

# *Christmas in Sussex in the Olden Time.*

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NATIONAL Festival reflects the character of a people. If an accurate picture of the way in which Christmas has been observed in England for the last thousand years could be drawn, it would, without doubt, convey a pretty good notion, not only of the religious institutions of the times, but of the social and moral condition of the people. In the early and purely Saxon days we should, in all probability, find a good deal of Paganism and the grossness of heathen idolatry in the festivities of the season. There had been a feast of Yule long before the festival of Christmas, and an element of the old heathen holiday long mingled with the rejoicings of the new festival, and, perhaps, still does so. Yule cakes or dough are still to be met with in the North of England; the Yule plough is not quite obsolete; and the Yule log still burns on our hearths. It was, and still is, the wont of the Roman Priesthood to smooth the conversion of a heathen people by grafting the rites of the new religion on those of the old. In Italy it was the worship of the gods of "high Olympus" that was thus tenderly dealt with. In the countries which, like England, had been wrested from Rome by the Northern barbarians, it was the gods of Walhalla—Odin and Friga, Woden and Thor—that had to be superseded by a higher faith, and the same policy was pursued: the people's habits and customs were disturbed as little as possible, and if a festival of the new religion happened to concur in season with or to resemble in character a feast of the old religion, the transition from one to the other was made as easy as it could be by the preservation of the olden forms. Conversions

In all the Collegiate Churches of England it was customary for one of the children of the choir, completely apparelled in Episcopal vestments, with a mitre and crozier, to bear the title and state of a Bishop. He exacted a ceremonial obedience from his fellows, who, being dressed like priests, took possession of the church and performed all the ceremonies and offices which might have been celebrated by a Bishop and his prebendaries. In the statutes of Dean Colet for his school at St. Paul's it is expressly ordered that the scholars "shall, every Childermas, come to Paul's Church, and hear the Childe-Bishop's sermon." This was, with other ceremonies and processions, abrogated by a proclamation issued in the thirty-third year of the reign of Henry VIII.

If such scenes as these, in very mockery of religion, were carried on in churches, it is easy to conceive that the people were not slow to imitate them in their own houses. And such was the case. "Cards, dice, tables, and most other games prohibited at other seasons of the year, were (says Strutt) tolerated during the Christmas holidays, as well as disguisements and mummeries," and he distinctly traces one of these mummeries, the "Fool's Plough"—which, in the North, was, and, perhaps, still is, dragged about by sword-dancers attired in antic dress, and with which the soil is ploughed up before those houses where no reward is given—to the "Yule-plough" of Pagan days.

Royalty itself, in the time of the Plantagenets, set the example of Christmas revelries; and as the Church had its mock-Popes and mock-Bishops, so the Court had its "Lord of Misrule." "At the feast of Christmas," says Stow, "in the king's court, wherever he chanced to reside, there was appointed a lord of misrule, or master of merry disports; the same merry fellow made his appearance at the house of every nobleman and person of distinction, and among the rest the Lord Mayor of London and the Sheriffs had severally of them their lords of misrule, ever contending, without quarrel or offence, who should make the rarest pastimes to delight the beholders."

The most graphic description of the reign of a people's "Lord of Misrule" is given by Philip Stubbs, who wrote at the close of the 16th century. As a picture of Christmas doings before the Puritan Revolution it is very suggestive:—

