

Such Stuff podcast
Episode 7: Christmas at the Globe

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello. I'm Imogen Greenberg and welcome to a very special festive episode of Such Stuff.

We've loved bringing you stories from the Globe this year, and we'll be back in 2019 with more provocations, conversations, performances and ideas from behind the scenes here at the Globe.

But for now... we thought we'd get into the festive spirit...

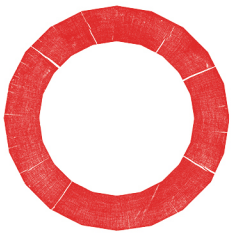
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IG: So, our very own Dr Will Tosh will be taking us back in time to the frosty winter of 1608.

And as midwinter's eve approaches, we've been retreating into the warm glow of candlelight. Our indoor theatre, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, is lit solely by candlelight for shows. Our candle technician Cleo takes us behind the scenes on how we get through anywhere from 100 to 300 candles per day.

And we've been digging around the archives to find you a festive poem from Jacobean England.

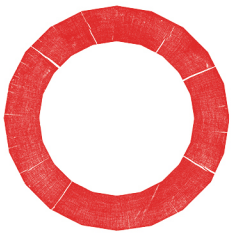
First up... I sat down with Dr Will Tosh, research fellow and lecturer here at Shakespeare's Globe, to ask him what London and Southwark would have been like in the icy winters of the late 16th and early 17th century.



Will Tosh: So if we go back in time to 1607, the winter of 1607/08, an unusual thing happens in London because the Thames freezes solid. Now the Thames has frozen before. Winters were colder, all of Europe was undergoing throughout this period what we now call the Little Ice Age, so it was a much colder period in general. And because the river was rather wider and shallower than it is now, and the piers of London Bridge stopped the flow of, or prevented the water flowing as quickly, the Thames was prone to freezing over. And in 1607, the winter of 1607/08, it freezes really, really solid, it freezes hard and merchants and entertainers and just Londoners in general take to the ice and set up a kind of, set up a market place, set up a fair on the frozen river.

[Music plays]

WT: In the past when the Thames had frozen, people had taken sleds on to Thames, the Queen took her sled onto the frozen Thames in the 1560s, people would cross it on foot, but it hadn't frozen as hard as it did in that winter of 1607/08, and this is the start of something that continues for the next 150 years, almost 200 years, of periodic heavy freezes when the Thames freezes solid and frost fairs get set up on the frozen river. So you could buy food and drinks, enterprising stall holders would kindle fires on the ice and roast whole sides of pork, kind of like a frost fair barbecue, you'd buy hot drinks, mulled drinks. Later on, in the later part of the 17th century, when frost fairs had become even more substantial, there's one occasion in the 1680s when a printing house sets up its operations on the ice and you can buy souvenir printed cards that say printed on the river Thames in the year 1683, I think. You can see over the course of the century, people becoming much more kind of commercially minded about what you can do when the frost fairs get set up, when the ice, the cold grips London. So as far as we can work out, people are pouring onto the river from both banks, from both North and South. Borough, Southwark is a kind of teeming,

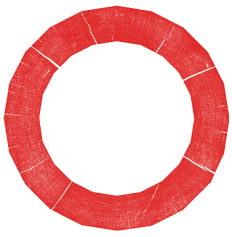


thriving area, it's very busy with lots of different sorts of trades, leather workers, tanners, brewers, theatre obviously, entertainment.

WT: One thing that does happen when the river freezes solid, is the people who make their lives from the river, so people who are boatmen or who are effectively kind of taxi drivers, the people who are piloting the little boats, the wherries from one bank to the other, suddenly are out of business because of course you can't pilot a boat across a frozen river. And you get the watermen as they're called trying to stop Londoners walking down the water stairs to the river unless they pay them money. In the normal course of events, you wouldn't be able to cross the river without paying the watermen a fair or without crossing by London Bridge. So they regard the frozen river still as their terrain and if you want to walk on it, you have to hand over a couple of pennies to the watermen guarding those water stairs. They're not very successful in this.

[Music plays]

WT: So the 1607/08 frost fair is the first one on record and its the first time in sort of early modern living memory that the river had frozen hard enough and long enough to enable a fair like that to be set up. There is a story that in 1599, winter 1599, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which is Shakespeare's theatre company, having dismantled, kind of demolished their old Playhouse in Shoreditch called The Theatre, they dragged the timbers of their Playhouse over the frozen river to Bankside where they then built The Globe. Now that is a great story and its kind of full of romance and sort of nostalgia. As far as we know the river did freeze a little bit in 1599 but you'd have been very foolish to try walking over it, it didn't freeze as heavily as it did later on. So it's very unlikely anyone ventured out onto the ice in 1599, especially carrying very heavy timbers. As far as we know, they did indeed take apart The Theatre and use the materials from



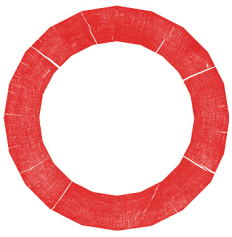
that structure to build The Globe, but they almost certainly overwintered those timbers in a warehouse somewhere, and then built The Globe. Which isn't such a good story, but it's probably what happened.

