

# COTSWOLD LIFE

Cotswold Life website

<https://www.cotswoldlife.co.uk/out-about/events/gustav-holst-composer-of-in-the-bleak-midwinter-1-6944845>

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## In the Bleak Midwinter: Holst and Britain's favourite Christmas carol

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**In The Bleak Midwinter**

In the bleak mid-winter, Frosty wind made moan,  
God, heav'n can-not hold him, Nor earth sus-tain;  
An-gels and arch-an-gels May have ga-thered there,  
What can I give him, Poor as I am?

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Earth stood hard as i-ron, Wa-ter like a stone;  
Heav'n and earth shall flee away When he comes to reingn;  
Che-ru-bim and se-ra-phem Thronged the air;  
If I were a she-pherd I would bring a lamb,

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Amelia Marriette is the former curator of the Holst Birthplace Museum and author of *Walking into Alchemy: The Transformative Power of Nature*. Amelia Marriette is currently raising money for the Holst Birthplace Museum

< In the Bleak Midwinter by Gustav Holst (below)

“In 2004 I became the curator of the Holst Birthplace Museum in Cheltenham, and I began what will be a lifelong quest to understand and appreciate Gustav Holst, composer of *The Planets Suite*.

I wanted to understand Holst's mind as well as his works. Holst was always an active musician, so I auditioned to become a member of the choir at All Saint's Church in Cheltenham. I had sung in a choir as a child, but I had forgotten how wonderful it is: to stand in the middle of a host of voices and to hear the harmonies at work is balm for the soul.



A choir is a community, and the unspoken feeling of companionship that it brings is without parallel. I loved being a part of that choir – we sang Haydn's *Creation* under the patient and kind baton of John Wright, and this I thought, was going to be the real highlight, but I was wrong.

Author Amelia Marriette. Photo: Katie Gayle >



It was a Christmas concert in All Saint's Church that really held me spellbound. We had rehearsed in the afternoon and, returning at dusk, we settled into our pews. Towards the end of the concert we sang *In the Bleak Midwinter*, and I felt a welling up of emotion – suddenly all the memories I had of this Christmas carol seemed to coalesce. Playing the beautiful melody on the cornet when I was a child; singing the carol at school on Christmas Eve in a candlelit concert in the beautiful, tiny church in Hanley Castle, where nervously I sang a solo.

I think most of us can cast our minds back and remember singing or hearing *In the Bleak Midwinter* – it has such simple power. The way that Holst unites the exquisite lyricism of Christina Rossetti's poem, with its powerful and deceptively simple words, with such a beautifully melancholic and haunting melody is pure alchemy at work.

To sing the carol in the same church that Holst sang in when he was a boy was very special, and I shall never forget it. I felt a connection to him that I had never felt before, but I have felt it since. I relocated to Austria in 2015 and, in 2016, I began to walk, and my walks grew into a weekly pilgrimage.

I remembered that Gustav Holst drew inspiration from walks in his native Gloucestershire: the tune for Rossetti's poem *In the Bleak Midwinter* is known as *Cranham*. The tune was named after the small Cotswold village where his grandparents lived, and where his mother played the harmonium in St James the Great Church. All his life Holst walked for he knew that walking aids the creative process and calms the mind. He loved to walk in the Malverns - incidentally, my home town. And when studying in London at the Royal College of Music, he would sometimes walk the 95 miles back home to Cheltenham, stopping to play his trombone on the way.



On my weekly walks, I often thought about Holst – and when I was nearing the end of my project to walk the same 13-mile walk every week for a year, I stood looking out over a Christmassy December scene on a snowy landscape, with the earth as hard as iron, and the water like a stone, and the memory of singing *In the Bleak Midwinter* in Cheltenham long, long ago came back to me.”

Amelia Marriette on the Q3 'Walking into Alchemy' walk in Austria. Photo: Katie Gayle

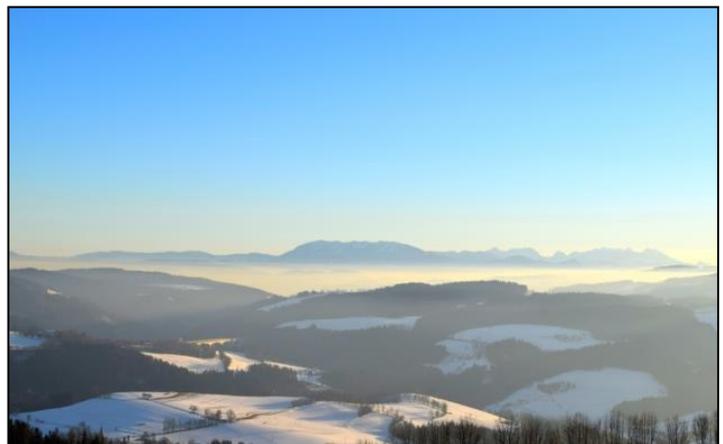
Useful links:

[A short film about Amelia's offer](#)

[The Gustav Holst Way – a 35-mile walk from Cranham to Wyck Rissington](#)

[The Holst Birthplace Museum in Cheltenham](#)

[Christmas in Bad Sankt Leonhard, Austria.](#) Photo: Amelia Marriette



**To find out more about 'Walking into Alchemy: The Transformative Power of Nature', visit [www.ameliamarriette.com/my-book](http://www.ameliamarriette.com/my-book). Choose from a full-colour, signed edition with over 50 photographs of the beautiful Austrian Countryside, for £23 including postage and packing, or an e-book for £3.99. Amelia is raising money for the Holst Birthplace Museum, and will donate £5 for every paperback sold, and £1 for every e-book sold (offer only applies to books sold directly from the website. UK and EU only).**