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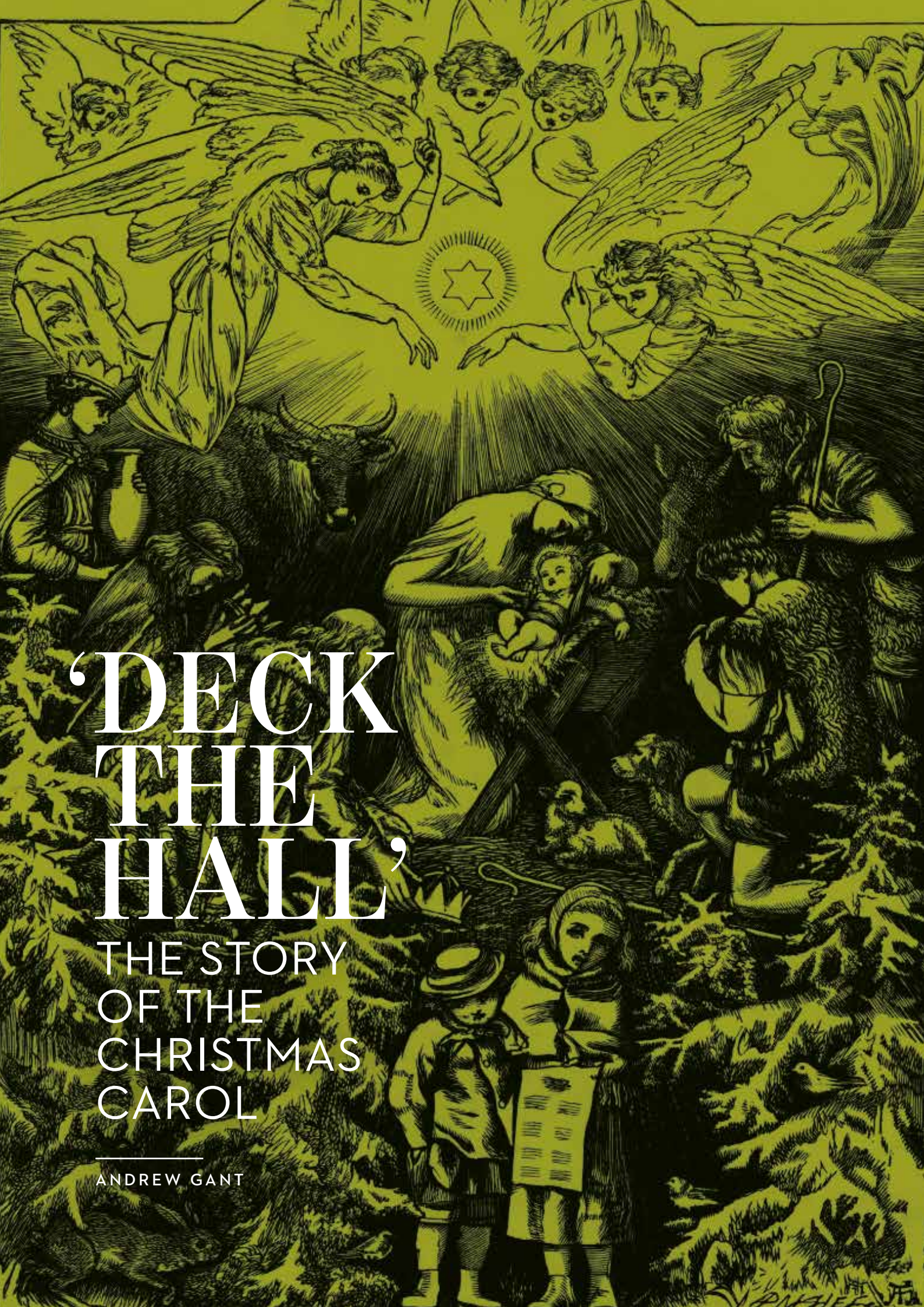
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THE ROYAL SCHOOL
OF CHURCH MUSIC

HEAVEN CANNOT HOLD HIM

SAMPLE PAGES

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‘DECK THE HALL,’

THE STORY
OF THE
CHRISTMAS
CAROL

ANDREW GANT

It's that most wonderful time of the year: time to hear once again the message of shops trying to flog us tinsel and mince pies before Halloween, never mind before Advent; time to retrieve the ever-diminishing stock of unbroken baubles and decorations from the attic; time to tune in to King's on the telly. And, of course, time to sing carols.

Our much-loved English-language Christmas carols have a rich and fascinating history. Many of them are not entirely, or even remotely, English. The words of 'O little town of Bethlehem', 'Away in a manger', 'We three kings' and 'It came upon the midnight clear' were all written in America. 'Good King Wenceslas' has one foot in Finland. 'Ding! dong! merrily on high' owes its familiar tune to a 16th-century French dancing manual.

