

December 2015 - Islip and Mince Pies



With rain in the air and darkness thickening in the wind-chid corners of the Rose and Crown's carpark, there was an easy choice to be made as Finbarr spoke.

Inside the pub there was a roaring fire, laughter, and even rock music playing on its jukebox; whilst outside, here we were listening to Finbarr describing the perils we would most definitely encounter if we were to follow him on a three and a half mile walk through the rain.

With one accord, we all followed Finbarr on what was to become the Shamblers first ever night-time walk.

Some of us had dimming torches, which cast a shrinking, dirty-orange circle of light, whilst others' torches were star-bright, blindingly so, as we left Islip village and set off down Mill Lane.



With our motley collection of torches (one even made a whirring sound) we illuminated the rough edges of water-filled potholes, whilst listening to the shouted calls from those just ahead, warning of places where puddles splayed beyond their natural hollows.



In such darkness, the bright colours of our jackets became almost indistinguishable; and hooded as we were against the rain, it became almost impossible to know who was now walking by your side.



Muffled by our hoods, woolly hats and scarves and the crackling sound our jackets made whenever we turned our heads, it was difficult even to recognise a once familiar voice, let alone hear any spoken words.

As the path narrowed, we became silent, concentrating on our every step; not realising how close we were to deep water until unfrapped halyards clinked against the invisible masts of boats. Surprising us even more than had fir trees hopped along from Birnam Wood to Dunsinane bedecked with decorations and Christmas lights.

We crossed a footbridge, where beneath us the river's silky-steel, slippery fingers were unable to hold firmly onto darkness, instead mirroring a faint green inner light. These waters quite unlike the

darker bushes and briars bordering our path like caped, hunched highwaymen, which poked our arms with their pistol-thick twigs making us stand and deliver. Unhooking caught scarves and gloves from such thorny fingers, we escaped this danger, only to face another.

“This handrail’s loose,” warned Finbarr.

We weighed the danger, but with one accord, we all followed Finbarr.

Boots that had squelched through mud, made a delightful scuffling sound as we stepped onto the dusty, planked floor of the bird hide, a place which smelt like a freshly opened matchbox. With its peephole windows shuttered tight, we were in almost total darkness, save for our torches, or the camera’s sudden flash of light.



To our great delight, Finbarr passed around some nightlight-sized electronic candles to be set aglow on the shelf behind.

Suddenly, from out of a corner a bat disturbed by our chatter flew briefly around our heads, barely visible in the thin cobweb of light, before it escaped.

Then for quite a while there was a great deal of unwrapping of things: cellophane crackled, plastic lids thrummed, and to our great excitement, tin lids were opened with a soft woof of sound.

Inside were homemade mince pies dusted with icing-sugar!



Into our hands, Finbarr pressed mulled wine, a drink so hot it could only be held by using a double thickness of plastic cups, but wine which tasted so delicious and warming after our trudge through mud, darkness and rain.

Then we shared our other booty: cheese, sausage rolls, biscuits and chocolates. The scents and flavours of this food we could barely see, made all the more special because of all the trouble people had gone to, especially Finbarr, in preparing it and carrying it all the way there.





Photos taken, all too soon, we were packing up, leaving nothing behind us, other than a delicious spicy, cinnamon scent.

Outside, we passed through a kissing gate merrily. Then someone slipped on mud, but got up with laughter quite unscathed, whilst the rest of us rejoiced whenever grass knitted the ground more firmly beneath our feet.

In some places, drooping leaves of weeping willow trees brushed our hoods and woolly hats with a saintly benediction; whilst just beyond these, and above the dull-brass eye of a lake, we could glimpse Islip's church on a low hill: its spire a beacon glowing orange against a windswept sky.

We Shamblers little knew that this church was dedicated to St Nicholas, a rather secretive saint with a penchant for dropping coins into people boots and shoes whenever he thought their owners weren't looking. Turns out they were; and thus in the fourth century the first secret Santa was rumbled, leading to all sorts of ramifications for today.

Yet had it not been for this saint's furtive actions, and the generosity he inspired in others, perhaps fifteen or so Shamblers would not have walked into the darkness to enjoy mulled wine and mince pies in a bird hide; perhaps they would have stayed at home instead, thinking the word 'Amazon' only referred only to a river in some far-flung continent as an answer to some dull television quiz.



Safely back at the Rose and Crown, with one accord we all followed Finbarr inside.



For right at the very beginning, when we had been faced with a choice, our obvious decision had been to do both!

In the warmth of the pub, we discovered friendly service, biscuits, teas, coffee and even more mulled wine!

Upon leaving, it was touching to see a pair of old boots left by the door. They didn't belong to any of us Shamblers, perhaps they had been left there in keeping with some old tradition, hoping for a dropped coin or two.

With heartfelt Christmassy thanks to Finbarr, for going to so much trouble to organise such an intrepid walk on our behalf, and for also rounding off the Shamblers' walks for the year in such a fine style!

Also many thanks to all who contributed food and good companionship along the way; and also to Terry for his good humour as our backmarker.

Happy Christmas one and all!