

VILLAGE SKETCHES : X, (PART 2)

EARBY FEAST

Of all the institutions of a social nature which have survived the march of time, the annual holiday season known as Earby Feast, is deserving of note.

Feasts in ancient times were associated with religious observance. Certain days were set apart on which the ordinary labour of life was suspended, and enjoyment of a more or less religious nature was indulged in. In all parts of the world, where ever the religion of the country has been dear to the whole of the nation, the fixed state festivals have been associated with religion.

Egypt had many festivals which were consecrated to the Nile, Oriris, Plato and her countless deities.

The Greeks had several festivals, but two principal ones, and the expenses were met out of the public purse.

In the later days of the Roman Empire the Imperial City revelled in innumerable feasts.

But many of the festivals of the pagan world were accompanied by disgusting performances and scenes.

SACRED FESTIVALS

held an important place in the Jewish religion. The principal Jewish festivals were the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

In the early years of the Christian church

LOVE FEASTS

were instituted, and they were usually celebrated in the same place where the disciples met for worship, and in close connection with religious exercises. As the Church grew in numbers and wealth it became more difficult to manage such feasts with propriety, and to prevent them becoming occasions of scandal rather than edification.

The Methodist Love Feasts, which are still held in some parts of the country, are a lingering reminder of those primitive customs.

In England religious festivals had not only been associated with the headquarters of the Church in the City of London and in the Cathedral cities, but small villages had there feasts or fairs, which were held on or near the festival of the patron Saint to which the Church of the village was dedicated.

On the festival of the Patron Saint of the village, crowds of neighbours from adjoining villages flocked to the place, the inhabitants of which used to keep open house, and entertain all their relations and friends who came from a distance. They used to erect booths and tents with bows of trees near the Church and celebrate the festival with much thanksgiving and prayer.

By degrees they began to forget their prayers and remember only the feasting. Peddlers and hawkers came to find a market for their wares, their stalls began to multiply, and thus the

germ of a fair was formed.

The word “fair” is derived from the Latin word “feria,” which means a festival.

THE PARISH FEAST DAY

The right of granting permission to hold a fair was, by degrees, vested in the King, who for various considerations bestowed this favour on nobles and Merchant Guilds. In country places this power was vested in the Lord of the Manor.

The fair was not open until it was proclaimed by the Mayor or the town crier, and then there was a bedlam of sounds, caused by the noise of the traders, the music of the minstrels, the jingling of the bells of the Morris Dancers, while hot coins were thrown to the children, who scrambled and shrieked with glee.

During the reign of Edward I it was felt that churchyards, or immediate precincts of the Churches and Abbeys, were being desecrated by fairs, and a law was passed to check the custom of holding fairs near to a place of worship.

But there were many villages which did not possess a Parish Church, and Earby is a case in point.

Village feasts or fairs became general, and the village green or common was the fixed locality for the festive proceedings.

EARBY FEAST IN THE XVIII CENTURY

That our village, in spite of its being neither a parish or a township (being included in the ancient parish of Thornton-in-Craven) had a communal life of its own, is quite evident. In the Elizabethan period there existed many substantial farm houses and public buildings, and of these which are still in existence may be named Waddington Fold, commonly known as “Wadd Fowd,” and now occupied by Mr.J.S. Procter (who is known to everybody as “Jim Sam”) ; the old Grammar School and the White Lion Inn. Probably there would be others which have been demolished or re-modelled. It is known that there was a substantial corn mill at Mill Brow, where the corn of the district was brought to be ground into meal, and later there was a warehouse at Green End for the storage of hand-loom woven cotton goods. At that time the centre of the village was

THE VILLAGE GREEN

It was an extensive plot of common land in the centre of the village, and on the verge of it there was the well-built old fashioned country inn, the “White Lion.”

Unfortunately all that remains of the “green” is an area of about 100 square yards in front of the inn and the Wesleyan Chapel, which is a bit of a “no-man’s land” (and be it said with bated breath, a disgrace to whatever authority is responsible for allowing it to remain in its present condition).

