

Whinstone Times

Community magazine for Embleton and Christon Bank



January – February 2018

50p where sold

Edition No. 53

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Another year over and a new one about to begin.

The editors would like to take this opportunity to thank all our contributors and advertisers for their input over the past year. We have had some very complimentary feedback from readers who continue to enjoy the Whinstone Times. Of particular interest are the Nature Notes compiled by Linda Heslop so thank you Linda and keep up the good work. Linda has also suggested the new nature competition for the under 10's (see page 15) which we hope will have a good response and help to get the youngsters interested in what goes on around them.

If you would like to submit any stories, articles or information to us but prefer not to see your name in print, you could do so under the guise of our "Roving Reporter" and remain anonymous.

Of course we wouldn't have a magazine at all if it weren't for our readers so thank you for your loyalty and may we wish you all a Merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and peaceful 2018.

Please send material for the next edition by Monday 5th February to:
Mary Kibble marykibble@talktalk.net, 01665 576608 (articles, stories etc)
Jan Ainsley jan.ainsley@yahoo.com tel 01665 576019 (advertising)
Shelagh Coxon tel 01665 576791 ('What's on')

Baby Sitting Services

Are you interested in helping out and earning some extra money? If you are a teenager, mum or older person prepared to babysit and earn some money at the same time, would you like to advertise your services, in the Whinstone Times? Let us know and we will advertise for you, free of charge. Don't forget to include your name and a contact phone number or e-mail address.



Community Information

County Councillor's Report

wendy.pattison@northumberland.gov.uk



The following is a brief version of Wendy's reports from October and November

I would like to wish Embleton Parish Council and all residents a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and all the very best for 2018. I do hope that you will all be able to take some time out from your busy lives to enjoy the festivities with your family and friends. I rely very much on your input and feedback to let me know when things in your area are not right and are not working as they should be and I want to ensure during 2018, with your help, that I continue to make improvements throughout Embleton Parish.

9 Parish Councils - The September meeting was extremely successful. A further meeting will take place in March 2018. In attendance will be the Northumberland County Council's Area Manager for Neighbourhood Services, Mr Bob Hodgson.

Sea Lane - The missing bin lid and potholes have been reported and hedges and vegetation requested to be cut back.

Missing litter/dog bin - a replacement bin and fitting of same has been offered by NCC.

Spitalford Cemetery - Embleton Joint Burial Council are considering a resident's suggestion to form a group of those willing to look after the cemetery. A grant for this purpose may be available from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Post 16 Home to School Transport – Wendy is a member of this committee and will report back when a final decision is made.

Constructions and Building sites – Wendy has written a full report on matters pertaining to working hours, noise, dust and burning. Please contact her for the full report. For concerns contact Liz.OBrien@northumberland.gov.uk or Environment Officer rosemary.ayre@northumberland.gov.uk

A1 dualling – The route between Morpeth and Felton will require a new stretch of dual carriageway to the west and the Alnwick to Ellingham route will involve widening the existing road.

Core Strategy Update – Wendy reported in full details of the new Core Strategy. Copies of the report are available on request.

County Hall Renovation – Significant investment is needed to meet the future needs of NCC. Staff will be asked for their suggestions and ideas which will help to create the best possible environment for everyone to work in.

20mph speed limit – This trial is proceeding well in Christon Bank. £2k has been given to NCC for the same scheme in Embleton.

Embleton Quarry – Ownership of this has now been transferred to Embleton Parish Council.

Whinstone View – The frontage at this development has been tidied up.

Small Business Rate Relief – A review of entitlement of businesses claiming relief is to be carried out.

LED Street Lighting – This is now in place and the NCC dimming policy has been built in to all lanterns as follows: 100% power from dusk to midnight, 50% power from midnight to 6 a.m. and 100% power from 6 a.m. to dawn.

Parish Council Notes

November 2017

Work on building the first of the three planters at Christon Bank has commenced at the entry to the village near the Falldon turn.

A new waste bin is being installed opposite the play park.

The Parish Council (PC) voted to make a payment to cover the difference between the cost of the firework display and public donations.

