

# Calendars, Almanacks, Wakes, and Fairs.

In former times, when the parish priest could scarcely con his missal, and when the felon who could read his "neck verse" was allowed the benefit of clergy, from his thus giving legal proof of his being a "clerk"—"*legit ut clericus*;" when a knowledge of the first four rules of simple arithmetic was a sufficient qualification for the office of Chancellor or of the Exchequer; and when the wise man who could predict an eclipse of the sun or moon, always lay under the suspicion of practising the black art, what kind of Almanack was in use, and how did the husbandman mark the times of earing and of harvest, of sheep-washing and sheep-shearing, and of Wakes, Fairs, and Church Ales—matters in which he was deeply interested, both on the score of business and of pleasure?

It is unnecessary, here, to enter into any disquisition respecting the etymology of the word "Almanack," or the time when it began to be popularly used in Europe; it may be sufficient to remark that the thing, under the name of a Calendar, was known in this country at an early period; and that, in its general arrangement, the Calendar prefixed to a book of prayers, about the time of the Conquest, differed but little from a common Almanack of the time of James I. In some of those ancient Calendars there was a drawing at the commencement of each month, showing how the husbandman was usually employed at that particular period. For instance, in JANUARY, which the Saxons called *Giul aftera*—the month after *Yule*, or Christmas—there was the figure of a man drinking from a horn, representing the New Year festivities. FEBRUARY, *Sproutkele* (cabbage-sprouting), or *Solmonath*, Cake Month—a man sitting idly on a bench, at the door of a house, the weather not yet permitting him to pursue his labour regularly. MARCH, *Lenct Month*, Spring Month—a man digging. APRIL, *Oster* or *Easter Month*, the month in which Christ's *eastering* or *rising* from the dead was commemorated—a man pruning a tree. MAY, *Trinilki*, Three Milkings, from the cows being milked thrice a day in that month, during the flush of the grass—a man pruning a vine. JUNE, *Weyd Month* and *Mede Month*, Meadow Month—a man wedding. JULY, *Hey Month*, Hay Month—a man mowing. AUGUST, *Arn Month*, Harvest Month—a man reaping. SEPTEMBER, *Gerst Month*, Grist or Grinding Month—a man thrashing out corn for grinding. OCTOBER, *Wyne Month*, Wine or Vintage Month—a man pouring wine from a flagon into a drinking cup. NOVEMBER, *Wind Month*, Windy Month, also *Blut Month*, as in this month they killed their cattle and swine for winter provision—a man killing a pig. DECEMBER, *Winter Month*, and *Giul cora*, Ere or First Yule—a company feasting, indicative of the festivities of Christmas or Yule.

In those old Calendars, the names of the saints were inserted under their respective commemoration days; and such days as were more particularly observed by the Church as high festivals, were distinguished by being written in red ink, and hence the term "red-letter day," signifying a holiday. As the deaths of kings, popes, bishops, abbots, and other eminent persons, and also the dates of memorable events, were frequently inserted in those Calendars, they thus became, to a certain extent, Historical Recordors as well as Remembrancers of Times and Seasons. The introduction of astronomical observations and computations into the Calendar was probably owing to the circumstance of Easter Sunday having to be reckoned from the first new moon that occurred after a certain day. As Astronomy and Astrology were intimately associated in popular opinion, prognostications of the weather, and predictions of political events—"founded on the aspects of the heavenly bodies"—followed as a matter of course; but the seers were so frequently wrong in their foretellings, that "to lie like an almanack-maker" was proverbial in the time of Queen Elizabeth, long ere the art of "figure-finging" had attained the *ne plus ultra* of systematic mendacity in the person of William Lilly.

