

A Dales Christmas ...

Hill farmer John Rayner talks about Christmases past in the Dale

Writer and oral historian **Anna Greenwood** uncovers stories from Christmas past.

I met Gouthwaite hill farmer John Rayner several years ago whilst recording rural lives in Nidderdale. John's family have lived at Gouthwaite for many generations and his grandfather, Moses Rayner, rebuilt their Elizabethan home further up Gouthwaite's hillside from the valley bottom when the reservoir flooded the family out. John has a keen interest in his family's history, and that of the local area in which he has spent the majority of his life. He is well-known in the area and supports interest in the archaeology and history of the landscape through the AONB.

It is the afternoon of Sunday 21st December 2014, and I am accompanying John to the carol service at Wath Methodist chapel just outside Pateley Bridge. The chapel in Wath was constructed by the Wesleyan Methodists of the Dale.

Before taking the journey from John's house to the chapel, we sit together in one of his two front rooms at Gouthwaite Farm and talk about Christmases that have passed in this remote hill area of Nidderdale. Our conversation flows around childhood games, Father Christmas, gifts, entertainment, and to all the work that went into festive preparations.

John grew up with his sisters in the house at Gouthwaite Farm and all his childhood Christmases were spent here. John recalls what Christmas for a small boy entailed.

"Always had Christmas in this house. Once we grew up a bit, got t' ten and eleven, all farmers round about had Christmas parties, and we all trooped off, at night, my sisters and me, and 'ad these parties. We alus 'ad one in 'ere in this front room, then we went through for supper.

When you got t' be teenagers, y' played games. Black Magic. Well, they 'ad the poker and y' 'ad t' guess what were coming next or summat. Secret was, they touched something black before answer. Black Magic they called it. It were a complicated thing. Then we used t' play Postman's Knock. All girls used to put their names in a hat, teenage girls, and then you put yer hand in, drew one out, the y' went int' passage there for kisses and that. Postman's Knock! And if y' got a good looking one you were well away, y' din't come out so quickly! And, anyway, me mum and dad used t' be sat through there when we were all teenagers, about fifteen of us in 'ere, and we were alus going out playing Postman's Knock, and me mother put clock on two hours. She was that fed up she shoved it on from ten to midnight and then it were time fer us t' go 'ome!"

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To view the full article, contact Anna Greenwood.

Photographs can be supplied