

Thornborough & Thornton W.I. Report December 2014

In 1539 Lawrence Washington of Sulgrave and Stuchbury bought from Henry VIII an estate of 3,400 acres including two villages for £324.14.10p. He then built a Manor House for his second wife and 11 children. Quite an entrepreneur was Lawrence Washington according to Martin Sirot-Smith, who in fact dressed up as Washington and addressed us as if he were that man. He spoke with great artistry and conviction, with almost no hesitation or loss of fluency and assailed us with many known and unknown facts about Christmas and its history. The amusing and disconcertingly large codpiece aside, this was a man who knew his history of Yuletide in forensic detail.



Although the actual Washington who died in 1584, would not have been able to remind us that Oliver Cromwell banned almost everything festive about Christmas including mince pies and Banbury cake (a law that has never been rescinded) nor that it was the Victorians who introduced the Christmas tree and presents, his knowledge about Tudor festivities seemed inexhaustible.

Although quite definitely Christian for over 1,000 years, Tudor England still clung to many old pagan traditions, including dragging a Yule log through the village and keeping it burning for 12 days. Or the Ashen faggot: a pile of sticks tied together by nine withers each of which was chosen by a maiden of the village and when the faggot was burned, the order in which the withers burned signified the order in which the maidens would be married off; and of course the mysterious and naughty Lord of Misrule who was a peasant appointed to make practical jokes at the expense of the aristocracy or Lords of the Manor.

We all loved hearing about shred pie (pulled mutton) and fruit – precursor to the mince pie, and the holly and ivy and kissing rings and boy bishops and games like snap dragon (fruit soaked in rum or brandy which had to be snatched from the burning alcohol) and the 3 huge, people-sized pies, part of the enactment of various Mummers plays to signify the end of the 12 days of Yule tide.

Bearing in mind that this meeting happened on December 3rd, with our shops awash already with Christmas fare, it seemed strange to hear of festivities which were more or less confined to 12 days. Some of us would argue that a return to 12 days would be most welcome, though in terms of sheer excess, according to Lawrence Washington at least, the Tudors set the bar pretty high and would have given us a good run for our money. Our W.I. Christmas lunch on 17th January promises to be both sober and orderly, by comparison.

Cath Sayer