The oldest printed Almanacks appear to be those called "Wand Kalendars"—Wall Calendars, or, as we now call them, "Sheet Almanacks"—engraved on wood, in the manner of block-books, and printed in Germany, about 1470. Till about the close of the fifteenth century, it would seem that this branch of the cheap book trade was chiefly in the hands of wood-engravers, who at that period appear to have travelled from place to place for the purpose of vending their productions. Previous to the introduction of printed Almanacks, "Clog Almanacks" were in common use in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and England, and continued to be used by the poorer classes, and such as could not read, until comparatively recent times. These Almanacks obtained their distinctive name from their being formed of a *Clog* or piece of wood, on which were cut various marks, indicative of the days of the week and month, and of the Principal Fixed Terms and Festivals. *Clog* Almanacks inscribed with Runic characters appear to have been known to the people of Northern Europe, previous to their conversion to Christianity.

Dr. Robert Plot, in his "Natural History of Staffordshire" (folio, 1686), gives an engraving of "a Clog, or Staffordshire Perpetual Almanack," together with a copious explanation of it; and an ample account of ancient Danish Calendars, of a similar kind, is to be found in the "Fasti Danici" of Olaus Wormius, printed at Copenhagen, 1643. Versteegan, speaking of the Anglo-Saxons, says:—"They used to grave upon certain squared sticks, about a foot length, or shorter or longer as they pleased, the courses of the moons of the whole year, whereby they could always certainly tell when the new moons, full moons, and changes should happen—as also their festival days." In Almanacks of this kind, a period of three months was usually inscribed on each side. The different marks were arranged in three columns; the first column contained the days of the month, in a repeated series of marks, in the same manner as the Dominical

Letters; the second column contained marks corresponding with the Golden Numbers, for the purpose of ascertaining the phase of the Moon; and the third was occupied with emblematical marks, expressive of "tides" and seasons and of the greater festivals and saints' days.

In Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, Runic Calendars were of various forms; sometimes carved on a piece of bone, and sometimes on thin pieces of wood, which were afterwards fastened together at one corner, by means of a peg or a thong, and were thus moveable, like the leaves of tablets. The most common form, however, of such Calendars was that of a staff, either squared at the sides or cylindrical; and the usual name for such a staff was, with the Danes, *rimstok*, and with the Norwegians, *primstaf*: the former term, according to Wormius, signifying simply a calendar-staff, and the latter a staff for finding the *prim*, or New Moon. A curious cylindrical staff of this kind was exhibited by Sampson Hodgkinson, Esq., at the meeting of the Archaeological Institute, held at Lincoln, in July, 1848. It was about three feet eight inches long; and the Calendar was inscribed upon it in two divisions, commencing at the top, and extending down to the bottom, the one-half of the area being occupied with the six months from January to June inclusive, and the other half with the six months from July to December. The characters and emblems inscribed on the division comprising the latter six months are shown in the annexed cuts. The cut on the left shows the months July, August, and September; and that on the right, the months October, November, and December. In the original the inscription is a continuous line. The marks are arranged in three columns; the column, in which the characters are closest together, shows the days of the month; the second contains the Golden Numbers; and the third and widest contains the emblems of tides, festivals, and saints' days. It may be observed that most of those emblems are not placed exactly under the day of the calendar month to which they belong. In the column of days in the cut to the left, the first character that occurs is that which corresponds with G in our series of Dominical Letters; the second in the same column, that which corresponds with A; the third, B; the fourth, C; the fifth, D; the sixth, E; the seventh, F. All the rest of the days, to the end of December, are thus marked by a repetition of the same series of characters. The commencement of each month is denoted by a circle containing the figures of the Sun and Moon. The months are not lunar; but contain, respectively, the same number of days as our present calendar months. On the characters in the second column, denoting the Golden Numbers, it is unnecessary to make any remark, further than that they are letters of the Runic alphabet, and that they here represent numbers. The following is an explanation of some of the emblems in the third column, commencing with JULY in the cut to the left, and continuing on through each succeeding month till the end of the year;—JULY: St. Margaret's day, a rake, indicative of the time of hay-harvest. St. Mary Magdalene's day, a kind of vase, representing the vessel containing the precious ointment with which she anointed Christ's feet. St. James's day, two acorns, relating to an ancient northern superstition which, according to Wormius, ascribed the origin of acorns to that day. St. Peter *ad vincula*, a key. AUGUST: St. Laurence, a gridiron, with an instrument like a fall behind it. The Assumption of the Virgin, a crown. St. Bartholomew, a knife, the instrument with which he was flayed. At Croyland Abbey, in former times, it was customary to give away small knives on St. Bartholomew's day. The Decollation of St. John the Baptist, a sword. SEPTEMBER: St. Giles, a pair of sheep-shears, because about that time they usually clipped their sheep. The Nativity of the Virgin, a crown. Holyrood Day, a cross. Michaelmas, the Archangel's trumpet and a pair of scales, denoting the Equinox. St. Francis, a fish, because about this time the fishery was productive. OCTOBER: St. Bridget of Sweden, a wool-card, because about this time the farmers' servants were employed in carding wool. St. Calixtus, a leafless tree, denoting the fall of the leaf. In some calendars the emblem referring to this day was a glove, denoting the increase of the cold. St. Luke, an ox. NOVEMBER: Martinmas, a goose. In former times, the feast of St. Martin, of Tours, was generally commemorated with roast goose at dinner in England; the custom is now chiefly observed at Michaelmas. St. Clement, an anchor with an arrow across the shank. St. Catherine, a wheel. St. Andrew, St. Andrew's cross. DECEMBER: St. Nicholas, a ring, and pastoral staff. Conception of the Virgin, a crown. St. Thomas, a hand, relative to the incredulity of St. Thomas, who declared that he would not believe in the resurrection of Christ, except he should thrust his hand into his side. Christmas tide or Yule, drinking horns, denoting the festivity of the season: the sword crossing the horn which stands singly is the indication of Innocent's day. In the preceding explanation, the emblems are arranged according to the months under which they appear in the engraving, and not with reference to the precise time at which their corresponding festivals are now observed.

