On your marks

Have you ever been puzzled by the words in 'Twelve Days of Christmas'? What on earth have maids, swans, hens, etc. got to do with the festival? Well apparently it is all in code! Because Roman Catholics in England were not allowed to practise their faith openly for many years in the past, someone in that time wrote this carol as a way of helping young Catholic children to remember some key truths of the faith. Each element of the carol is code for something. For example the partridge is Jesus, the two turtledoves are the Old and New Testaments, the three French hens stand for faith, hope and love and the four calling birds are the four Gospels. Can you work out some of the others? (They involve some books in the Old Testament, days of creation, gifts and fruits of the Spirit, the beatitudes, the commandments, the faithful disciples and the creed. Over to you!)

Below is a version of 'Twelve Days of Christmas' that focuses on the miracle of Christmas Day itself and does away with all those feathered interlopers, assorted cattle operatives, noisy military music makers and unseemly aristocracy! It is inspired by a similar rewriting of this carol that I first heard at our own church one Christmas but has been extensively reworded and rescanned (I think!).

Get set

You will need to take a deep breath!
NB: If you are using this in a non-confessional context such as at school, then the simple rewording of the last line of each verse to 'The Saviour Jesus is born' might be helpful.

Go!

At the first hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the second hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the third hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
In Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the fourth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the fifth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,

Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the sixth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Angels are singing
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the seventh hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay
All heaven blazing, angels are singing
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the eighth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
With shepherds watching, all heaven blazing, angels are singing
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the ninth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Many sheep are bleating, with shepherds watching, all heaven blazing, angels are singing
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the tenth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Local people dozing, many sheep are bleating, with shepherds watching, all heaven blazing, angels are singing,
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the eleventh hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay,
Dawn's light has broken, local people dozing, many sheep are bleating, with shepherds watching, all heaven blazing, angels are singing,
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth
For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born

At the twelfth hour of Christmas, the world in darkness lay
Wise men are riding, dawn's light has broken, local people dozing, many sheep are bleating, with shepherds watching, all heaven blazing, angels are singing,
P-e-a-c-e o-n earth

For on Christmas Day, in Bethlehem, sheltered in a stall,
Our Saviour Jesus is born