A new cherry tree has been planted on the village green to replace the one that died and new 'no litter' notices provided for the school fence.

An article warning dog walkers of the consequences of not 'picking up' has been published in the Whinstone Times.

Our County Councillor reported that the 20mph traffic management scheme through Christon Bank is progressing well and that the Northumberland Local Plan (Core Strategy) is unlikely to be in place before 2020.

The PC was told that the Neighbourhood Plan committee was making good progress towards presenting a first draft policy document. The feedback from the drop-in event had been analysed and those issues which were inappropriate for the committee to consider been passed on to the appropriate groups. As a result of this the PC discussed those items allocated to them and concluded that almost all were already in hand.

The new method of operation of the medical practice and the removal of the baby clinic from Embleton were considered important and the practice manager was asked to attend the next PC meeting to discuss perceived problems. This will take place in February.

The outline proposals for the development of part of the field to the south of Station Road were considered and certain counter-proposals were agreed. These will be relayed to the developer.

It was noted that, despite considerable opposition from residents, the development of a site of 13 houses near Horsley Place, Christon Bank had been approved.

Continuing problems caused by the Cussins development of Creighton Place were noted. The PC had again complained about the site access onto Station Road being used but to no avail. Work on the sewage system was still not complete although it had been scheduled to be completed in September. Completion dates were continuously being missed.

The quarry in Embleton is now owned by the PC. A committee to manage the site will be formed in early 2018 (see additional article in this issue).

It was noted that Northumberland County Council (NCC) had carried out some work on the bank in front of Whinstone View and agreed to await the arrival of spring to decide if it solved the problems.

The PC approved a grant of £200 to the Creighton Hall towards the cost of a new projector.

There will be no meeting of the Parish Council during December, the next meeting being on Monday 22nd January in the Creighton Hall. All are welcome to attend. A full copy of the PC minutes can be found on the Embleton and PC (northumberlandparishes.uk/embleton) websites.

Embleton Quarry

Embleton quarry is now owned by Embleton Parish Council. Under the terms of a Community Asset Transfer the quarry was given to the PC by Northumberland County Council (NCC) for the 'purpose of open recreational space comprising a nature and wildlife site together with any ancillary uses'. NCC also transferred £25,000 to the PC for the management of the site over the next five years, this to be broadly in line with the management plan written by the Northumberland Wildlife Trust in September 2015. This money was taken from the Creighton Place s106 payment made by Cussins to the County Council.

The specified use of the disused quarry is in line with the wishes of the parishioners expressed in the Parish Plan written some nine years ago and the transfer protects the quarry from further development. Excluded from the transfer is a small site of nearly one acre, containing the derelict quarry house, which is being sold by the County Council for development. The entrance to this site will be from the lay-by through what is now the bottle bank. A new site for this waste facility will be sought in conjunction with NCC.

The PC is currently setting up a committee to manage the facility with its own Terms of Reference etc. but reporting to the Council. It is intended that there will be at least three parishioners on the committee who are not Parish Councillors and also an external 'expert' to advise the

committee on wildlife issues. It is hoped the village school will be closely involved in the improvements planned and that an outside learning area can be developed.

Early in 2018 it is intended to hold an open public meeting to give parishioners a chance to express their views on the way forward and register an interest in joining the new committee.

Embleton & Christon Bank's Neighbourhood Plan - latest news

On Wednesday 29th October 2017, the Neighbourhood Plan project group met to receive and begin to consider a report prepared by its planning consultant, Jenny Ludman, MRTPI.

The so-called Stage 1 Discussion Report took account of the results of the Initial Consultation held on 9th October 2017 at which parish residents contributed thoughts and comments relating to the future development of their neighbourhoods.

The contents of Ms Ludman's report are intended to assist the project group with its task of arriving at a Neighbourhood Plan containing policies that, *inter alia*, provide for appropriate residential development within the Parish in the years ahead. As far as possible, these policies will be acceptable to the authorities and residents alike having been the subject of prescribed governmental scrutiny and a parish referendum.

It should perhaps be mentioned that the project group's meetings are open for members of the public to observe. However, whilst it is not always possible to provide notice of the dates of its meetings, this information may be had from any of its members whose names appear on the Embleton village website.