WT: So Christmas was certainly a festival and a festivity. It was obviously celebrated as Christ's birth, the saviour's birth. A lot of the conventions and habits and traditions that we have today are kind of more recent date, they're, a lot of them are 19th century and Victorian innovations. But Christmas is definitely a time of feasting and festivity. So it is a time of gift giving, actually, though for the early moderns, the real gift giving day is New Year's Day, January 1st. That's a day when a little bit like today, when we all get incredibly worried about who we're going to give what to and whether we're going to choose the right present, and what our boss will say if we give them the wrong kind of thing. Those are the anxieties people have about New Year's Day gifts, especially at court. So the court of Queen Elizabeth and then later King James, that's absolutely part of the tradition and you've got to make sure you give the right kind of gift to your aristocratic patron or to the monarch or to the member of the monarch's family that you're connected to. So it's a time full of gift giving anxiety.

[Music plays]

IG: Next up, I snuck backstage in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse with Cleo, our wonderful candle technician – yes, that is her official job title – to ask about all things candlelight.

Cleo Maynard: Hi I'm Cleo, and I am the Globe's candle technician, er full time candle technician, I do have other people that come in and work with me but I'm here all the time, squirrelled away in the SWP...



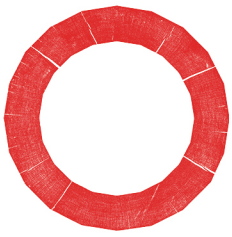
IG: Lighting candles?

CM: Lighting candles, yeah.

IG: So today we're doing candle prep?

CM: Yes, today we're doing a bit of candle prep for our shows Macbeth and Faustus which are currently running in the SWP 'til February. Come and see them, they're awesome, if I say so myself. And basically we get the majority of our 100% beeswax candles from a guy called Ted who lives in the middle of nowhere in Cumbria with his team and they hand dip all our wax, beeswax candles. And so when we get them, we get them in little pairs and they look like, kind of like a Christmas tree decoration actually, and they're two candles attached by one piece of string. And so what we do is we then have to snip the candles, and then light the candles and pre-burn them so they're easier to light, quicker to light on stage. We often do two shows a day with a small turnaround in between the two and we have to completely restock all the candles for every show and so that's often, it can be anywhere from 100 to 300 candles depending on the show. So obviously we want to make our lives as easy as possible so we try and pre-burn as much as we can. It's very time consuming but what we've found out is most things with candles, you kind of have to go at candle time, candle speed, which is like very relaxed and laid back until suddenly it isn't and then it has to move very fast.

I think when the theatre first opened, they put a lot of time and effort in to working out what type of candle we should use in here. And originally it would have been tallow which is animal fat. So we burnt some tallow, but apparently what happened was basically it's just a nightmare 'cos it's animal fat so it's greasy to the touch, it smokes, it's really abrasive on the voice which is of course perfect for a theatre full of actors and basically nobody could see anything so very quickly...

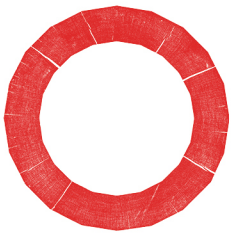


IG: Oh really, 'cos it smokes?

CM: Yeah 'cos it smokes, so you're just in a haze all the time. And it smells awful, you know well like a tannery basically. So not something that a modern audience would take to very easily. So after that they started looking at all kinds of different materials and then they chose beeswax because... well for many reasons. There's, I guess, it smells amazing when the candles are lit, it smells really nice, and that probably helped but also the actual light that you get from them... so all the candles give off different types of light, and the beeswax gives off this amazing warm glow and everybody looks really great under it, so that was probably, definitely part of it. And then also they don't drip a huge amount of wax, they don't drip from the chandeliers as much as paraffin does and it lasted roughly the right amount of time. One candle... well, one candle in a vacuum without any air on it lasts, can last between four and five hours burning. But obviously it's hard to control air flow like that, so we actually find in the SWP depending on where our chandeliers are, they all burn at different times, depending on how many people are in the auditorium, they burn for different amount of times depending on the weather outside, that affects the weather inside, and that's also a huge change. So basically in Autumn and Spring, when there's huge shifts in weather, we have a real issue with working out how long a candle's gonna last. So it's a really hard thing to keep constant so we've kind of given up trying basically and you just have to kind of go with it.