First of all, the wilde heades of the parish flocking together, chuse them a graund captaine of mischiefe, whom they innoble with the title of Lord of Misrule; and him they crowne with great solemnity, and adopt for their king. This king annoynted chooseth forth twentie, forty, three-score, or an hundred lustie guttes, like to himself, to waite upon his lordly majesty, and to garde his noble person. Then every one of these men he investeth with his liveries of greene, yellow, or some other light wanton colour, and as though they were not gawdy ynough, they bedecke themselves with scarffes, ribbons, and laces, hanged all over with gold ringes, pretious stones, and other jewels. This done, they tie aboute either legge twentie or fortie belles, with rich handkerchiefs in their handes, and sometimes laide acrossse over their shoulders and neckes, borrowed, for the most part, of their pretie mopsies and loving Bessies. Thus all thinges set in order, then have they their hobby horses, their dragons, and other antiques, together with their baudie pipers, and thundring drummers, to strike up the devil's daunce with all. Then march this heathen company towards the church, their pypers pyping, their drummers thundring, their stumpes dauncing, their belles jynghly, their handkerchiefs fluttering aboute their heades like madde men, their hobbie horses and other monsters skirmishing amongst the throng; and in this sorte they go to the church, though the minister be at prayer or preaching, dauncing and singing like devils incarnate, with such a confused noise that no man can heare his owne voyce. Then the foolish people they looke, they stare, they laugh, they fleere, and mount upon the formes and pewes to see these goodly pageants solemnized. Then after this, aboute the church they go againe and againe, and so fourthe into the churche yard, where they have commonly their sommer-halls, their bowers, arbours, and banquetting-houses set up, wherein they feast, banquet, and daunce all that day, and paradventure all that night too; and thus these terrestrial furies spend the Sabbath day. Then, for the further innobling of this honourable lardane, lord I should say, they have certaine papers wherein is painted babelerie or other imagerie worke, and these they call my Lord of Misrule's badges, or cognizances. These they give to evey-one who will give them money to maintain them in this their heathenish devilrie; and who will not show himselfe buxome to them and give them money, they shall be mocked and flouted shamefully; yea, and many times carried upon a cowlstaffe, and dived over heade and eares in water, or otherwise most horribly abused. And so besotted are some, that they not only give them money, but weare their badges or cognizances in their hates or cappes openly.

Of course, Philip Stubbs was one of those new sectaries to whom the Reformation gave rise, who, by the severe way in which they looked at religion and life in general, were dubbed Puritans, and who were destined to give quite a new character to Christmas in England, and powerfully to influence its celebration down to our own days. The Reformation, in



fact, though it had put an end to the most flagrant abuses of Christmas revelling in the churches themselves, had left the people to follow pretty much the old paths, as we see by Philip Stubbs's description, and as we know also by the goings-on at the Courts of Edward, Elizabeth, and James I. But the higher minds of the English people were rapidly waking up to a sense of the inconsistency of this spirit of license with the objects and aims of the religion they professed, and which they were now able to realise for themselves. A sober and severe spirit grew upon the people more and more, operating equally upon manners, morals, political opinions, and faith, until it attained its full development, first, in the ascendancy of the Presbyterians in Scotland and in England, and then in the rule of the Independents under Cromwell. Of the two, probably, the Presbyterians were the most hostile to that religious laxness which had tolerated, if not encouraged, the license and abuse of Christmas and other festive seasons. They were very severe disciplinarians and made short work of the games and sports, religious and secular, which had given to this country the title of "merrie England." The Cavaliers endeavoured to keep up this vein, in their dress, poetry, and mode of living; but they were beaten out of the field by the fanatics, as their enemies called them—by the elect of God, as they called themselves; and England became, for a time, a very sober, and, on the surface, at least, a very moral and religious country. To reverse the lines that Shakspeare puts into the mouth of Glo'ster, "its merry-meetings were turned into stern alarums;" its bear-baitings and cock-shyings into prayer-meetings and psalm-singings; its Festivals into Fasts. Christmas Day itself was made a strict fast-day, and if Englishmen eat roast-beef on that day, during the reign of the saints, they had to do it "on the sly." That many did so, we do not doubt; for the work sought to be done by the exalted spirits of these Puritan days was too much in advance of the times to carry the great body of the people with it. A vast number sighed for the flesh-pots of Egypt, and with the Restoration there was a strong re-action to olden ways. But the Puritans

of the 17th century left their mark on the nation and on its chief festival of Christmas. Their purgation of the old heathen license was very effectual. They went too far, no doubt; most Reformers do so; but they succeeded in giving a new and a higher character to the English people in their religious life, and a new aspect to the Church in its religious festivals. It is only since the Commonwealth that England has presented that strong contrast to the Continent in its Sunday aspect which strikes all foreigners—even when those foreigners are Protestants—with astonishment and not a little dismay.