In those days when every village was to a large extent self-contained, there would be the

usual accompaniment of village civilisation, the blacksmith's forge, the wheelright's shop, and the village store.

The approach of feast day would be attended by much gossip and preparation, and

CHALLENGES WERE THROWN OUT

to the neighbouring villages and towns to try their skill and prowess against the men and boys of Earby. The games and contests were old-fashioned English games - wrestling, quoits, bowls, skittles and, in more modern times, a cricket match would be arranged.

The wrestling contest used to arouse widespread interest, for the village blacksmith, whose forge was on "the Green," was a "mighty man" both in his craft and in sport, and he held the "championship" for Yorkshire against all comers, the visitors even including, on occasion, giants from Cumberland and Westmorland.

In the days when rural England was in a more prosperous state, before the Napoleonic and other wars brought on blight and poverty, a village festival (according to Miss. Mitford in "Sketches of Rural Life) was "a joyful affair, especially when it was held in the beginning of July, when the days were at the longest, and the weather at the finest, and the whole world was longing to get out of doors."

According to Miss. Mitford it was customary at English rural festivals in midsummer to reproduce some features of the Maytime festivities.

This included the erection of a Mayhouse on the common or green, for the benefit of the dancers, the Mayhouse being composed of booths made of timber and canvas and garlanded with branches of trees and flowers.

The contests being over, the young people took to dancing, and the Mayhouse presented a scene of delightful animation, as the dancers performed their old English country dances, country lads and lasses mixing with the ladies and gentlemen of the district.

There was fun and revelry on all sides. "Punch and Judy" was there, with fiddlers and ballad singers ; - a Frenchman with dancing dogs - a Bavarian woman selling brooms - stalls laden with fruit, and frippey-boys throwing at boxes - girls playing at ball ; there were also donkey races, jumping in sacks, grinning through horse collars, and other diversions more renowned for their antiquity than their elegance."

There was plenty of eating and drinking on the "Green," with the older men smoking their pipes and recalling days of "Auld Lang Syne."

EARBY FEAST FIFTY YEARS AGO

When Earby became an industrial community the annual feast retained its popularity, although the observance was changed in many respects.

Owing to the Enclosure Acts the Green and Common Lands around had been appropriated by those who held the manorial rights, and there was not the space available, as in former times,

for the feast celebrations.

“THE FAIR”

associated with the feast continued as of yore, and was located round the old village inn. The stall holders, among whom was a well known character called “Swaggering Dick,” took up their places on the spare ground that remained on “The Green,” and the swings, shooting galleries, coconut shies, etc., were accommodated in the yard behind the inn, and the field around. Now and then a travelling circus would provide an extra attraction, and the popular “Punch and Judy” was usually in evidence.

What a scene it was in that crowded congested area, especially on the Saturday and Monday nights, with the village population swollen by visitors from Barnoldswick, Kelbrook, Thornton, Lothersdale and other places!

FAIRGROUND SCENES

There were men challenging each other to “try their strength” and occasionally a man could be found who could “ring the bell” at every stroke of the hammer. There were venturesome youths who risked their necks on the “swings,” and nervous people feared they would go “over the top.”

There was chaffing and jesting, hustling the “foreigner.” The good sense of the people prevented much rowdyism, and no serious offence seemed to have marred the historical observance of the feast.

THE WHITE LION INN

is deserving of special notice in this connection. For about two and a half centuries it has maintained its existence, as shown by the following inscription which appears over the sign of a “White Lion,” over the central doorway :-

IOSHVA : IANE
WINDLE : IVNE 29
R.B. 1681 I.B.

The two names, Joshua and Jane Windle, evidently refer to the original owners and occupiers, and the initials on each side of the date of erection are probably those of the builders. The name Windle is one of the oldest of Earby names, and the owners of the inn would undoubtedly be related to Robert Windle, who built and endowed the Grammar School.