IG: So if in doubt, I guess you have to change the candle because it won't last a show.

CM: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. So we have intervals structured in the SWP and we have to structure those into the show, and an interval has to come, or the end of the show has to come at basically two hours maximum. So an hour and a half we say is like peak time before we start losing candles. So that's what we'll



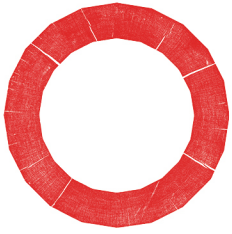
do during shows, once the interval happens we'll come in, assess what the candles are doing, change over the ones that need changing and then do a normal interval change like for any theatre show. So our audiences get to see us tending the candles in the interval and we get asked questions all the time, and people approach us, people seem to be quite surprised they're real candles.

IG: Really? People think they're fake?

CM: Yeah. I was once asked like 'Do the fire department know you're doing this?' to which I answered 'No, don't tell them' to look of slight confusion on the person's face. But yeah all kinds of wonderful questions that we get asked by audience members who are just... people aren't used to seeing anything just by candlelight, but also they're not used to being surrounded by that much fire basically. We find it quite interesting when we talk to creative teams about how to stage a show by candlelight, we often say weirdly the audience will get more scared more easily by an actor going quite near an open flame, more so than we will because we've rehearsed with it so we know that it's there. So actually when you're directing something, if something looks a bit dangerous, that's always something to keep in mind whether you want to not do something because it's going to snap the audience out or whether you want the audience to feel a bit like 'woah'. So that's, it's a really interesting concept that we talk to creative teams about as well.

IG: So you must get involved quite early in the shows to sort of talk directors through what it's like directing shows by candlelight...

CM: Yeah, there's a like, there's a whole team of us back here who... and I haven't been here, I've only been here for two years, so what I've picked up has just been in that time but you only start to understand lighting shows by candlelight through doing it.



So I like to say to creative teams that it's... you can't light like a theatre show, you can't direct the candlelight like you can, you can't tell a story specifically with the candles, but you can set a mood, so it's a bit more subtle. As I say there's a whole group of us that are on hand to advise. Also we're really keen to try new stuff 'cos we only learn new things by doing it so it's always amazing to hear some of the ideas that people want to try and it's really lovely to be like 'OK, we've tried something similar, it may or may not work but actually let's try it this way and we might be able to make it work this time'. So that's kind of, it's really nice to have that constant push for creativity and to bring new ideas to the table. That's definitely my favourite part of the job, for sure.

IG: OK, let's burn some candles.

CM: Let's burn some candles.

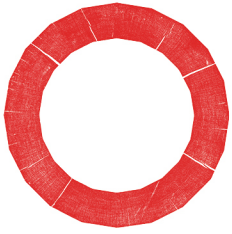
IG: So then you light them all from a little...

CM: So. Well. Our maker calls these spills but we call them tapers so I think the technical term is a spill. They're basically like a mini candle and the reason... rather than lighting it with a lighter which will just melt the candle, so lighting it with this is a kind of smaller, cooler point of flame and it just, it takes hardly any time at all.

IG: So now we're going to light fifty candles...

CM: Now we're going to light fifty candles...

IG: And see what it sounds like.



CM: And it's going to look like a very square birthday cake.

IG: You can feel the warmth...

CM: Yeah, I mean there's a huge amount of heat that comes off these.

IG: Do you still get excited about like lighting candles and...?

CM: Er, maybe not the lighting of the candles, I don't think. Like people always ask if I have candles at home, and I really don't.

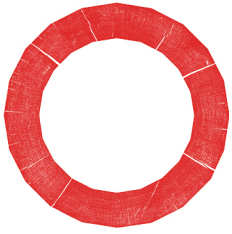
IG: Do you not? You just can't do it?

CM: Not at all. I have like a smelly candle in the bathroom because it's nice, you know? But um, no, though I do... obviously who doesn't like candlelight, it's very kind of soothing, it's very kind of soothing and calming. And what's very nice is if I've had kind of a rough day sometimes or like things haven't gone quite how I want them to, sometimes I'll come and do some candle prep and I'll just be like 'Ah, ok, it's ok, life's ok' and that's the nice thing about it, it's quite a nice...

IG: It's a soothing process...

CM: Yeah because you have to give it the time it takes as well. The candles take the time they take and they'll last for the time that they last and they won't last any more, so that's quite a nice rhythm to it.

IG: And then you just let them burn a little bit?



