

Some Notable Whitsuntide Customs.

BY YORK HOPEWELL.



As compared with Christmas and Easter in England, the feast of Whitsuntide has but few surviving customs that are at all of wide or attractive interest. Yet up

and down the land there are to be found certain ceremonies and celebrations still existing which are well worth a little attention on the part of the lover of the quaint and antiquarian.

One of the most curious of these is that known as the "Cheese-Rolling," at Birdlip, in Gloucestershire. Birdlip is only a small place in itself, known to visitors at Cheltenham as a very pleasant spot at which to have a picnic or day's outing when they want to exchange the gaities of Cheltenham for something quieter and more restful.

The varied scenery along that six miles between Cheltenham and Birdlip has a specially large number of admirers each Whitsuntide on the occasion of the annual "Cheese-Rolling" at the smaller place. Of course, all the district is very hilly, and down one of the steepest declivities in Birdlip a cheese is set rolling from the top. Hundreds of folks from the surrounding villages then start pell-mell after the cheese, and the one who catches it first is entitled to keep it, besides being awarded another small prize into the bargain.

It is an extraordinary sight to watch all those people rushing break-neck down the

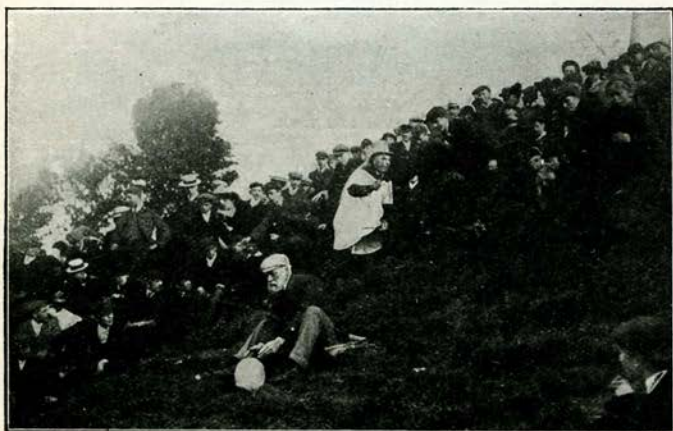
dangerous slope, and one simply marvels that a dozen necks are not broken in the descent. Yet, strange to say, there is hardly ever an accident, and those which have occurred at various times have never been very serious.

The palm for the strangest of all customs in an English church, however, must certainly be awarded to that of St. Ives, in Huntingdonshire. Here, on Whit-Tuesday morning each year, there is enacted a scene which has no parallel in any other place of worship in our land, and even at St. Ives it is one of those customs which would, as Shakespeare says, be "more honoured in the breach than the observance."

An eccentric inhabitant, some centuries ago, left a fair sum of money for the benefit of the boys and girls in the neighbourhood. The interest from this money was to be spent in buying well-bound Bibles, which were to be distributed to the children each Whit-Tuesday in the following manner: the communion-table was to be brought out from the chancel into the nave of the church, and a box of dice was to be provided. Each competitor for the Bibles was to have a throw of the dice, and those throwing the highest were to be accounted the winners of the gifts.

This extraordinary ceremony is still carried out in our own times, though I believe that, in deference to the change in popular sentiment, an ordinary table is provided for the dice-throwing instead of the sacred one which holds such an important and dignified position in every place of Divine worship in our country. There is much competition for these Bibles, and the ceremony of throwing for them is witnessed by a large number of people, often relatives and friends of the candidates, though visitors to the district seldom miss seeing such a unique sight. The children have to be under a certain age, and the vicar and churchwardens of the parish are in charge of the proceedings.

It is only fair to say that



Photo] "CHEESE-ROLLING" AT BIRDLIP, IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE. [N. May & Co.

the trustees carry out the terms of their trust with as little frivolity as possible, and have made the proceedings as dignified as they can. Yet it would surely be better if some method could be devised for getting rid altogether of a custom which is to-day quite out of keeping with the national feeling as regards places of worship.

Derbyshire, that contains so much of the quaint, superstitious, and curious within its borders, supplies us with more than one novel custom that takes place about Whitsuntide every year.

One of the most beautiful of such—not only in Derbyshire but in all England—is the "Blessing of the Wells," at Tissington, on Ascension Day. Tissington is a small village in Dovedale, noted for its wells and famous trees, and is situated in the midst of most charming scenery. If we may believe tradition the flow of the springs at this Derbyshire village was not affected during a drought long, long ago, when all the neighbouring springs were quite dried up. Since that time it is said that the wells of Tissington have been dressed and decorated with flowers, leaves, and texts every year on Ascension Day, in token of the gratitude and joy of the people at such a signal proof of Divine favour.

