

Wonderful Woodland Wassail

“Was hael, was hael!” This ancient cry rang out around Duchess Wood last Saturday afternoon during Helensburgh’s inaugural Wassail. Over 200 people gathered at the orchard to wake up the fruit trees and drive away evil spirits by banging pans, shaking tambourines and ringing bells - all in the hope of encouraging a plentiful harvest of apples and pears this autumn.

Nicky Brownrigg, a Friends of Duchess Wood trustee who had organised the event said, “We were delighted with the turnout and how enthusiastically everyone joined in. It was really heartwarming to see the joy on people’s faces.”

Nicky and Richard Horrell, another trustee, acted as Queen and King of the Wassail and led the ceremony. Nicky said, “When I asked the crowd who’d been to a wassail before, only one person had (my husband!), so we explained about wassailing and invited the audience to participate when it was time to make a noise, wish each other “was hael” (good health) and hang toast and lanterns on the trees.”

Tartan Harmony choir - complete with ivy crowns - entertained the crowd by singing seven jolly Wassailing songs in a mixture of traditional and more contemporary styles.

During the interval revellers blessed the trees in the traditional wassailing way by hanging toast on the fruit trees’ branches - literally toasting the trees! Friends of Duchess Wood added their own take on wassailing by offering the audience coloured lanterns with tea-lights to hang on the trees, so as the sun set, the orchard began to glow in red, purple, green and orange. Nicky said, “The orchard looked enchanting and it was lovely to see folk of all ages - from toddlers to octogenarians - hanging lanterns on the trees.”

The event drew to a close by the Wassail King thanking Tartan Harmony for their wonderful a cappella singing, Lomond School for opening their car park, Helensburgh Theatre Group for their generous loan of the costumes, Barclay Smith House for toasting the bread and volunteers for their help. The audience banged their pans loudly when the Wassail Queen asked if they’d enjoyed themselves and if they’d like to wassail again next year. The wassail ended with the King thanking the audience for coming and for their donations to Friends of Duchess Wood.

David Lewin, Chair of Friends of Duchess Wood said, “It was great to see this ancient tradition come alive in Duchess Wood and so many people having a thoroughly enjoyable time. It is thought this is the first ever Wassail in the area and it will hopefully be the start of a tradition of such events.”