Christmas Day shared at first with the Sunday in the almost ascetic character given to it by the Puritans. But there has been a tendency of late days to emancipate it from this strict discipline and to restore to it a part, at least, of its original, and, as some may think, its appropriate character of a festival. After going, first, too far in one direction—that of license and profanity—and then too far in another—that of asceticism—the national pendulum seems to have swung into a medium movement, in which the spirit of religion and the spirit of enjoyment mingle with and temper one another. In fact, the great festival is becoming, as festivals are wont to become, a reflection of the character of the people themselves. As they become more refined—more intellectual—more spiritual—so are their national demonstrations, religious or secular, apt to present these aspects and be purged of that grossness which marked them in early ages—ages fresh from the contact of barbarism and idolatry.

The advance has been gradual. There was, doubtless, a re-action in the days of the Second Charles from the extreme rigidity of the Commonwealth. From a severe fast-day, Christmas again became a joyous festival. We find the evidence of it in the journal of the Rev. Giles Moore, Rector of Horsted Keynes, who, though a Royalist at heart, had been “admitted” to the Sussex living by the Commissioners appointed by Cromwell and his Council to “try” the efficiency of such as

presented themselves. Not a word do we find in the journal about Christmas Day until Charles II. has been restored, and then, on December 25, 1662, the Rector tells us:—"I gave an entertainment to Mr. Hale and Mr. Citizen, at Bachelor's [the village public-house?] and I paid for 3 pecks of barley malt, 2s. 7d.; for 11lbs. of beef 2s. 2d. [2½d. a lb. for beef! think of that, ye modern consumers of beef!] Being Christmas-daye, I received of John Burtenshaw, at the Parsonage, 8s., whereof I did give him back again 1s. *Christi gratiâ.*" For what the eight shillings were paid we are not told—perhaps for tithes or some other ecclesiastical dues. The gift of the shilling was clearly in the nature of a Christmas-box.

We have to pass over several years before we meet with another entry by the Rev. Giles Moore on a Christmas Day, and then it is a somewhat laconic one:—"25th Dec. I sent to Mr. Hely a ribspare and hoggs puddings, for which he returned me a box of pills and sermons." We wonder whether the Rector of Horsted Keynes considered himself the loser or the gainer by the transaction?

The next reference of the Sussex Rector to Christmas is of a similar character—only with a change of persons. Perhaps Mr. Moore had had enough of "Pills and sermons!" "25th Dec., 1677. I sent Mr. Herryman a faire large ribspare and hoggs pudding worth 4s., for the which he returned mee 24 oranges and 6 lemons." This was a decided advance upon Mr. Hely's pills and sermons, but whether it was a fair piece of barter we can't determine, not knowing the value of oranges and lemons 200 years ago.

With the exception of a gift of 6d. to "the howling boys" on the 26th December [how many sixpences have we to give now-a-days both to howling boys and girls!], these are the only references to Christmas in the journal of a Sussex country clergyman in the time of the Commonwealth and the Second Charles; and it shows that the great festival did not occupy much of his time, thoughts, or labours. It had not



recovered the double blow given to it, first by the Reformation and then by the Puritans.