David Ainsley

Chair Embleton & Christon Bank Neighbourhood Plan Project Group

Embleton's New Electricity Sub-station

On Monday 20th November, final testing of Embleton's new Electricity Sub-station in the Play-park car park was completed. This allowed the subsequent disconnection of the temporary, lorry-mounted, diesel generator which had been supplementing Embleton's power needs for the final days of the months' long project.

Northern Powergrid's engineers explained to *Whinstone Times'* roving reporter that the project, which had also involved upgraded power cables, would contribute to fewer village power outages whilst allowing sufficient power for the substantial new residential development at Creighton Place.

SCHOOL NEWS

Embleton Primary School would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. 2017 was a busy year for Embleton Primary and we have lots of exciting activities planned for the coming year too.

Christmas Time

Lots of you joined us for the Christmas Fair, Christmas Play and Christingle service. The children understand that it is important to fund-raise for other children less fortunate than themselves at Christmas time so the Christingle collection was in aid of The Children's Society and a Christmas Jumper Day was held on 15th December with donations to Save The Children. Many thanks to everyone that contributed.

School Trips

In November Class 2 were invited to the Playhouse to learn all about lighting and shadow effects as part of their Science topic. In contrast, our Nursery and Reception children spent a 'Squirrels' birthday party' themed morning at the Little Acorns Forest School. Despite the cold weather and sleet the children had a great time outdoors.



Sports Clubs

The children are offered a variety of sports at Willowburn each week and we aim to offer additional sports at the after-school clubs too. Following on from the success of the Cramlington Rockets we have the NUFC Foundation hosting an after-school sports club this term and Dance City delivering a dance session in school each week.

UK Parliament Week

13-17th November was UK Parliament Week. Class 2 learned all about the Government, the Houses of Parliament and the debating process. On Friday 17th November Ann Marie Trevelyan also visited Embleton Primary School to meet the children, answer questions and talk to the children about the role of a local MP.



The History of Chocolate

As part of their learning in history and D&T, Class 2 enjoyed learning all about the history of chocolate. As well as teaching children about its origins the children also designed a chocolate bar and wrote letters to a chocolate company selling their ideas, the CEO of the chocolate company (Mrs Borrego) then judged the winning design.

Parents In School

In December, Miss Murray held Stay & Play sessions for the parents of children in Nursery and Reception. These sessions invite parents to spend time with their children in their school learning environment discovering what resources are available to them each day. Our parents are also invited to parent lunches which are always well attended and popular, Mandy our School cook holds six lunches each term and we are planning to continue these in 2018.

CANCER ADVOCACY

Help at Hand

In March 2015 Age UK Northumberland set up an exciting initiative with Macmillan Cancer Support. Taking the form of cancer advocacy support, this is a free and confidential service which anyone living in Northumberland over the age of 50 with a cancer diagnosis can access.



The service matches people with an advocate who will provide a 'second' voice ensuring that any information you require is accessed and that your opinions are heard and your choices supported.

This assistance is there for everyone. Even people who have the aid of families or friends may prefer to talk to an independent person rather than make their views known to their immediate social circle or 'trouble' those around them.

Help can take the form of accompanying a client to a hospital appointment, identifying benefits and allowances they may be entitled to, finding out information about housing options or providing support when dealing with community care services. Where there is a need for information in order to make an informed decision, the help is there.

Our service strives to give a client more control over what is going on and ultimately seeks to improve their quality of life. As Macmillan say "Cancer is the toughest fight most of us will ever face. But no one should go through it alone". In addressing this need our advocacy volunteers and staff empower people and help to make a frequently difficult journey that bit more manageable.

If you are interested in learning more about our project, whether as a service user or potentially as a volunteer, please contact us at macmillan@ageuk-northumberland.org.uk or call 01670 784800.

The above photo is of a service user and volunteer discussing a project.