In the middle ages, periodical times were marked rather by the occurrence of Saints' days or Festivals than by the days of the month: thus, the sittings of the Courts of Law, and the return of writs, were always regulated by the vigil, morrow, or octave of a particular festival; and by these the tenant paid his rent, either in money or goods, at Christmas, Candlemas, Lammas, Michaelmas, or Martinmas, according to the conditions of his tenure, without any reference to the day of the month on which each festival was kept. Amongst the old Term days, it is believed that May





Day is the only one which is not specifically distinguished by being associated with a festival or office observed by the Church. Though the derivation of Lammas, from *Loaf-mass*, be doubtful, it is evident that the period was originally determined by the celebration of some Mass or other religious office on that particular day. Candlemas, which is the anniversary of the Purification of the Virgin, obtained its popular name from churches and chapels being brilliantly lighted up with tapers, and from tapers and candles being blessed by the priest, on that day. It may here be observed that the word *Mass*, about the etymology of which there have been so many conjectures, is of Gothic origin; and that, in its primary meaning, it is nearly synonymous with the word *Mess*, as still used in the navy to signify a *community* of persons who take their meals together. The Latin word *Communio*, and the Saxon word *Houseling*, are suggestive of the same idea as the word *Mass*. This brings us in regular concatenation to the "*Kermess*"—the Kirk or Church-Mass of the Dutch and Flemings, which is identical in its origin with the English Wake or Feast.

