

Tradition of St Thomas Day in England



Widows "Thomasing" in nineteenth-century Yorkshire

December 21st the shortest day of the year and usually commenced the Christmas preparation of cleaning and baking. In England, this was a day of charity, when poor women went a "Thomasing", or begging. Wheat was cooked and distributed for the poor.

Thomasing also went by the names of 'Gooding', 'Mumping' from Mompfen (Saxon to beg), 'Corning' and 'Doleing', 'Washaeling', 'Christmasing' and 'Gathering'. Sometimes the name varied from parish to parish within the same County, for example in Cambridgeshire, Gooding (Haddenham), Gathering (Doddington) or Mumping (Chatteris). In the West Country it was known as 'Mumping Night', in Kent 'Doleing Day'. In Various counties it was referred to as 'going a gooding' to ask for the 'good things' for Christmas.

The earliest reference to Thomasing dates from the 16th century but the tradition may be older. On St Thomas's Day, the Nationwide custom permitted the poor people of a village or parish to go door to door visiting the houses of the better-off and ask for small handouts of food or provisions to help them through the winter months and the elderly collected money, to enable them to enjoy good things to eat at Christmas time. In Worcestershire children begged for apples and sang: *'Wassail, wassail, through the town, If you've got any apples, throw them down; Up with the stocking, and down with the shoe, If you've got no apples, money will do; The jug is white and the ale is brown, This is the best house in the town.'*

What was given varied from place to place, each town and village developed its own custom over the years, but the gifts could vary from foodstuffs, such as a measure of wheat or flour, to household essentials such as coal or candles, bread or ales.

Some gave cash gifts, others in lieu of money, often distributed grain to their less-fortunate neighbors, who turned it into various Christmas cakes, breads, or sweets. Often it became frumenty, a dessert made of boiled wheat, milk, sugar, and cinnamon. Some parishes, not only presented these small gifts, but might also offer Christmas ale or

other forms of seasonal cheer. What was unusual about the custom was that the petitioners did nothing or gave nothing in return for their gift; they simply asked for and were given something to tide them over winter.

In return for their charity, in East Anglia it was custom for the wealthier householders received a sprig of holly or mistletoe, which folk beliefs suggested would bring them good luck.

In some regions of the country, the well-off contributed money to a local charitable fund known as "St. Thomas's Dole." The clergy, churchwardens or overseers of the poor distributed the money to the needy on the Sunday before St. Thomas's Day.

Evidence suggests that the custom of begging door to door on St. Thomas's Day arose in the eighteenth century, peaked in the early nineteenth century, and died out in the early twentieth century.

In England students raced to school early on St. Thomas's Day. If they succeeded in arriving before the teacher, they were allowed to lock him out and so escape their lessons. In some areas students tied their teachers to a chair until their demands were met, which often required teachers to take them to a local tavern.

Records from around England

Hertfordshire 1870's:

"The women that I knew always called at the same houses and were evidently expected, for they told me that they always got a something at each place of call. One gentleman gave a new sixpence each year to every Thomaser at his house. I asked what they said or did when calling at the houses. Said they: *'All we ses is o please we've cum a Thomasing, remember St. Thomas's Day.'*"

Dorset 1870's:

It was called Christmasing, where they would ask:

"Please give me something to keep up Christmas or keeping up o'Christmas'. The food varied in Dorset they: *"Receive substantial pieces or 'hunks or bread and cheese, bread and meat, or small sums of money."*

Some specifically asked for corn and hence the term 'a-corning' was used. More often it was used to make frumenty, with it baked and sugar and currants being added, it was then boiled in milk and egg and flour added.

Devon 1917

In north Devon, on Mumping Begging day the agricultural laborer's wives in remote areas would call at different farmhouses in the neighborhood for a penny.

Worcestershire:

"wives, mothers, and children of all those who worked on the Beckford Estate were expected to call on Mr. King-Ross at Beckford Hall to be given a six-penny piece each which was solemnly produced from a leather bag. The recipients, some 40 in number, then went around the back to be given a steaming hot cup of hot coffee and plenty of bread, spread thickly with lovely farm butter."

Lincolnshire:

In Hemswell Ethel Rudkin remembered:

"The women of Hemswell used to join together and go around 'mumping' to the various houses on St. Thomas's Day-women who were ashamed to beg – but it was not looked on as begging, but as their due. They were given goods in kind." Ethel said that in Willoughton, they were always given potatoes and on the Isle of Axholme tea or bread.

Coningsby in 1914:

"Old women would come mumping and mother would give them homemade cakes, half a cake or a whole one sometimes. They came very early, I was still in bed, before 7 o'clock. They used to sing 'Here we come a mumping.'"

Staffordshire:

"In the days of the Georges, when red cloaks were commonly worn by the beldames of every parish, it was a usual sight to see, in the grey light of a December, groups of figures bent and withered, going from door to door, wrapped in these curious garments and hear them piping 'in a childish treble voice; the following rhyme:

"Well a day, well a day, St Thomas goes too soon away, the yivr goodinf we do pray, For the good time will not stay, St Thomas grey, the longest night and shortest day, please remember St. Thomas's Day."