NATURE NOTES OCTOBER/NOVEMBER

"Seven Swans a - Swimming"

Some of the names mentioned in the Christmas song have been around and about, more than 1 partridge, in fact there were still 10 - although not a lot of "maids a - milking"! At the beginning of October there were 2 swans and 4 cygnets swimming in the Embleton burn by the beach. The first gorse flowers were out bringing a bright splash of colour to the leaden grey skies, what a pretty shrub; it cheers us up right through the



winter and usually into May.

Too late for inclusion last month was the sighting by David and Beryl Morgan, at the end of September (from their eyrie overlooking the bay) on 2 consecutive days, of approximately 1000 gannets flying north, it must have been quite something. On 20th October there were 4 larks hovering and singing in fields to the north of Embleton. Deer are again being seen and there were over 100 lapwings swooping and "peewitting" to the east of the Newton pond. The geese were still heading south and one evening could be seen flying into the setting sun west over the church, oh to have had a camera then. Around the same time dozens of seagulls seemed to be riding the thermals over the village. A large bird of prey, probably a buzzard, is heard consistently over Dunstan Steads woods. Wrens, pied wagtails and pheasants are about, although as the shooting season has now started the sightings of pheasants will become rarer. A photo of what appeared to be the remains of a grey squirrel was sent in by Rita Cavil; she discovered it on the water path at the quarry, it is a bit too gruesome for printing but there are obviously predators about. On the subject of squirrels, red squirrels continue to feed on the nuts at Shirewater Low Mill and sadly there are reports of 2 having been run over on the road near there, maybe we need some red squirrel signs. Reg and Vivienne Kirkby at Dunstan Steads saw a grebe on the Embleton Burn and have had weasels on their wall.

The wildlife haven that is Tom and Judy Turnbull's Shirewater Low Mill, has been playing host to 7 rescued hedgehogs of varying sizes. There is a sanctuary, part of the Hedgehog Trust, at Longframlington and these creatures, after being rescued, are re-homed carefully when they are ready for rehabilitation. They arrive late afternoon/early evening in their own little boxes. Each box contains shredded paper bedding and dried food. They are allowed to settle for a couple of hours and then at dusk the flap at the side of the box is opened. Food and water is put out and the box checked to see if it has been vacated, sometimes it can take a few days but in the case of Shirewater they left straight away. The garden has been made very hedgehog-friendly so it is not surprising; there are leaf and wood piles and all manner of shelters set up for them to hide and hibernate in. This year there were some babies born, although according to Judy it was one of the original Shirewater hedgehogs that had given birth. If you do want to feed a hedgehog put out shallow dishes of water and dog/cat food but NOT containing fish.

What an incredible time it has been recently for activity both in the sky and on the ponds. We are so lucky to have 2 wildlife havens in the Embleton parish, the quarry which has just been made over to the Parish Council and awaits decisions about the future. Hopefully this will include encouraging wildlife and birds. The other is of course the Newton reserve, the parish boundary is Risemoor House just to the south of Newton beside the pond. On 6th November an amazing sight greeted the observer on approaching the pond, squadrons of Whooper swans were arriving from the east over the sea, some were 7 strong and some at least 12. In all 60 landed on the pond, what a lot of splashing as they skidded to a halt trying to avoid other birds - assorted geese, mallards and moorhens. There have been so many reports from people who have seen them either grazing in the fields or flying overhead. One lady was thrilled when 5 flew low over her garden really early in the morning to the south of the village; it really is an evocative sight. One of the reasons that can be attributed to the large numbers of big birds arriving is the fact that the National Trust have been clearing the areas around the pond, new reeds are being planted and trees cut back, hedge laying too is part of the job, the native ponies which are in fact that hardy breed, the Exmoor, seem to take a delight in helping with



that particular task. The ponies are used to help manage the vegetation, keeping it low. They are "tenanted" from a local owner and 2 can also be seen on the dunes near Seahouses. The effect of all this work is that there is now a much clearer flight path for the birds to approach and depart from the pond making it more attractive to them. The rangers/wardens are helped by

volunteers every Wednesday, if anyone would like to volunteer; the jobs include repairing paths, setting up the tern site in the spring and pond clearance. The number to contact the rangers is 01665 576874

Finally just a reminder, please, to keep feeding the birds and remember to put out water for them, keeping it ice-free when necessary.

ps. The first little pointed green daffodil shoots are starting push though the earth.