Of the Dutch and Flemish *Kermess* it is not our intention here to speak, further than it may serve to illustrate the origin of the English Wake or Feast. The *Kermess* is a kind of fair, which some attend for business, some for pleasure, and others for the sake of both. It obtained its name, *Kermess*—Kirk-mass, Church-mass—in consequence of its being originally held on the anniversary of the saint to whom the village or parish church was dedicated. The term "*Kirk*," which has erroneously been supposed to be derived from two Greek words, *κρητου οίκος*—the House of the Lord—originally signified, with people of both Gothic and Celtic origin, a *circle*, a word which, in fact, is derived from the same root; and as their places of worship were usually *Kirk*s, or *Circles*, of stones, the same term continued to be used to signify a place of worship after their conversion to Christianity. The Latin adverb *circum* (Kirk-um) is formed from the same root; and its component parts express the same idea as the English word "*round-about*"—*Kirk*, Celtic, a *round* or *ring*, and *um*, German, *about*.

The institution of the English Wake or Feast was in its origin precisely the same as the Dutch and Flemish *Kermess*; it was a festival held in commemoration of the saint to whom the parish church was dedicated. The difference in the names given to it—Wake and Feast—originated merely from the circumstance of the commemoration being chiefly observed in some places on the *Wake*, *Vigil*, or day preceding the saint's day, and in others on the day itself. Though this be the real origin of the Village Wake or Feast, yet, in later times, the day was not infrequently changed for various reasons; such as its happening in the time of hay-making or of harvest, when its celebration might interfere with labours which could not be conveniently postponed; or from its happening immediately before or after the Wake of an adjacent parish; or *quodcumque alia ratione*—"*for any other reason why*." Such is the origin of our Village Wakes and Feasts, which in the progress of society are gradually becoming obsolete.

It was in large country parishes that Wakes and Feasts were usually commemorated with the greatest display; for as on those days all the parishioners were required to attend the parish church, the same as at Christmas and Easter, there was, consequently, a great assemblage in the village where such church happened to be situated; and as the original institution partook more of the anniversary of a jovial roof-raising than of a day of mortification, the natural consequence was that those nominal Wakes and Feasts became Feasts indeed. On those occasions the inhabitants of the "*church town*" were in duty, or in interest, bound to entertain their relations, friends, and customers who lived at a distance. At such times every "*responsible*" man in the village made provision for a crowd of visitors; and even those whom he was most slightly acquainted with, from having rubbed shoulders with them at a fair, were allowed, or rather privileged, on the Feast-day, to partake of his hospitality. When on such occasions the tailor or the weaver gave beef, bread, and a cup of ale of a fortnight old to the shepherd who had looked after his flock of bees on the distant common, he was merely re-paying an obligation. The smith, as a matter of course, was bound to entertain every man in the parish who kept a horse.

Philip Stubbes, in his "*Anatomic of Abuses*," thus speaks of Wakes and Feasts, at the time of the publication of his book, 1583:—

"This is their order therein; every town, parish, and village, some at one time of the year, some at another (but so that every one keep his proper day assigned and appropriate day to itself, which they call their *Wake-day*), useth to make great preparation and ordinance for good cheer. To the which all their friends and kinsfolks, far and near, are invited; where is such gluttony, such drunkenness, such satirity and impletion used as the like was never seen. In so much as the poor men who bear the charges of these Feasts and Wakes are the poorer and keep the worse houses a long time after. And no marvel; for many spend more at one of these Wakes than in all the whole year besides. This makes many a man to trifle and pinch, to run into debt and danger, and finally brings many a one to utter ruin and decay." To the query "*From whence sprang these Feasts and Wakes*," the author, who was utterly averse to all the institutions of the old Church, and greatly inclined to consider them as Pagan relics, answers as follows:—"I cannot tell, except from the Pagans and Heathen people, who, when they were assembled together, and had offered sacrifices to their wooden gods and blockish idols, made feasts and banquets together before them, in honour and reverence of them, and so appointed the same yearly to be observed in memorial of them for ever. But whencesoever they had their exordium, certain it is that the devil was the father of them, to drown us in perdition and destruction of body and soul; which God foretend."