The usual method of procedure is to cover the various wells, of which there are several in different parts of Tissington, with wooden boards of all shapes and sizes. Before Ascension Day these coverings are plastered over with thick coatings of soft clay. Then various kinds of flowers (real ones), together with leaves and cones, are stuck into this clay on the appointed day, so as to form a sort of mosaic, which is always most striking in its design and colouring. Texts of Scripture usually adorn the upper part of the well, being made to harmonize with the design.

There is a short service, held in the little church, and then a procession of the villagers and visitors is formed, headed by the clergyman and the choir. It goes to every well in turn, Psalms being read or sung at each of them, whilst sometimes a short lesson is read also, a hymn sung, or a few words spoken by the minister.

Large crowds now go to Tissington each Ascension Day from such places as Buxton and Matlock for the simple services which

have become so celebrated, and they never fail to be impressed with the striking character of the thanksgiving of which the well-dressing is the outward and visible sign.

So much has been written at one time or another about the Whitsuntide processions in Yorkshire and Lancashire that we do not propose to deal with them here further than merely mentioning them. But instead of giving any detailed account of the great Preston and Leeds processions, which are so widely known, let us speak of a wonderful

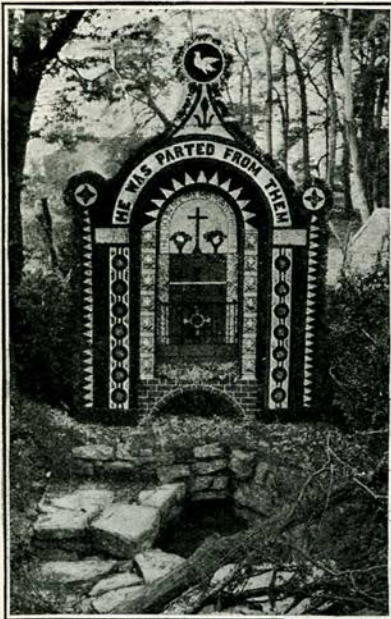


ST. IVES, HUNTINGDON, WHERE DICING FOR BIBLES TAKES PLACE AT WHITSUNTIDE

Whitsuntide celebration at Derby, which is not nearly so celebrated, and which is, nevertheless, perhaps the greatest of all Sunday School processions in our island.

It is the custom at Derby—and an excellent custom, too—for the various denominations to show the true spirit of Christian unity at Whitsuntide by letting all their Sunday scholars meet together at this annual festival. The famous market-place at the Midland town is the scene of the operations, and here come the wonderful processions from every Sunday School in the town on the great day of the year, so far as they are concerned. The children march through the town to the rendezvous preceded by bands of music, they often sing as they go, and their banners are usually worth going miles to see.

Last Whitsuntide there were no fewer than



WELL-DRESSING AT TISSINGTON.
Photo Reg. H. Cocks.

thirty thousand Sunday scholars thus gathered together in that market-place, and over sixty fine bands accompanied them there. So dense was the crowd, and so thronged were all the chief streets, that traffic in the centre of Derby was entirely suspended for several hours, as there was no room for anything or anybody but the Sunday Schools and their enthusiastic supporters and friends.

What a testimony to grand work in Derby is such a state of things, and how splendid it would be if other places would copy this! And when all those bands played the sacred songs, whilst the delighted and happy children, with their parents, too, in many cases, sang their favourite hymns, what a noble chorus of praise swelled up to the skies from at least forty thousand throats!

It is worthy of note that all the Jewish synagogues in our land are decorated at Whitsuntide, a feature which is not to be overlooked in an article of this kind. The Jewish Pentecost always synchronizes with the Christian Pentecost, and so each Whitsun the Jew throughout our land begins to keep

his "Feast of Weeks" exactly as his father did in Bible times, in so far as this is possible.

This feast was intended to celebrate the ingathering of the harvest, and so it seems inappropriate in our country to keep it at Whitsuntide. But we must remember that the harvest in Palestine was begun in what is our June, so that the Jew is right after all, from his point of view, in maintaining this curious custom each Whitsuntide.

The congregation of the synagogue is somewhat handicapped in decorating for its harvest festival in this way, since there are as yet no sheaves of corn, no gleanings of barley, etc., to be had for that purpose. But there is a wealth of flowers of all kinds, both wild and cultivated, and the synagogue is always decorated with the choicest plants and blossoms for this great occasion.

To the Jew this ancient custom is specially significant, for not only does it represent to him his forefathers' "Feast of Weeks," but tradition, which is, as we all know, most important with his sect, tells him that the Pentecostal Day is the one on which, some 3,400 years or so ago, the Ten Commandments were given to the assembled Israelites on Mount Sinai through the medium of Moses. He therefore looks forward to our festival of Whitsuntide with a peculiar feeling of reverence, and he religiously counts the days which intervene between Easter and Pentecost. In fact this very tale of the days has its name, for it is known as "The Counting of the Omer."