Please can you send any observations, items of interest and reports to: naturenotes.whinstonetimes@gmail.com.

CALLING ALL WALKERS

If you would like to get some fresh air and exercise but would like a companion on your walk - how about taking someone's dog out with you? There are many people who are unable to walk far themselves and cannot fully satisfy their pet's needs and you would be doing them and yourself a favour.

If you are interested, why not send us your name and a contact number or e-mail address so that interested dog owners can reply?

NATURE NOTES COMPETITION FOR THE UNDER 10'S



This is a photo of a partially hidden bird can you guess what kind of bird it is?

Clue: Often seen around the villages and in the fields at all times of year and you might see him (or her!) on your bird table.

Closing date is January 19th 2018 and the winner will be announced in the next edition of the Whinstone Times.

Prize: The prize for the lucky winner will be two pocket books, one on birds and the other on the seashore but the best bit of all is a visit to see the National Trust coastal ranger at Newton by the Sea who will take you to the nature reserve and tell you all about the birds and animals that live there. The prize will be awarded to the first correct answer to be drawn from the hat.

Entries please to: naturenotes.whinstonetimes@gmail.com. **Don't forget to include your name and a contact phone number or e-mail address with your entry.**

CLUBS AND GROUPS

Embleton W.I.

Embleton WI would welcome new members to come along and join us for a meeting at any time to see if they would like to join our merry band of ladies who meet sometimes in Creighton Hall and sometimes in the Parish Room - depending on the type of meeting. We meet on the second Tuesday of each month.

For 2018 we have a varied programme ranging from wood turning to Ingrid Kilner's talk entitled 'Behind the Veil'. We have Nick Lewis talking about the restoration of Lindisfarne Castle and Professor Alan Craft with his talk 'Medicine Through the Cat Flap'. You will be made most welcome.

If you would like more information please telephone Joan Little (President) on 576788 or Judith Hazelhurst 571036 or Jean Lawrence 576356 (Joint Secretaries).

Embleton Carpet Bowls

John F Wallis

Since the last report we have played 7 matches, all of which we have lost and I have been requested by many of the embarrassed members not to reveal the score lines but what I will state is the winning scores would have won cricket matches. If this was a school report it would have stated "must do better"

However we have been able to welcome Peter Harris to the club with the hope that his efforts will improve our future results.

All club members would like to wish the readers of the Whinstone Times a very Happy Christmastime along with a Happy, Healthy 2018.

Embleton Girl Guides

The RAF Boulmer Fire Safety Visit

Katie Green

Embleton Girl Guides went to RAF Boulmer's Fire Section for Training for our badge and had a wonderful and very interesting talk about the different things to do about Fire Safety, such as learning about the Fire Triangle and what fire extinguishers to use for different types of Fire. We learnt how to prevent fire and the importance of smoke alarms at home! We also learned about electrical fires and

overloading plug sockets and using gadgets with faulty cables.

Matt and the crew from the Fire section lit controlled fires and we had the chance to use the fire extinguishers to put out the fires under their supervision. It was very exciting and we all had a brilliant time! Before we left we had a very exciting ride in the Fire Engine with the blue lights



and sirens going, we were taken around the RAF base, it was great fun for everyone!

We left feeling so much more confident about the ways Fire starts, how to prevent fires and what to do in an emergency! Basically call 999!

WHAT'S ON

January 2018

Tuesday 2nd Women's Club - "An Introduction to Archaeology" with Richard Higginbottom. 2.00 p.m. Parish Church Room.

Tuesday 2nd National Theatre Company Pantomime 'The Princess and the Goblin'. Memorial Hall, Craster 3.00 p.m. Adults £8, Children £4, (Family - 2 adults + 2 children) £20. Tickets and all info from Rosemary Gibbs, 01665 576226, or 721026.

Tuesday 9th Embleton W.I. - 'Medicine through the cat flap' Sir Alan Craft. 2.00 p.m. Parish Room.

Wednesday 10th Mothers' Union.

Thursday 11th Craster W.I. Natural Knitter Wool Shop by Caz Pring. 7.15 p.m. Memorial Hall.

