



# The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

## WILLIAM WINSTANLEY (1628 - 1698)

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William Winstanley was an influential poet and journalist of the 17th century. He was born in Quendon, Essex, in 1628, one of eight children. He lived for most of his life in a large farmhouse called Berries (now demolished) which stood near the parish church.

His father Henry, a London lawyer, moved to Quendon to enjoy the rural life and be near his cousin, James Wilford, who owned Quendon Hall (now Parklands). His mother was Elizabeth Leader, daughter of a rich Saffron Walden merchant. His nephew, Henry Winstanley, was the builder of the first Eddystone lighthouse.

William grew up at Berries in a family who were staunch Royalists and devout Anglicans. They enthusiastically celebrated Christmas and the birth of Christ.

William and his first wife, Martha, lived in a house in Creepmouse Alley off Market Square in Saffron Walden. They had two children, William and Anne. After his mother's death in 1670, William inherited Berries in Quendon and moved there with his second wife, Anne, whom he had married in 1653 after the death of Martha. Anne bore him a second son, Tom.

During the Commonwealth (1649-1660) the Puritans under Oliver Cromwell proclaimed that it was illegal to celebrate Christmas, and even mince pies were banned under Cromwell's regime. Cromwell died in 1658 and the monarchy was restored in 1660. By this time people had become used to not observing Christmas even though they were now free to do so.

There was a real danger that the celebration of Christmas would die out. It was in no small way that William Winstanley helped to restore the type of celebration that we know today. He was a determined man and until his death in 1698 he campaigned to revive the previous level of interest in Christmas.

William was one of the most popular writers in England. He enjoyed the support and friendship of many influential men of his time including the king, Charles II. William's chief patron was Henry Somerset (Lord Herbert and future 1st Duke of Beaufort) and his sponsorship gave William the opportunity to be heard and to influence his contemporaries to revive our Christmas traditions. He lobbied friends in high places and persistently kept up a campaign to bring back the old customs of his youth. These powerful men helped by mounting lavish celebrations themselves and by encouraging their friends to do likewise.

Details of how he celebrated the twelve days of Christmas between 1670 and 1698 at Berries are well documented in his published almanacs, papers and books.

He led by enthusiastic example in his merrymaking, feasting, hosting and giving to the less fortunate. From 1661 he often wrote under the pseudonym Poor Robin and the series of almanacs he published yearly from then onwards proved to be so popular that they were continued by the Stationers' Company until 1827. These almanacs contained jokes, culinary advice, poems and practical information.

William started his preparations for Christmas early by stocking up with provisions for his many guests as well as presents for his family and friends. In his detailed writings we learn that food would include beef, turkey, goose, mince pies, plum pudding and frumenty (a type of sweet porridge). Decorating the home was all part of the festivities. After lunch on Christmas Eve William and his family and friends would take a cart into Quendon Woods and fill it with holly and ivy. His wife Anne would collect herbs such as bay and rosemary from the garden to add to the greenery that would be used to decorate paintings, sideboards and mantelpieces.

There would be much storytelling, dancing and carol singing (including God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen). Many games would be played including hunt the slipper, hide and seek, and hoodman blind. William did not forget his less fortunate neighbours and on Boxing Day with his wife and daughter would distribute clothes, fuel and food to the poor of Quendon.

Throughout the twelve days of Christmas, William would be the most generous and convivial of hosts and can rightly be given the accolade "The Man who saved Christmas". Indeed, that is the title of a book written by Alison Barnes, from which much of this short summary is derived.

Further reading:

*The Ingenious William Winstanley*, Alison Barnes, 1998, Uttlesford District Council.

*William Winstanley, The Man who saved Christmas*, Alison Barnes, 2007, Poppyland Publishing.

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