

Christmas at Camelot

Maureen James explores the Medieval country house festivities

SOME people believe that every seven years on Christmas Eve, King Arthur and his knights can be seen riding down from Cadbury Castle to drink from the waters of a nearby spring. Others say that on this night the ghosts of the King Arthur and his men ride along Hunting Causeway from Cadbury Castle to Glastonbury Tor.

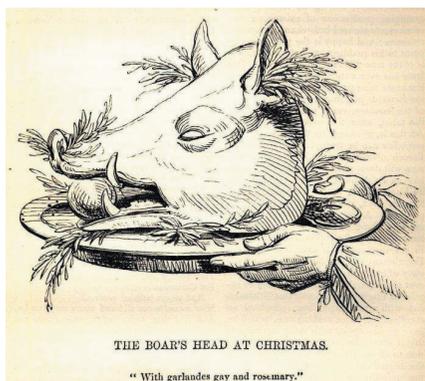
The life, death and even existence of King Arthur has been subject to speculation over centuries. One of the most seasonal of the King Arthur myths is the poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written down in the fourteenth century in a northern dialect, the poem opens at the castle of Camelot at Christmas. While the name Camelot may have been invented in the twelfth century, the poem still provides a wealth of material for examining a late Medieval Christmas.

Christmas appears to have been celebrated, by the king and his court, for 15 days starting at the solstice and ending on Twelfth Night. The monarch, who would customarily travel round the country with his court, staying at the castles of his favoured nobles, would find an appropriate venue for celebrating Christ's mass. He and his companions would spend this midwinter feast playing games, dancing until late at night, and they would also go to chapel for their religious devotions.

After chapel the company would give each other gifts and there may have been a form of pass the parcel played before washing and dressing for the banquet in the Great Hall.

At one end of the hall would be set a raised platform known as the dias on which the high table for the king, queen and the most powerful of the nobles stood. In the poem the dias was described as decorated with fine silk curtains to the sides, a silk canopy above and embroidered and jewelled tapestries from Turkestan hanging behind.

The lesser lords would sit at the long tables



■ The traditional Christmas dessert

below. All the tables would be covered in white cloths. The first course would arrive with a fanfare of trumpets followed by the sound of drums and pipes in a rousing chorus.

A huge number of dishes of fresh meat would be brought in and silver bowls of soup, with twelve plates of food for every couple, alongside copious amounts of good beer and bright wine.

We learn even more about the Yuletide festivities and the following days in the description of the time when Gawain left Camelot and travelled north to search for the Green Chapel.

He arrived on Christmas Eve at the house of the man we are later to realise is the alter-ego of the Green Knight and was shown into a beautifully decorated room. He was asked to sit in a chair in front of the fire and a trestle table was set up in front of him covered in a clean white cloth. A salt cellar, napkin and silver spoons were then given to him and he was served food by many worthy men.

As it was the night before Christmas and a non-meat eating day, Gawain was served double helpings of well seasoned soups, and many types of subtly flavoured fish baked in bread or grilled on the embers, boiled or stewed in spiced gravy.

After the other guests had talked to Gawain it was nearly night time and the chaplains were ringing the bells for evensong. The lord and lady led the way with Gawain following and they sat down for the service. As soon as the service was over they went to sit by the fireside to drink wine and play merry games for the rest of the evening until they retired to bed.

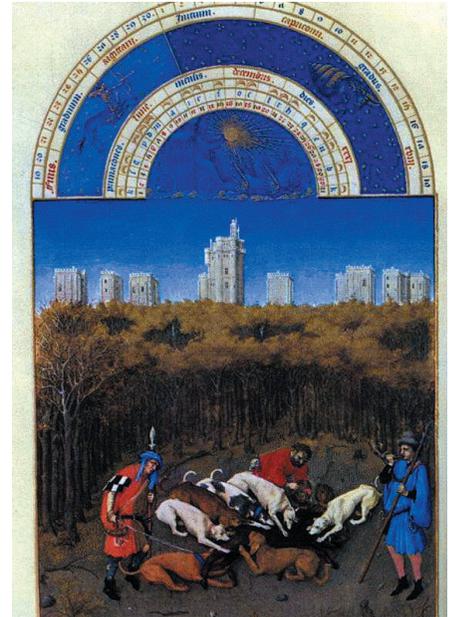
On the next day the real feasting began with a dinner of marvellous dishes and daintiest meats served whilst musicians played. The feasting continued over the next day and into December 27, Saint John the Evangelist's day, which was the final day for many at this particular Christmas gathering.

Despite a few of the guests being due to leave early in the morning there was yet more drinking of wine and dancing and singing until late.

Gawain had been asked to stay a few days longer and the lord had suggested he remain resting in the morning. He would probably have been disturbed by the guests getting up before first daylight, the saddling of horses, the strapping on of bags and the riding off.

The lord and a number of his companions also got up early, went to hear Mass, ate a quick snack and then prepared to go for a day's hunting.

Just as dawn was breaking the huntsmen on



■ The Medieval hunt

their high horses set off with their hounds to the sound of bugle blasts. They were to spend the day chasing does and other deer in wood and heath, using long bows. They did not return to the castle with the venison until the evening but once back, enjoyed fine food and drink until bedtime. The rooster had not roused, cackled and crowed three times before the lord and his men were up for the next days hunting. This time they took the bloodhounds to hunt wild boar.

Their arrows would not sufficiently penetrate the tough boar skin but they did enable the beast to be cornered in a stream, and to finally be killed by the sword. The boars head was then cut off and carried home with the rest of the meat. The lord and his company then enjoyed the usual feasting until late.

The next morning was much the same as before but with the lords hunting the fox in the mountains. Towards the end of the day they finally managed to kill the wily creature, cut off the tawny fox fur and return home for mirth, minstrelry and plenty of meat and drink.

You may well wonder what the ladies got up to whilst the men were off hunting. Gawain, as stated earlier, stayed with them. The poem described how he rose late, had a cooked meal and spent time with the ladies until nightfall. We later learn that he pleased "himself and the ladies at carols (singing), dancing and delightful pleasures".

I don't know about you but all the medieval partying sounds exhausting – give me a quiet family Christmas anytime ■