CM: Just a little bit yeah, just the tips to kind of establish themselves, and then we'll snuff them. You can blow out but you just get mountains of wax everywhere and another huge part of our job is making sure that the stage stays relatively wax-free so we do scrape wax off the stage a lot.

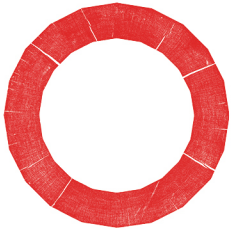
IG: Really?

CM: So a lot of my job is... and floors, like scraping wax off of floors. That's also a huge amount of it. But you listen to a lot of podcasts. Yeah and then they'll just harden up and I'll chuck them in a box and then... it's kind of just like constantly moving candles around the building, the life cycle of a candle in the SWP. And what's quite nice about that is actually it doesn't end with them burning on stage, because the ends, we collect those up and any wax I scrape up off the floor, that all goes back in a box which goes back in another box which then gets sent back to our maker Ted in Cumbria, who then melts them down and re-dips them as candles and then sends them back to us. And then we burn them again. And then we put them in a show. So it's like this really lovely circle of just, of what the candle does. I mean I must have snuffed and lit the same kind of piece of wax like a million times, it's just nice, it's a lovely thing to think about.

[Music plays]

IG: If you've never seen a show in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, do come along. The warm glow of candlelight is beautiful, and particularly atmospheric at this time of year.

[Music plays]



So, that's nearly it from 2018 here at the Globe. But finally, to read us out, I persuaded the lovely Lucy from our Comms team to read George Wither's festive poem, a Christmas Carol, written in 1622.

[Extract from A Christmas Carol by George Withers]

Lucy Butterfield:

So now is come our joyful feast,

Let every man be jolly;

Each room with ivy leaves is dressed,

And every post with holly.

Though some churls at our mirth repine,

Round your foreheads garlands twine,

Drown sorrow in a cup of wine,

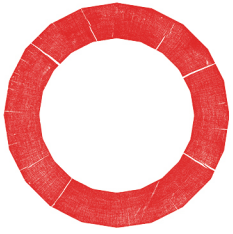
And let us all be merry.

Now all our neighbors' chimnies smoke,

And Christmas blocks are burning;

Their ovens they with baked meats choke,

And all their spits are turning.

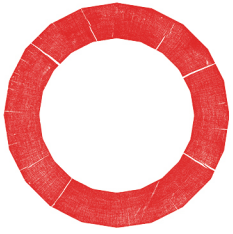


Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if for cold it hap to die,
We'll bury it in a Christmas pie,
And evermore be merry.

Now every lad is wondrous trim,
And no man minds his labor;
Our lasses have provided them
A bagpipe and a tabor.

Young men and maids, and girls and boys,
Give life to one another's joys;
And you anon shall by their noise
Perceive that they are merry.

Now poor men to the justices
With capons make their errands;
And if they hap to fail of these,
They plague them with their warrants.

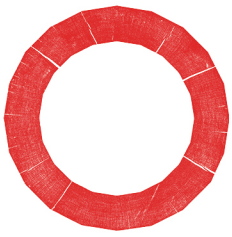


But now they feed them with good cheer,
And what they want they take in beer,
For Christmas comes but once a year,
And then they shall be merry.

The wenches with their wassail-bowls
About the streets are singing;
The boys are come to catch the owls,
The wild mare in is bringing.

Our kitchen boy hath broke his box,
And to the dealing of the ox
Our honest neighbors come by flocks,
And here they will be merry.

Now kings and queens poor sheep-cotes have,
And mate with everybody;
The honest now may play the knave,
And wise men play at nobby.



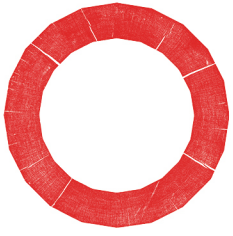
Some youths will now a mumming go,
Some others play at rowland-hoe,
And twenty other gameboys moe;
Because they will be merry.

Then wherefore in these merry days
Should we, I pray, be duller?
No, let us sing some roundelays
To make our mirth the fuller.

And whilst we thus inspired sing,
Let all the streets with echoes ring;
Woods, and hills, and everything
Bear witness we are merry.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us. If you want to join in with more merriment at the Globe, come along to our Winter Wassail on the 22nd or 23rd December – there will be storytelling, songs and music from the Society of Strange and Ancient Instruments. Wassail comes from the middle English meaning to 'be in good health', but it also came to refer to spiced ale or mulled wine. So whatever you consider to be good health, join us for some festive fun.



You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg.

To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

We'll be back with more stories from Shakespeare's Globe in 2019 so subscribe, wherever you got this podcast from.

[Music plays]