As an old English inn for the lodging and entertainment of travellers, it must have had a remarkable history, if only its stones could speak. Nearby there is an old road which led from Skipton to Colne and Blackburn, and pack horse travellers would make it one of their calling places. It must be left to the imagination to visualise the scenes which took place in the kitchen and parlour of the inn.

To all old Earby people there is one name, that of Edmondson, which is inseparably associated with the village inn.

For four generations at least it has been in their possession. Mary Edmondson, who was known as “Owd Mary” and her son William Edmondson, who was born in the inn, must have

occupied the house for about a hundred years.

Later it was in the possession of Mr. Matthew Gaunt, who married William Edmondson's daughter, Mary Ann, and it is now occupied by Mr. John Gaunt the younger son of the late Mr. Matthew Gaunt. (For some years it was also occupied by Mr. Greenwood Hartley).

Mr. John Edmondson, formerly the Earby carrier to Skipton, was the son of William Edmondson, and the late Mr. Richard Edmondson, of Cowgarth, was a brother. Their family name is one that has always been held in the highest regard in the village. Forty years ago, owing to the illness of Mary Edmondson, at the time of the feast, the fair was diverted to the lower part of the village, and the small field known as "The Doffers Croft," has ever since been called "The Fair Ground." It was adapted for that purpose by William Wright, of School Fields, and is now in the possession of Councillor Fred Wright.

Before the introduction of the "long holiday" at Earby Feast, the fair ground was a popular resort for people from miles around, as well as the villagers, and the scene was a dazzling and animated one, especially with the introduction of the modern "merry-go-round" with a mechanical organ.

During the 19th century, Earby feast had its religious associations in the

CHARITY SERMONS

at the Methodist Chapel, in Stoneybank Road, and later, in the beautiful gothic Wesleyan Chapel, which is built on the old village green, and on the opposite side of the road to the White Lion Inn. These services been refereed to in previous articles, but it may be stated that they reached their climax in popularity about thirty years ago, when the chapel used to be packed to suffocation on the visits of Rev.J.R. Immison, a very eloquent and forceful preacher.

SUNDAY SCHOOL WALKING DAYS

prior to 1902, was always on "Feast Monday." There were only two schools then, the Baptist and the Wesleyan and there existed, for a hundred years, a good deal of friendly (and sometimes otherwise) rivalry.

When Earby got a brass band it was always claimed by the Baptists, and the Wesleyans had to be satisfied with "Barlick Band."

But it was a day!

Everybody turned out in the procession, or to watch it, and the whole place was en fete.

And what competition! Who had the most scholars in the procession? Which had the best display. Who sang the best? and everybody tried their hardest and best. Then there was a great tea party at the two schools, and afterwards they went on to two separate fields for sports and pastimes.

On one occasion they united , and that was just about fifty years ago on the coming of age of Councillor Robert W. Bracewell, eldest son of the late Mr.C. Bracewell. The processions joined forces at Green End House, and a presentation of an illuminated address was made to Mr. Bracewell by Canon Morris of Thornton.

In modern times, thanks to railway facilities, Earby feast ended at the seaside. There was

usually a

“SPECIAL TRIP” TO MORECAMBE,
and sometimes to other Lancashire seaside places, but Morecambe used to be the favourite
with Earby people.

How fondly one recalls those visits as a boy : The jolly parties on the train ; the stroll upon
the promenade, and the first glimpse of the Lake Mountains across the silvery bay ; a ride in a
waggonette to the “Strawberry Gardens,” where a company of jolly trippers from down
Yorkshire made merry by singing

“One more river to cross”-

“One more river to cross”

The animals went in two by two,

The elephant and the kangaroo,

One more river to cross.

To hear that sung with such gusto was worth going to Morecambe for ; then on occasion
there was a steamer trip to Grange, with its beautiful roses and greenery.
Time has brought with it many changes, but may the spirit of old Earby feast live on amidst
the new forms of social entertainment.

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