Saturday 13th Embleton School Prize Bingo 7.30p.m. Creighton Hall. Please leave any donations at Embleton School.

Sunday 14th Film Night at Howick. For all details please contact John Roper contact John Roper on 576413.

Monday 15th Craster Hist. Soc. 'History of St Ayles skiffs, as built & used by Craster Rowing Club' by Michael Doherty. 7.00 p.m. Memorial Hall.

Tuesday 16th Crafts with Company starts in Craster Memorial Hall 10-noon. Please bring any crafts you are working on, or just call in for a cuppa! Full details from Jan Applegarth 07711 166171.

Thursday 18th Whist Drive & afternoon tea at Creighton Hall 1.30p.m. Tickets £5. Donations and Tickets please contact Linda Dixon 576437.

Wednesday 24th North Sunderland Hist. Soc. - George Scott "The Mystery of Mr Nightingale". 7.00 p.m. St. Paul's Church Hall.

Friday 26th Embleton Reading Group 10 a.m. details from Pat Postlethwaite - 577516.

Saturday 27th Flower Club Coffee Morning Creighton Hall 10.30 - noon in the Parish Room. £2 entry includes coffee & scones.

February 2018

Thursday 1st Craster W.I - Annual Dinner.

Tuesday 6th Embleton Women's Club - Susanne Fulton and her working dog Esther - talk on 'Canine Partners'. 2.00 pm. Parish Room. All welcome.

Sunday 11th Film night at Howick Village Hall. For all details please contact John Roper on 576413.

Monday 12th Embleton Flower Club - AGM. DVD & pooled supper. 7.00 p.m. Creighton Hall.

Tuesday 13th Mothers' Union - Shrove Tuesday Pancake Day in the Parish Room.

Tuesday 13th Embleton W.I - speaker Nick Lewis Holy Island Castle. 2.00 p.m. Parish Room.

Saturday 17th Burns Supper & Ceilidh. Come & join us for a family fun night at Craster Memorial Hall 7.30 p.m including a piping in of the Haggis. Adults £7.50, Children £5.00 tickets from Rosemary Gibbs 01665 576226.

Monday 19th Craster Hist. Soc. - 'John Wesley's Newcastle' by Reg Hall. 7.15 p.m. Memorial Hall.

Thursday 22nd Embleton Reading Group - 10.00 a.m. Parish Room.

Wednesday 28th North Sunderland Hist. Soc. - Linda Bankier "The Ford Estate at the time of the Waterfords." 7.00 p.m. St. Pau's Church Hall.

For your Diary:

Future film dates at Howick Village Hall

Friday 2nd March

Sunday 25th March

Friday 20th April

Sunday 13th May

Friday 1st June

Sunday 1st July

Friday 20th July

For all details please contact John Roper on 576413.

Whinstone Times advertising rates

Small box £15, long box £30, large box £40, full page £80

Discounts:-5% for three editions, 10% for six or more

CHRISTMAS STORY

THE SIGNALMAN'S CHRISTMAS

James Rose

A long time ago, when trains were pulled by giant steaming monsters that roared along the permanent way, grumbled up inclines, hissed into stations and shed a fiery glow onto the tracks, when signals and points were moved by giant levers in glass-sided boxes elevated above the tracks, it was signalmen who opened the long, white gates of the level crossing and swung them back once the ground-shaking thunderer had passed.

In such a signal box, next to a level crossing in the middle of the countryside, worked a solitary signalman. From his high vantage point he could see far up the main line towards London and as far again in the other direction towards Edinburgh. He could also see cars winding along the road towards the crossing and at night their headlights scanned the night sky like the beams of a lighthouse.

Over the years, the music of his life had been the crescendo of noise from the approaching trains, the warning blasts from the whistle that shrieked higher and higher, dropping suddenly as the engine powered past, the vibrations that reverberated through the old floorboards, and the derwoosh derwoosh of the carriages.

When a train entered his section, bells rang in his box and he had to pull signal levers, check points and, when he saw that there were no vehicles crossing the lines, close the gates to traffic by winding the wheel that swung the gates. Behind the fast receding train, he would change the signals to red and open the gates for the small queues of cars that built up.

