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Walking Forwards For Christmas

Roman and Medieval Winter Celebrations in Chester - Fortean Traveller Piece – Rob Gandy

Chester is one of England's oldest cities, founded as a fort by the Romans in the AD 70s, and has the most complete city walls in Britain, and a Roman amphitheatre. There is little doubt that its early inhabitants would therefore have celebrated Saturnalia, a seven-day festival of light leading to the winter solstice, which was a time for feasting, goodwill, generosity to the poor, the exchange of gifts and the decoration of trees¹. It survived well beyond the first Christian emperors, before arguably being assimilated into Christmas festivities.

Chester also has a medieval tradition of a Midsummer Watch and a Winter Watch, dating from the 15th Century. The Midsummer Watch involved a parade, which was renowned throughout the country, and represented pageantry on a grand scale. By contrast the Winter Watch had a particularly serious purpose: records in the British Library describe how sixteen tenants of the city were bound to watch the city for three nights each year - Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and St Stephen's Day - because these were the days when festivals were going on and disorder could threaten the peace. Therefore, in effect, the Winter Watch acted as a police force to control revellers; and it was the responsibility and financial burden of the local Guilds. The custom was that the City leaders would hand over the keys to the City to the Watch after processing around the City to ensure it was secure, and there would then follow a banquet and celebration of Christmas, knowing the City was safe. Both Watches continued into the 17th Century when it seemed Puritanism triumphed².

With such a history of festivities and parades in Chester, it is little surprise that its Council decided to recreate the Midsummer and Winter Watch parades in the 1990s; this was to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the former², and partly to act as attractions to generate tourist income. Whilst the Midsummer Watch that was re-created reflected details from the City archives, it was decided to make the Winter Watch more of a fun parade. It takes place twice in the lead up to Christmas, but for one of these it combines with a Saturnalia procession of soldiers from the Deva Vitrix 20th Legion (Leg XX v.v.) to make for a particularly spectacular evening. So armed with my travel pass, I headed into town on a cold, wet December evening, to see what was afoot!

Saturnalia Parade

The Roman soldiers were actually the excellent, local Roman Tours re-enactment display team³ who use authentic clothing and equipment, supported by their 6th Legion friends from York. The Legion gathered outside the Grosvenor Museum in preparation for their illuminating the streets with their torchlight; marching along past the amphitheatre, before turning into Eastgate Street, under the famous clock, to the steps of the unique Chester Rows⁴ outside, er, Debenhams. 'Emperor Domitian' addressed his subjects/ the crowd with a grand speech about Saturnalia and some bloodcurdling stuff about '... I am the axe that thuds into your skull. I am the accuser, judge and executioner....' – and of course, everyone cheered! He then formally unleashed the Lord of Misrule.

In addition, the Legion's Centurion gave a speech with more detail about the practises of Saturnalia, such as relaxed dress codes and the inversion of social roles, with masters and slaves swapping clothes. He also talked about the god Mithras who was variously described as 'the Way,' 'the Truth,' 'the Light,' 'the Life,' 'the Word,' 'the Son of God,' 'the Good Shepherd', and was born of a virgin⁵; before asking 'Does this remind you of anybody?'

There then followed a ceremonial lighting of four candles (No – not fork 'andles!) representing the four cardinal points of the compass - north, south, east and west - and symbolising the quest for knowledge and truth; before the soldiers re-formed into lines and resumed their torch-lit procession to the Town Hall Square, followed by the eager crowd. It was there that they joined with the Winter Watch.

Winter Watch Parade

The Winter Parade had a distinct carnival atmosphere led by Karamba Samba, the 'ghost band', with its drummers all having skeletal faces. They were followed by a wide variety of magical and festive characters: the Lord of Misrule; Angels; Devils; Dragons; Ice Queens; Jack Frost; Kings riding camels; skeletons, and characters with Raven heads. All along the line there were lanterns of every shape and size, including stars and moons. The parade also maintained the medieval tradition of including giant effigies²; these modern incarnations were the Lord of Misrule, Father Christmas, a snowman, winged Ravens, and 12-foot high skeletons wearing top hats held aloft. And finally, bringing up the rear was the Deva Vitrix 20th Legion carrying their torches. They were certainly earning their cups of posca!

The parade started from Chester Town Hall Square, passing through the Christmas Market and past Chester Cathedral on to St Werburgh Street, before turning right into Eastgate Street, where it paused for the benefit of the crowds. It then set forth to Bridge Street, where it turned and returned to Chester Cross before heading back to the Town Hall Square via Northgate Street. When the parade finished the drumming band continued to entertain everyone for some time.

What was great to see was that there so many children and youngsters, not only watching the parade, but also actively participating. This is the way to build new 'old' traditions.

Giants

Chester is only one place where old customs and practices have been rekindled and/ or reinvented, which seems to be something of trend, and such initiatives must be applauded otherwise we would be living in a fairly drab world. Giants are always a very popular attraction, with French puppeteers Royal De Luxe⁶ delivering fantastic events across the globe, and delighting enormous crowds in nearby Liverpool in both 2012 and 2014. The inclusion of several Giants in Chester's modern Winter Watch (and the Midsummer Watch) reflects that they were central to the medieval processions, where the Giants were enormous structures made of buckram and pasteboard, and were carried by two or more men. Giants were common in Tudor pageantry, both in England and Europe. However, Chester was unique because it paraded a whole family of Giants: a Father, a Mother and two Daughters. In addition there were fantastic giant Beasts, which included a Camel, a Dragon, an Elephant, and a Unicorn. Apparently it was the custom for the Dragon to be beaten by six naked

boys, but this practice was banned in the late 16th century! The Giants were accompanied by fools, guildsmen, hobby horses, musicians, and children in costume as angels, goblins and green men².

The inclusion of giant Ravens to the cast of characters only took place in 2002. This was in recognition of the birds that nested in Chester's Town Hall in 1996; the first time these huge birds had nested on a building in England since the 15th century, ensuring their place in ornithological history².

So if you are looking for somewhere to do some Christmas shopping and you fancy some fun with a forteen twist, you can do no better than to check when the next Saturnalia and Winter Watch parades are scheduled for Chester.

1,204 words

References

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