Wakes and Feasts were not exclusively devoted to eating and drinking; but were also celebrated with sports and pastimes. There was dancing to the pipe and tabor from morn till eve; and after dinner, when the spirits of the champions had been stimulated by beef and bread, and cakes and ale, the wrestling and the cudgel play commenced. The prize for the wrestling was frequently a ram. The miller, in Chaucer's "*Canterbury Tales*," seems to have been a frequent victor in those contests:—

The Miller was a stout carl for the nones,  
Full bigge he was of brawn, and eke of bones;  
That proved well, for ever all he came,  
At wrestling he would bear away the ram.

Millers, when they take to the sport, usually prove good wrestlers. One of the most celebrated of the Cumberland wrestlers, recorded in "*Litt's Wrestiana*," was a miller; and his skill in laying men on their back is said to have been chiefly derived from his practice of lifting sacks of flour.

What were called Church Ales appear to have been very nearly allied to Wakes and Feasts. Whatever might have been their original institution, they seem to have been held for the exclusive benefit of the Church. "*The manner of them*," says Philip Stubbes, "*is thus*: in certain towns where drunken Bacchus bears the sway, against Christmas and Easter, Whitsunday or some other time, the Church-wardens (for so they call them) of every parish, with the consent of the whole parish, provide half-a-score or twenty quarters of malt, whereof some they buy of the church stock, and some is given them of the parishioners

themselves, every one conferring somewhat, according to his ability; which malt being made into very strong ale or beer, is set to sale, either in the church, or some other place assigned to that purpose. Then when this *Nippitatum*, th's Huff-cap (as they call it), and this nectar of life, is set abroad, well is he that can get the soonest to it, and spend the most at it, for he that sitteth the closest to it and spends the most at it, he is counted the goddest man of all the rest, and most in God's favour, because it is spent upon his Church forsooth: but who either for want can not, or otherwise will not stick to it, he is counted one destitute both of virtue and godliness. In so much, as you shall have many poor men make hard shift for money to spend thereat. And good reason; for being put into this *Corban*, they are persuaded it is meritorious, and a good service to God. In this kind of practice they continue six weeks, a quarter of a year, yea, half a year together, swilling and gulling night and day, till they be as drunk as rats, and as blockish as beasts." The pretext for holding those Church Ales was, to obtain money for the repair of the church, to buy service-books, cups for the celebration of the sacrament, surplices for the parson, and such other necessities. "*But*," says Stubbes, "*who seeth not that they bestow this money upon nothing less than in building and repairing of churches and oratories? For in most places lie they not like swine-cots (pig-styes)? Their windows rent, their doors broken, their walls fallen down, their roof all bare, and what not, out of order? Who seeth not the book of God, rent, ragged, and all betorn, covered in dust, so as this epitaph may be writ with one's finger upon it, *Eccce nunc in pulvere dormio*—'Behold, I sleep in dust!'"*

Fairs—like Wakes, Feasts, and Law-days—were, in former times, usually appointed to be held on the anniversary of some saint; and there is reason to believe that in many places, which in course of time had increased from small villages to considerable towns, the Wake or Feast was the origin of the customary fair. Fairs are of great antiquity; and it has been conjectured that, in the southern provinces of France, where we first find them expressly mentioned, they were merely a continuation of the *mundina*, or periodical markets of the Romans. Sidonius Apollinaris, Bishop of Clermont, who died in 488, speaks of a fair, in one of his epistles addressed to the Bishop of Troyes. During the period of the Crusades, the principal Continental fairs, more especially in France, became of more importance than in former times, both from the number of pilgrims and fighting men who were accustomed to take them on their way to the Holy Land, and from the increased commerce of Europe with the East consequent on those expeditions. As marts for general traffic, the great European fairs, such as those of Troyes, Rheims, Bruges, and Ghent, began to decline from about the latter end of the fifteenth century. At these fairs the Merchant Princes of Italy had their factors, who not only bought and sold on account of their principals, but also acted as bankers, discharging bills of exchange drawn at distant places, and there made payable, and granting others to merchants, who, having disposed of their goods, were either returning homewards, or proceeding, for the purpose of making purchases, to some other fair. In England, at a time when it was unlawful to export the coin of the realm, a merchant intending to visit one of the great Continental fairs, provided himself with a bill of exchange, drawn by an Italian factor upon another agent of his own firm attending the fair in question, and there made payable at sight. As the merchant requiring the bill always paid the money for it, in the first instance, to the drawer, the acknowledgment of its receipt in the bill gave rise to the formal words, "*value received*" in modern bills of exchange on account of goods sold and delivered.