It was a job he loved and it suited him well, for he was by nature a solitary soul, more so since his wife died and his son emigrated and, as he would point out to the few people he spoke to, not only did it have awe-inspiring machines and lots of levers but bells and whistles too. The goods trains, express passenger trains, cars, buses and lorries made his life in the box seem a social whirl compared to the solitude of his cottage a short bike ride away.

As he had no family he always volunteered to work on Christmas Eve and, although the early evening was full of trains rushing passengers back to their families, soon the drivers, firemen and guards went home too and

there were no more trains. All the signals were set at red and he kept the gates permanently open in favour of the few cars that slowed to bounce over the sleepers, before they too accelerated away into the darkness. In the stillness sometimes he caught himself listening for choirs of angels and scanning the sky for Father Christmas.

One Christmas Eve after the last train of the night had blasted through, seeing no car headlights, the signalman did not immediately open the crossing gates. He needed to stoke the fire, check that all the signals and points were set correctly, fill in his log book, and put the kettle on the hob for his tea. He was in no hurry. Afterwards there would be nothing to do, other than attend to any emergency bells and watch out for cars. Stars scintillated brightly in the cloudless sky, the earth's heat seeped into space, frost sparkled in the fields and ice formed where water had gathered.

As he sat sipping his tea, he saw the distant lights of a car. He got up to wind the wheel that opened the gates but it would not move. Something was stuck. Something had frozen.

He tried several times but the gates would not open. The man from Track Maintenance on the other end of the phone said,

'Sorry, guv! They've all gone home. It is Christmas, you know.'

'And a Merry Christmas to you too!' the signalman said, knowing that his colleague next morning would be the only person to wish him Merry Christmas.

Meanwhile a van had arrived on one side of the gates and a couple of cars on the other. As he struggled with the mechanism, the cars tooted politely and then the van more insistently. The signalman descended the outside steps from his box to explain, first to the cars then to the van.

'If you can't fix them soon, we'll be late for the carol service,' said the man driving the first car. 'And those folk in the car behind are members of the choir.'

The signalman had some difficulty in getting the driver of the van to hear him above the chorus of 'Why are we waiting?' coming from the back. 'Plumbers,' said the man. 'Works outing. They're already late home and well past caring. They're glad of any excuse to stay out.'

Like a mediator, the signalman shuttled to and fro across the railway lines, eventually persuading the pleasantly inebriated plumbers to locate a

blow torch in their van to unfreeze the hinge mechanism and the churchgoers out of their warm cars to help push the gates open. By which time it was past midnight and they were all very cold.

'Come up to the box and warm yourselves. Strictly against regulations, of course, but it is Christmas. I've a fire and some tea.'

'Well, we're too late for the service now,' said one of the churchgoers.

'I'll get the Scotch from the van,' said a plumber.

It was a squeeze in the box but the smell of grease and the warmth from the fire were cheering. As tea was passed round in chipped china and Scotch in old enamelled tin mugs, they looked about, not having seen each others' faces in the light until then.

'So that's what you look like, Signalman. I've often wondered,' said a plumber.

'You fixed my U-bend and my copper joints,' said a churchgoer to a plumber. 'It was you, wasn't it?'

The plumber sucked his teeth and said, 'Wouldn't catch me doing that again, mate. Tricky job,' then smiled.

A member of the choir said, 'As we've missed the carols in church, we could have them here. *God rest ye merry, gentlemen, anyone?*'

And they rested merry far into the early hours of Christmas morning, singing carols, keeping the signalman company and wishing him a Merry Christmas before they left.

Since that time, on Christmas Eve, drivers of vehicles passing over the level crossing have peeped their horns and sung carols out of their car window to thank the signalman and wish him a Merry Christmas. And as far as he was able, he did.

100 Club Winners

November £40 Margaret Davison No. 110

£20 Frances Cook No. 53

December £40 Orlando Bridgeman No. 49

£20 Anne Chisholm No. 43

The £100 draw will take place at the Bingo in the Creighton Hall on Saturday 16th December.



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