Warwickshire the rhyme would go:

"A Christmas gambol oft can cheer, The Poor man's heart through the year."

Another Warwickshire chant went:

"Little Cock Robin sat on a wall, We wish you a merry Christmas, and a great snowfall, apples to eat and nuts to crack, we wish you a merry Christmas, with a rap, tap, tap."

Kent:

The 'Doleing Day' had been known since time immemorial as the annual solicitation for Charity on St Thomas Day. At Loose, near **Maidstone** the poor of the parish were given quantities of wheat in proportion to their family size, the **Chalton** family would give the widows of the parish a new flannel petticoat each year and each poor family 6 shillings.

At **Barming**, 100 loaves of bread were distributed annually to the poor of the parish.

Nottinghamshire:

In **Mansfield** they said the following:

"Hip-Hip hurray, Saint Thomas' Day Fetch a bit, and leave a bit, Hip-Hip hurray." In **Worksop**, gifts of money, foodstuffs, oatmeal, potatoes, pieces of bacon, milk, eggs, currants and cheese were commonly given.

Cambridgeshire:

Whilst commonly old women, particularly widows were central to the custom, the men at the time were probably working, a contributor to *Fenland Notes and Queries* said: *"old men and old women and even young women pass from house to house begging for alms."* A common rhyme was:

"Bud well, bear well, God send spare well, A bushel of apples to give on St. Thomas's morning"

The decline

The decline occurred between the 1930s and 1950s. Perhaps this snippet from Sutton (1996) gives an idea of one of the reasons why:

"This old lass went mumping for spuds, the farmer told her to clear off. so, she said 'You might not get a good crop next year'. The funny thing was, he didn't. Not many were as mean as that."

An account in the *Lincolnshire Magazine* from 1932-4 bores:

"Look out of the window facing the road and on the 21st, any time between 7.30 am and 12 noon, you will probably see groups of women apparently eagerly discussing where to call. They will cast dubious looks at some houses, shake their heads at others and finally decide on points of attack, chiefly amongst the old residents. Those residents who favour old customs are usually armed with small change, coppers, or food tickets of small value, such will have as many as seventy or eighty callers." Of course, this indicated the ultimate reason for the decline, as communities became disparate and less cohesive, the very close-knit nature of these villages began to disappear and so the custom began to die out. Sometimes as in Dorset this led to Thomasers going further afield: *"those only refused the dole who did not belong to the parish."*

Charlotte Burne notes in *Shropshire folklore* of 1883: *"It is in fact a custom very likely to be abused and to degenerate into a nuisance; the strongest, who could walk farthest, getting the greater number of doles; several members of a family going to the same house at different times in the day, and thus getting an unfair share."*

Such an action led to the establishment of doles and Burne notes that in: *"1870, the farmers around Clun determined to put a stop to the begging, and instead of giving to all comers, they agreed to send their contributions of corn to the town hall to be distributed under proper supervision to the deserving poor."*

Nottinghamshire had a large number of parishes with doles ranging from 3s to £50 for 10 poorest widows and at **Worksop Priory** in 1884 upwards of two hundred people, mainly widows, received a few shillings each. Some had stipulations, such as Samuel Higgs's Will for the poor of **Farnsfield** and the interest given on the 21st December for equal numbers of men and women who could recite the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments before the vicar. This may have been hard, but if they could do it they would have the money each year for the rest of their lives.

Others provided garments. In **Sturton-Le-Steeple**, it is noted that the work of the charity worked in 1911: *“They received suits ranging from 2s to 10s according to circumstances. The suits of the clothes were arranged who were to have them this Christmas. Finally, it was restricted to have six suits to be given to the deserving of the village. The distribution took place in the school at noon. There was, however, very little mumping around the village this year, this old practice is obsolete.”* In parts of Nottinghamshire those who went mumping were referred to as ‘mummers’ who carried two handled pots to receive their gifts. In **Clifton** the St Thomas Day Dole was called the ‘plumb pudding money’

Diana Gibson left £50 at **Rolleston** in 1882 to invest the interest being paid to 10 of the poorest families on St. Thomas’s Day. The dole was worth £21.74 between 1967 and 1972 and it was noted locally such small amounts could be considered demeaning and divisive in a small community as Rolleston and as such it was wound up by 1996, the £450 being used to provide a village seat, with plaque and fine trees. In **Laxton** there was The Charity of George Brown which specifically paid out to the poor widows of the parish on St Thomas Day.

In the Warwickshire the Rev. John Dobyn left a bequest to ‘aged widows, and parents of large families’ in Beckford and Grafton and they would receive tickets which could be exchanged for food supplies from local tradesmen. At Alfrick, twelve penny loaves were given to each of five poor people under Thomas Markham’s 17th century Will.