And not all of them began life with their seasonal associations attached. Some were born to Christmas, some have achieved Christmas and some have had Christmas thrust upon them.

Even the blameless word 'carol' has travelled a long way over the centuries. To our ancestors a carol was simply a celebratory song or dance, with or without words. 'Jingle Bells' can claim its cheerful place in that tradition. Among folk as much as composed music we find carols for Corpus Christi, Easter, mysterious ballads like 'Tomorrow shall be my dancing day', which appear to cover the entire Christian world view from Creation to Last Things, and entirely secular items like the *Carol of Hunting* printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1521. Shakespeare writes of a lover and his lass:

This carol they began that hour, ...
How that life was but a flower

Not much Christmas here! Their minds were certainly not on turkey and wrapping paper, never mind the birth of Jesus Christ.

One of the major challenges, and fascinations, of trying to write a history of something as diffuse and multifaceted as our English carol repertoire is that a folk tradition, by definition, has no history. History happened, then someone wrote it down. Folksongs and poems are just there. They get written down when someone stops to take an interest. And, of course, what they write down is merely the latest, local incarnation of a fluid, oral tradition. John Stainer recorded a version of 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' in London. Cecil Sharp noted down a variant from a singer in Cambridgeshire. The two versions have a different

first note: respectively, the first and fifth degree of the modal scale. The same song, but different: that's how an oral tradition works. Or doesn't.

If there is no single, agreed, correct account of carol history, there are phases.

Undoubtedly the oldest item you will sing this Christmas is 'Of the Father's heart begotten'. This well-known carol, often sung as part of the Advent season of preparation, provides us with an example of a song pieced together at various moments in history according to the tastes and liturgical requirements of the times. The English words are drawn from translations written by a variety of late 19th-century clergymen in the aftermath of the explosion of the popularity of hymn-singing flowing from the High Church Oxford Movement, drawing on part of a poem by the Roman poet Prudentius, dating right back to the fourth century. The tune is an arrangement of a melody found in a 16th-century school songbook from Finland to quite different words. That tune is itself a version of a much older plainsong melody. When we sing this carol, our voices echo throughout all ages.

Many other musical sources provide tunes for our Christmas celebrations, very often to words added in the 19th century. German chorales from the age of Luther give us several familiar examples, including 'A great and mighty wonder', 'In dulci jubilo' and 'Zion hears the watchman calling'. And, of course, chorale melodies were themselves gathered into the church music fold by Luther and his like-minded followers from all over the musical world they inherited: Catholic plainsong, school songs, secular dances and original material of their own.

The 17th century was perhaps not the greatest age for the creation of Christmas carols, partly (though not exclusively) thanks to Oliver Cromwell. But the century did give us Nahum Tate's *Song of the angels at the Nativity of our Blessed Saviour*, better known by its first line, 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night'. Tate cast his metrical account of the familiar story from St Luke's Gospel in the simple, ubiquitous verse form known as common metre, and he and his collaborator Nicholas Brady published it without a tune, so that their words could be sung to any tune in the same metre that the reader happened to know already. As a result, this little lyric has had many musical partners over the centuries, including tunes called *Old Foster*, *Tom's Boy*, *Old Beer*, *Morchard Bishop*, *Sweet Chiming Bells*, *Cambridge New*, *Fern Bank*, *Comfort*, *Hail*, *Chime on* and many others,

Opposite: Frontispiece from *Christmas Carols New and Old* by Henry Ramsden Bramley and John Stainer (1871).



'Good King Wenceslas' began his rather ill-advised tramp across his wintry domains to the tune of a 16th-century song originally about the coming of spring

Left: 'Good King Wenceslas' by Jessie Marion King, published in *The Studio: an Illustrated Magazine of Applied and Fine Arts*, 1919.

(including *Cranbrook*, better known as 'On Ilkla Moor baht 'at').

The next phase built on this simple but hugely influential idea of casting a religious text in a regular metre for singing. Undoubted genius of its early years was the English Nonconformist minister and hymn writer Isaac Watts, who in 1719 set out 'to make the Hebrew Psalmist only speak English ... I never thought the Art of sublime Writing consisted in flying out of Sight: nor am I of the Mind of the Italian, who said, Obscurity begets Greatness', and 'to improve Psalmody or Religious Singing ... that the People may have some Notion of what they sing'. Watts succeeded splendidly: many of his hymns are of course still regularly sung today. His 'Joy to the world!' is claimed to be the most-published Christmas carol in North America. The words are a psalm paraphrase, which

found itself joined to a tune composed (or, more properly, arranged) by the early 19th-century American musician Lowell Mason. Mason was a banker by profession, but devoted his time and energy to music, particularly in churches and schools, in and around Boston. In 1836 he published his *Occasional Psalm and Hymn Tunes*. 'Joy to the world!' is no. 73. Mason calls the tune *Antioch*, for no obvious reason. He also tells us that the music is 'Arranged from Handel'. It isn't. But the attribution stuck and appeared in countless hymn books and carol service sheets thereafter. Something similar happened with 'O come, all ye faithful', which was also ascribed to Handel during the 19th century, with a similar lack of any justification. Handel might have wished he could have been around to pick up the royalties from two extremely popular songs, neither of which he actually wrote.