This view is borne out by other Sussex diaries. Their references to Christmas are very few and far between. In the minute and voluminous diary of Thomas Marchant, of Little Park, Hurstpierpoint, there are only three meagre entries on the 25th December:—In 1714, “Mr. Martin preached. Thos. Norton, of Edgerley, Nich. Stacey, and I spent 3d. a-piece at Smith’s.” This was certainly a very modest expenditure for Christmas rejoicings! In 1719, “Mr. Dodson preached. My father and mother, and *the workmen*, din’d here (at Little Park). Mr. Burry and my brother Peter stopped and spent the evening here.” And again, in 1721, “Our workmen all dined here.” These last entries mark an improvement. The workmen of the farm are invited into the house and partake of Christmas fare with their master. There is no record of any special festivities—of the old games and mummeries and carol singing which used to characterise the day. Eating and drinking were the solid shape which Christmas festivities assumed in Sussex farmhouses in the 18th century.

It was pretty much the same in the mansions of the gentry. The feasting and hospitality in these latter were of a higher kind; but Christmas rejoicings were confined to this solid shape of eating and drinking. In 1691, Mr. Councillor Timothy Burrell, of Ockenden, Cuckfield, “for the first time,” we are told by the editor of his journal, “invited a number of his humbler neighbours to dine with him at Christmas,” and he kept up the practice to the year of his death. He has left us not only the names of the guests on these occasions, but the bills of fare; and we subjoin two of the latter, to show to later—shall we say, more degenerate times?—the materials of a Christmas dinner nearly 200 years ago:—

1st January, 1706. Plumm pottage, calves’ head and bacon, goose, pig, plumm pottage, roast beef, sirloin, veale, a loin, goose, plumm pottage, boiled beef, a clod, two baked puddings, three dishes of minced pies, two capons, two dishes of tarts, two pullets.—2nd January, 1706. Plumm pottage, boiled leg of mutton, goose, pig, plumm pottage, roast beef, veal, leg, roasted pig, plumm pottage, boiled beef, a rump, two baked puddings, three dishes of minced pies, two capons, two dishes of tarts, two pullets.

It will be remarked that plum-pudding, without which no Christmas Day festivities would be now complete, does not figure in Mr. Timothy Burrell's bill of fare. Its place is supplied by "plumm pottage" (sometimes called plumm broth), which occurs thrice in each bill, and which, no doubt, stood in the place of and was the embryo of its more famous successor. Minced pies had arrived at maturity; but plum puddings had yet to be invented!

Such entertainments as these of a gentleman to his poorer neighbours, and of farmers to their men, at which all met and feasted at the same board, have fallen into disuetude. The poor are feasted, doubtless, at Christmas; but they feast apart from the rich. Classes are more divided, and carry on their tasks and pleasures by themselves.

One illustration of the way in which Christmas was kept by the middle classes in Sussex in the age succeeding Timothy Burrell's is furnished by the diary of Thomas Turner, general dealer, of Easthoathly, who flourished in the middle of the 18th century:—

On Sunday, December 25, 1756 (writes Thomas Turner) myself, the two boys, and servant at Church: I and the maid staid the Communion. This being Christmas Day, the widow Marchant, Hannah, and James Marchant dined with us on a buttock of beef and a plumb suet pudding. Thos. Davey at our house in the even, to whom I read two nights of the *Complaint*, one of which was the "Christian's Triumph against the Fear of Death:" a noble subject, it being the redemption of mankind by Jesus Christ!

Here we have the elements of feasting and Puritan piety in pretty equal proportions. The struggle of these two "fell opposites" is illustrated by the following entry of Dec. 25th, 1758:—

This being Christmas Day, myself and wife at Church in the morning. We staid the Communion; my wife gave 6d.; *but they not asking me, I gave nothing. Oh, may we increase in faith and maintain and keep the good intentions that I hope we have this day taken up.*

What Thomas Turner's "good intentions" were, we can only guess; but his acts were very shortcoming! As years went on the feasting at Easthoathly obtained the ascendancy, until at length the Christmas doings of Thomas Turner and



his neighbours, including the parson himself, ended in downright debauchery. For weeks after Christmas Day they met at each other's houses to play "brag," eat and drink to excess, and then dance and shout and play pranks with each other—such as carrying home the ladies pick-a-back and dragging each other out of bed—which bordered closely on indecency.

