

# The Shepherd's Boon

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Moderately (♩=170)

Our priest said that near Beth-le-hem, one tho-usand years a - go,  
A group of shep-herds much like me were hud-dled in the snow.  
I asked him "Where is Beth-le-hem?". He said "The Ho-ly Land.  
It's not far from Je - ru - sa - lem." I did not un - der - stand.  
For I know just the vil-lage and the val-ley and the moor,  
And Ches-ter's to the west, I think, and York is north, I'm sure,  
And these are all in Eng-la-lond, and Ae-thel-red is King,  
And I'm a shiv-'ring shep-herd, and it's three months till the spring.  
Though Christ-mas is a time of rest, the flocks re-quire my care,  
That they may give us milk and meat and warm wool we can wear.  
And for the twelve mid - win-ter days, when fes-tive boughs are hung,  
In hon - our of our Sav - iour's birth, I get to keep the dung.

*complete lyrics on the next page*

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Our priest said that near Bethlehem, one thousand years ago,  
A group of shepherds much like me were huddled in the snow.  
I asked him "Where is Bethlehem?". He said "The Holy Land.  
It's not far from Jerusalem." I did not understand.  
For I know just the village and the valley and the moor,  
And Chester's to the west, I think, and York is north, I'm sure,  
And these are all in Engla-lond, and Aethelred is King,  
And I'm a shiv'ring shepherd, and it's three months till the spring.  
Though Christmas is a time of rest, the flocks require my care,  
That they may give us milk and meat and warm wool we can wear.  
And for the twelve midwinter days, when festive boughs are hung,  
In honour of our Saviour's birth, I get to keep the dung.

The landlord's fields grow much corn, and I can tell you why:  
He spreads them with the good manure, the dung his sheep supply.  
He lets me farm a little land. The soil there is poor,  
I rarely have the chance to give it any sheep manure.  
My landlord saw a parchment once with rules about my work.  
It came from the Archbishop, three days' walk from here at York.  
It says I get one lamb each spring, and at the equinox  
In autumn for one week I get the fresh milk from the flocks.  
Each year I get one wether's fleece. These rules are only fair,  
For I, who keep my landlord's sheep, should also get my share.  
So, for twelve days at Christmas time, when festive songs are sung  
About the babe in Bethlehem, I get to keep the dung.

I hope next year the crop is good and we will have much corn.  
My young wife is with child now; the babe will soon be born.  
I'd give a daughter all my love, though I confess I've prayed  
My wife will bear a son for me whom I can teach my trade.  
I'll show him how to tend the dogs that keep the wolves at bay,  
To help the ewes to bear their lambs, to milk them twice a day,  
To make both cheese and butter, that the milk be kept from spoil,  
To honour the manure that gives such richness to the soil.  
Two years from now, I'd like a son who understands my words.  
I'll teach him "rams" and "grass" and "hay" and "bells" and "whey" and "curds".  
And for twelve days at Christmastime, although he be quite young,  
I'll show my son that on each day we get to keep the dung.

I first learned of the shepherd's right to 12 days' dung from Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger's book *The Year 1000*, Abacus, 1999. The right is mentioned on page 49 of the paperback edition (2000).

This right is known to us from a document originally written in old English but generally called by the name of its translation into Latin, the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, The presumed author of this document eventually became Archbishop Wulfstan of York. Both the original old English text and a modern translation are available as part of Stanley Jay Lemanski's M.A. thesis, 2005, downloadable from [http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd/send-pdf.cgi/Lemanski%20Stanley%20Jay.pdf?acc\\_num=akron1124902442](http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd/send-pdf.cgi/Lemanski%20Stanley%20Jay.pdf?acc_num=akron1124902442). Lemanski cites an argument that the text likely originated in the southwest, near Bath, but I have set the song near York, as if Wulfstan continued to recommend the same rules after his appointment there. It is not clear to me how widely this shepherd's right was practiced.

The list of shepherd's duties in verse three is taken from the *Colloquies* (dialogues) of Aelfric of Cerne Abbas, written as Latin translation exercises. A excerpt that includes a shepherd's reply can be found at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/voices/voices\\_reading\\_york.shtml#aelfric](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/voices/voices_reading_york.shtml#aelfric).