When we first hear of Fairs of considerable importance in this country, they were held either by a Royal grant or through ancient custom; and the profits arising from the tolls and the standings were usually enjoyed either by the feudal superior of the place where the fair was held, or by the abbot and brethren of some neighbouring monastery. As boroughs began to be incorporated, the right of holding fairs, and of enjoying the customary profits, was usually confirmed to the burgesses by charter. To each considerable fair there was attached a court of *pie-poudre*, for the prompt settlement of such disputes as might occur during its continuance. In the reign of Edward IV. an act was passed to prevent encroachments of the courts of *pie-poudre*, "*which*," says Barrington, in his "*Observations on the more Ancient Statutes*," "*like most other courts, wanted to extend its jurisdiction, or, in other terms, the profits arising from it. As these lowest of courts of justice were under the direction of the steward, or auditor of him who had the grant of the fair, the steward, by way of drawing every litigation to his own court, supposed, by an ingenious fiction, that parties who never made any contract at the fair, and who perhaps lived at a great distance, had made the bargain in dispute within the limits of his jurisdiction, and, by this means, claimed consance of the suit."* The term *pie-poudre* (*pie* *poudre*) literally signifies "*dusty foot*;" and it is supposed to have been given to the court in question, in consequence of the dusty feet of the suitors. It may, however, be observed that "*dusty-foot*" was an old name for a pedlar; and there is reason to believe that the same class of people were called *pieds-poudreux* in old French, before such courts were instituted, or at least before they had acquired their distinctive name. If this opinion be correct, the pedlar, or travelling merchant, was a "*dusty-foot*," and the Court of *Pie-poudre*, a pedlar's court.

In the middle ages, the principal letter-carriers were traders attending fairs, and pilgrims visiting shrines, holy wells, or other places supposed to enjoy the special favour of some saint. In the 15th century pilgrimages were fashionable; and in those days a visit to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket, at Canterbury, or to the Chapel of Our Lady at Walsingham, was not much unlike a trip to Bath about the middle of the last century.

In former times, it was at fairs that the monks purchased many of the commodities which they required; and as they were also extensive landowners, it was on such occasions that they usually sold the produce of their farms, more especially their wool. Before the establishment of a fair and market at Hull, the Abbot of Meux or Melsa, in Holderness, appears to have attended Boston Fair. In the latter part of the reign of Henry III., the Abbot of Melsa was charged with having unlawfully sold, at Boston Fair, one hundred and twenty-nine sacks of wool to foreign merchants, at a time when the exportation of wool was forbidden to such merchants, in consequence of a dispute between the King of England and the Countess of Flanders. Even the canons of Bolton Abbey, in the retired vale of Wharfe, were accustomed to make purchases of wine, cloth, and other articles, at Boston Fair. This fair, and also that of Stourbridge, appear to have been attended by manufacturers of woollen cloth from the distant town of Kendal, who, after disposing of their goods, invested the proceeds in the purchase of various articles which either might be required in their own neighbourhood, or which might be likely to meet with a ready sale in the course of their journey homeward. Travelling merchants, in their progress to a distant fair, frequently received commissions at the abbays and castles where they were accustomed to call, to make purchases on account of the owners and their dependants.

In the mythology of Greece and Rome, Apollo, typified as the Sun, was the great ruler of the year, and the personified seasons (*ἔρα*, Hours) were his attendants. In the cut (on page 58) he has twelve attendants, the personified hours of the artificial day.