

John Barleycorn

1. Oh! Three men did come down from the north
To plough for wheat and rye.
And they made a vow, a solemn vow
John Barleycorn should die.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

In the different versions, the three men come up from the south, out from the west, down from Kent and from all other directions and many other places. Sometimes they are identified: Sir William Goodwine, Richard Beer, Thomas Goodale – but whatever their names and wherever they come from, they are mercenaries, hired to deal with John Barleycorn.

The *ri-fol-lair-ry* chorus signals that there are many verses and that the singer is determined to sing them all. It alerts listeners that they may need some sustenance. It challenges listeners to stay the course and invites them to join in. Here is a rough translation:

You can wag your chin. You can shout 'n hiss 'n boo.
You can help me sing my song.
If you've got a drink then take a sip or two,
For my song is fairly long.

There are scores of verses. Sung in full, the song last for hours. As in church services, however, short cuts are often taken. I've trimmed the song down to just two dozen verses and I often skip the chorus. Let's get started:

1. Oh! Three men did come down from the north
To plough for wheat and rye.
And they made a vow, a solemn vow
John Barleycorn should die.
2. So they tossed him in a furrow deep
They kicked clods over his head,
Across the land they then proclaimed.
John Barleycorn is dead!
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
3. They left him there for a week or so
And a shower of rain did fall.
John Barleycorn, he sprang up again
And proved them liars all

4. In clothes of green he grew quickly.
His hair and beard grew spikily.
By summertime he was ripe and tall.
He owned the land entirely.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

The seasons, death, burial, resurrection, the miracle of life, harvest practice, hired labour, outside contractors, passing on skills, technological change. All feature.

5. They hired men with sickles
To crop him off at the knee.
They gathered him up, and formed him into sheaves.
They stooked him in rows neatly.
6. They hired men with pitchforks
To toss him high on the board.
They tied Jack tight with all their might,
They bound him down with cord.
7. They hired men with threshels,
They spread him out on the floor,
They went smick-smack on poor Jack's back,
They broke him apart for sure.
8. They threw him up to winnow the chaff,
They swept him into a heap,
They scooped him into bags and stacked him in a barn.
They had him in their keep.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Via a long, labour intensive process, corn, whether it be wheat, rye or barley is rendered into food that keeps for a lengthy period and sustains a whole community – an accomplishment worth celebrating. But there's more work yet to be done on it:

9. They tipped him into a malting kiln.
They fired it to roast his bones.
Then they sought to crush John Barleycorn.
They ground him between two stones.
10. They soaked him in a mashing tub.
Surely his strength must fail.
Then they poured him out into barrels and jugs
And called him home brewed ale.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

A celebration of a way of life, long past. Modern practioners an old art, are honoured anachronistically. This commonplace, earthy song is still being written.

11. But of all the things they did to him
The last was the worst of all.
For then they poured him down their throats
And pissed him against the wall.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Down and out. A change of tactics. Work from the inside. Use the enemy's own hand!

12. But John Barleycorn proved the mightiest man.
That ever throve on the land.
___ For he put those strong men down
By the work of their own hand.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Celebration of local practice. Forging group identity. We work with the materials at hand. We like like what we make. The way we do things here is best.

13. You can pour your wine into a fancy glass,
Put your cider in a tin can.
But put Barleycorn in the old brown jug
For he is the strongest man.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Something won is something lost. Beware of the powerful becoming tyrannical. Remain on guard and be responsible for yourself.

14. He can turn your gold into silver
Your silver into brass.
He can turn a man into a fool
And a fool into an ass.
15. He can rob the scholar of his books
The farmer of his corn.
He can rob the lord of his manor house
The dreaded John Barleycorn

16. He can swell your belly into a pot.
 ___ Play havoc with your liver.
 Diabetes, stroke and heart attack
 All curses he can deliver
17. He can wreck a strong man easily
 He can toss him over board.
 To be grabbed by Jack in the grip of the drink
 Is a fate to be abhorred.
You can shake your head. You can shout 'n hiss 'n boo.
You can call me a preacher man.
But don't let Jack put you down
By the work of your own hand.

Having John Barleycorn at hand helps us celebrate accomplishment and forge togetherness. Every trade and every sport has a verse for this song.

18. The huntsman he can't hunt the fox
 Nor so loudly blow his horn.
 The tinker he can't mend his pots
 Without a little of Barleycorn
19. If you're marking, drafting, hooling a mob,
 If you're selling sheep from the fence,
 A hard day's work gives a man a thirst
 That John Barleycorn can quench
20. If you're building, plumbing, or mixing cement
 If you're digging deep in a trench
 A hard day's work gives a man a thirst
 That John Barleycorn can quench
21. If you're batting, bowling, fielding in the slips
 If you're padded up waiting on the bench
 A day at the cricket gives a man a thirst
 That John Barleycorn can quench
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Times have changed. In the modern, mass produced, multinational world, slick marketers attempt to tell us what we like. The song simply folds in their efforts.

John Barleycorn is a powerful stimulant who revives fond memories.

22. He gives old men back their youth again
He gives the crippled back their spring.
His amber dose is a cure for all woes.
He makes dead men rise and sing.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

But this miraculous dose: does it deliver solace?

23. If you're lonely, lost or buried in strife
___ Struggling to make headway
John Barleycorn seems to comfort you
Seems to soothe your cares away
24. Whenever we fill him in our cups
And drink him shout after shout
The more we drink of Barleycorn.
The more we've to worry about.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry, fol-the diddle aye.
To me ri-fol-lair-ry O.

Source:

I began with the verses and tune in *Peter Kennedy, Editor, Folk Songs of Britain and Ireland, Oak Publications, 1975.*