and a hearty bunch of folk prepared to make plenty of noise and share in a cold evening with the trees to bid them good health. At our event, toast soaked in cider was hung in the tree by the Queen of the Wassail. Our Wassail

song was then belted out with so much conviction it put the carol service to shame, whilst our red tail-coated leader in the Wassail, otherwise known as Chris, constantly exalted us to wake the trees from their winter slumber with the cry "behold!" to which we all yelled "Wassail!"

Our gathering around the oldest tree in the orchard is time-honoured, as is the pouring of a libation from a Wassail cup – in this case a thing of

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beauty turned on a lathe in the woodwork shop of the school. When finally the song was sung and the cider poured about the ancient tree, Herefordshire's High Sheriff let go both barrels from his shotgun into the frosty night and, with a flash and a bang, warned off any evil spirits that might still have been about. And so ended my first Wassail, though I can assure you it won't be my last. Plans are already afoot for next year, and a Wassail trail that might celebrate almost every apple tree in the village, including ours!

When we look back on all these ancient goings on, it's easy to see them simply as enchanting old customs revived out of sentiment, but beware such untimely dismissal. Science may explain all, but there's more to belief than statistics and peer reviews.

The annual cycle of life is something we should never take for granted. Talking to the trees may be seen by some as a little crazy, but as it's worked for thousands of years I think I'll take my chances with the spirits of the countryside. At least I won't be talking to myself... ♪

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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