Above: Bishop Phillips Brooks, (1835-93), who wrote 'O little town of Bethlehem' after a visit to the Holy Land as respite from the horrors of the American Civil War at home.

Perhaps the single most important and lasting phase in this winding history is the mid 19th century. In the high-minded hands of a collection of handsomely whiskered Victorian clergymen, tunes were brought in from research in libraries and songbooks from all traditions and ages, turned into well-behaved four-part Victorian harmony and regular metre (mostly), and paired with new words or new translations of old ones. 'Good King Wenceslas' began his rather ill-advised tramp across his wintry domains cooking dinner for strangers, pageboy reluctantly in tow, to the tune of a 16th-century song originally about the coming of spring. The American bishop Phillips Brooks wrote 'O little town of Bethlehem' after a visit to the Holy Land as respite from the horrors of the Civil War at home. In England, Ralph Vaughan Williams joined it to the tune of a folksong about a delinquent ploughboy (but not in America, where these words are still sung to the tune first composed specially for them by Brooks's own church organist, Lewis Redner: not the only example in our repertoire of a well-known song that has different tunes on either side of the Atlantic). Other trends in the hinterland of Victorian intellectual life played an important part,



Above: Where was 'Jingle Bells' composed? Two competing sites, one in Medford, Massachusetts, in the other, Savannah Georgia, both lay claim.

too. Hymn singing exploded in popularity within the Anglican church from its roots in Methodism and Nonconformist worship, not least with the publication of *Hymns Ancient & Modern* in 1861. And scholars and antiquarians began to take a serious interest in studying and recording folk music, resulting in important carol collections by William Sandys, Davies Gilbert, William Chappell, John Stainer, Henry Ramsden Bramley and many others. Without Sandys we would not have 'I saw three ships' (even if Sandys's musical understanding was not always up to the level of his standard of scholarship: the wonderful hymnologist and carol historian Erik Routley says that Sandys's harmonizations sound like 'Auntie at the parlour piano', and he notated 'I saw three ships' in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, which of course it isn't).

This pioneering work in rescuing folk carols and much else from the funny tricks of time continued into the 20th century, led by collectors such as Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson, Arthur Sullivan, Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Many poets and composers wrote original material in a deliberately archaic and folksy style, perhaps most famously Christina Rossetti's 'In the bleak

70 No. 73. ANTIOCH. C. M. Arranged from Handel. Ch. Ps. Ps. 98, 2d pt.

And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, Far as the curse is found.

1. Joy to the world, the Lord is come: Let earth receive her King; Let ev-ery heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, Far as the curse is found.

2. Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns, Let men their songs employ: While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains Repeat the sounding joy

3. No more let sin and sorrow grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow [Omit and pass to the 2d ending.]

2d ending.

3. No more let sin and sorrow grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow Far as the curse is found.

4. He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove The glories of his righteousness, And wonders of his love.

And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, And heav'n and nature sing, Far as the curse is found.

Above: Lowell Mason's *Occasional Psalm and Hymn Tunes* (1836) included 'Joy to the world!' Mason called the tune *Antioch*, for no obvious reason. He also wrongly attributed the arrangement to Handel.

mid-winter', memorably set to music by both Harold Darke and Holst (see Gordon Giles's *Hymn Meditation* in this issue of CMQ). Some, perhaps, took the faux-medieval habit a bit too far: George Ratcliffe Woodward loved his 'sun-gen' and 'swungen' and his 'hinds o'er the pearly', making some of his more obscure archaisms sound a bit like a cross between Chaucer and Rambling Syd Rumpo.

Our tradition brings in items from all over the world, too: 'I wonder as I wander', collected by folk-singer John Jacob Niles from a little girl in a park in North Carolina in the 1920s (or, at least, most of it was: little Annie Morgan couldn't remember it all, so Niles filled in the gaps with words and phrases he wrote himself). Sabine Baring-Gould brings us *The Angel Gabriel* from the Basque country, Edith Reed *Infant Holy* from Poland.

There are some oddities here, too, including a song about a young man falling out of a sleigh into a snowdrift while trying to impress his girlfriend, and a song claiming that the shepherds were guided to Bethlehem by the light of the star (they weren't – that was the three Magi).

Our Christmas carol story doesn't always go in a straight line. Every song has its own hinterland, its own ideas, its own insight into our shared traditions and culture. Like family, they are all different, and we love them for it.

Happy Christmas.

DECK THE HALL

The Stories of our Favourite Christmas Carols

ANDREW GANT

Andrew Gant's *Deck the Hall: the Stories of our Favourite Christmas Carols* is available to buy now from RSCM Music Direct.