This occurs for some years, on each successive Christmas, the clergyman, the medical man, and the chief people of the parish taking part in the orgies, and one of them (a Mr. French, who, his friend Turner estimates, drank for several years "not less than twenty gallons of spirituous liquors a year!") at last succumbed to it; Mr. Turner's wife also died; and he himself then "turned over a new leaf." But his very frank confessions expose to our view the gross and sensual way in which Christmas was kept in Sussex villages (and Sussex was a county of villages) in the middle and latter part of the 18th century. There was a modicum of church attendance infused into it; but the rule was "eat, drink, and be merry."

There is no reason to believe that the Christmas of Sussex, as here depicted, was different from the Christmas of other parts of England. It was a time of gross material prosperity, in which Court, nobles, clergy, and people gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the senses. The sports, both of high and low, partook of the same character. Bull-baiting, cock-fighting, and prize-fighting were the popular sports; the clergy hunted, shot, gambled, and went to the play like other people, and the Parson Trullibers were, we are afraid, much more numerous in the Church than the Parson Adamses. Thomas Turner, a man of education and with literary tastes, joined in the revelry whilst deploring it, and lets us see that the example was set at "the great House" of the parish, Halland House, where the great Duke of Newcastle, the head of the Pelhams and the first statesman of the day, lavished his vast wealth with an excess and profuseness that was imitated on a smaller scale by his humbler neighbours. There was a

spirit of hospitality and even of charity to the poor in this Christmas feasting of the 18th century; but it was overlaid by grossness and immorality, and in the midst of it the rich lost the power and respect and influence which they used to possess and the poor their virtue and independence. Again it was the Protestant or Puritan spirit that came to the rescue, and, in the Wesleyan and other religious movements, battled with the heathen coarseness of the times. With vast numbers of Churchmen as well as Dissenters the Christmas Day again became a Fast-day, or, at least, was shorn of its festive character—only differing from the Sunday in the intenser degree of gloom that overspread it. But against this there was also a re-action, and the spirit of asceticism has had to yield in later times to an infusion of a brighter and more festive, and what may be called a more æsthetic spirit. With the growing refinements of the age, its chief Festival has become more refined: the graces of Art and the beauties of Nature—flowers, music, painting, embroidery, &c.—are brought to the aid of religion, and temper that love of “the good things of this world” to which the nation is prone. All cruel sports and coarse amusements are banished, and if the bulk of the community still make the day a holiday, and, like Justice Greedy, “eat abundantly,” it is in a less objectionable form than that of the 18th century.

Thus the great Festival of the year—it is considered so in England more than it is on the Continent, where the first day of the year vies with and, perhaps, surpasses it—has followed the various changes which the nation itself has undergone. It has been, at different eras, Pagan; half-Pagan; half-Christian; Presbyterian, Puritan, grossly material, rigidly ascetic; and now, if it can be classified at all when its phases are so various, it is Eclectic; for it borrows something from all of these interpretations of it. In the devotion of the misletoe, the yew, and the holly to its service, there is still a particle of Paganism; in the carol-singers, the “waits,” and, in some parts, the “mummers,” we have a remnant of the old Catholic plays and apologues and buffooneries; in the

sober appearance of our streets, and the church-going habits of our middle classes, we have the Puritan element asserting itself; in the universal feasting going on we have a manifestation of our material nature and tendencies; in the floral and artistic decorations of our churches, and in the interchange of "Christmas cards," and the pouring forth of Christmas tales and Christmas lays, the æsthetic tastes of the age peep out; in the wide-spread charity and spirit of kindness and benevolence, and goodwill to men, which walks abroad at Christmas, we have the great substratum of Christian feeling, which supports all these varieties of national character, blending them into one whole and making up, with the central Divine idea, in which we all "live and move and have our being," the ideal Christmas Day.