So few are the actual decorative customs of the Jewish people in our land that this one, falling as it does each Whitsuntide, is well worthy of a place in this account.

A strange custom is observable at a great number of places throughout the kingdom each Whitsuntide, but it is more especially prevalent and marked in some towns of the North. Yet to show how widely it has spread, we may notice that it is seen in its most striking form at one or two spots in Essex, though the southern towns generally seem to know little about it as compared with those from Nottingham to the Tweed.

This custom is the curious one of children appearing on Whit-Sunday in entirely new clothes from head to foot. What is its origin seems to be lost in the mists of antiquity. Some people have suggested that it is typical



WELL-BLESSING AT TISSINGTON.
Photo Reg. H. Cocks.

of the "new spirit" given by the Holy Ghost when He rules the human heart. Others have suggested that it is a survival of the origin of "White Sunday" itself, when the new members of the ancient church appeared in white garments. A more modern view is that it is due to the exigences of our climate, which usually prevents one wearing new summer attire much before Whitsuntide.

Whatever the real reason, the strange custom is very common amongst the peasantry and lower classes of our northern counties, and the sight in such towns as Bradford, Manchester, Leeds, Blackburn, Sheffield, Newcastle, etc., is very striking each Whitsun, when one sees thousands of children all dressed in new clothes.

But perhaps few spots can rival Thaxted, in Essex, in this respect. So strongly is the custom supported there that the special day kept in this way has become known more than locally as "Butterfly Day," from the gay appearance and vivid colours exhibited by the inhabitants, who don new attire on that



TWO VIEWS OF A VERY PRETTY WHIT-MONDAY PROCESSION AT PRESTON.

Photos Clifford Turner.

occasion. Each person seems to be trying to outvie all others in gaudiness of dress and in the jollifications of eating, speech-making, and pleasure on "Butterfly Day," so that the feast has become proverbial for merry-making and show. This is not the best way of keeping

Whitsuntide by far, for the spirit, loved and praised by our Lord, is not that which concerns itself with "What shall we eat, and what shall we drink, and wherewithal shall we be clothed?"

At Castleton, in Derbyshire, there is enacted every year, at or near Whitsuntide, an extraordinary custom. A huge garland of wild flowers is made on a frame of wood, which in shape somewhat resembles a bee-hive. Towards dusk a procession is formed of the inhabitants, which usually sets out from some prominent spot in the village. The local band, of course, accompanies the procession, and generally makes its presence very well known.

Then comes a horseman, who bears the great garland on his shoulders, and often finds the



Photo

SUNDAY SCHOOL PROCESSION AT SKIPTON.

[D. Brownsworth.]

weight of it no small matter. It completely envelops the upper portion of his body, but generally enough space is left for him to partake, with the rest of the processionists, of the refreshments that are provided gratuitously for all taking part in the ceremony.

Another mounted man also accompanies the procession; but it is his duty to play the fool for the rest, and to that end he is dressed in women's clothes, and tries to make himself appear as much like a woman as possible. The more he can act as clown the more pleased the people are, and the more successful he is supposed to be in his rôle.

From miles around the country folks flock to Castleton to take part in the parade and

The garland is left on the steeple to wither away, until there is practically little of it remaining. The unperished remnant, however, is removed before another celebration occurs, so as to make room for the new garland. Some people connect the custom with the celebration of Royal Oak Day, which, occurring upon the 29th of May, is always just about Whitsuntide. But others do not agree with this supposed origin, though they cannot suggest one more probable.

Whitsun Tuesday is also a notable time at the old church of St. James's, Mitre Court, Aldgate, in London, for there a sermon, known as the "Flower Sermon," is preached each year on that day, in accordance with



A CHURCH MISSIONARY PROCESSION AT WAKEFIELD.

to join in the subsequent festivities. The procession goes through all the place, accompanied by large crowds, until at length it reaches the church. There appliances have already been prepared, by which the huge garland is hoisted to the very highest point of the tower. When this has been done the ceremony comes to an end amidst cheers.

ancient usage and the terms of a will made long ago. There are other sermons of this nature which have been similarly arranged for in past times in London churches, such as those at St. Leonard's, Shoreditch, and at Stepney Church; but the sermon at St. James's, Aldgate, is the only one that is specially ordered to take place at Whitsuntide.

In our JUNE ISSUE there will appear, beside other attractive features, an article dealing with the philanthropic work of young Society Ladies. It is entitled "GIRLHOOD AND SERVICE," and is written by the LADY RACHEL BYNG. It will be profusely illustrated. ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