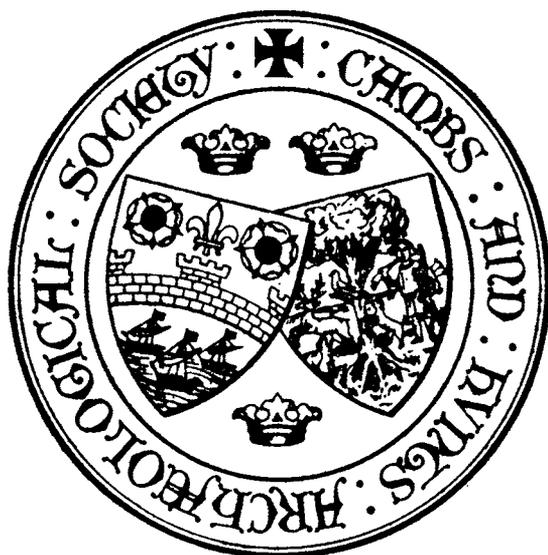


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VOLUME VII, PART III.

EDITED BY THE REV. E. H. VIGERS, M.A.
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HUNTINGDONSHIRE FOLK AND THEIR FOLKLORE II.

by C. F. TEBBUTT.

Since I published "Huntingdonshire Folk and their Folklore" in Volume VI., Part V. of these Transactions, interest has been stimulated in the folklore of the county and a certain amount of additional information has been recorded. It is now thought that this is worth printing as an addendum to the above article. Many people have sent me information, but I must mention especially that recorded by Miss Coles, of Spaldwick, and Dr. John Newton, late of Alconbury Hill.

The following notes will be arranged as far as possible in the same order as in the original publication.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD.

From St. Neots comes the idea that the colour of a child's hair is determined by conditions at its conception, a black haired child being conceived in the dark, a light haired one in the light, and a red haired one in front of a fire.

From Kimbolton and Waresley comes the belief that the season of birth affects the capacity of a person to feel temperature changes, those born in the summer feeling the cold more than those born in the winter. The contrary belief is also held, a woman telling me that if she had children she would try to arrange for them to be born in the summer so they should not suffer from cold as she herself did, being winter born.

A well-known Huntingdonshire solicitor confirmed the belief in the luck of presenting gold to a new born baby. He still possesses a set of Jubilee gold coins of 1887 presented to him at his birth in that year.

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE.

Some scepticism has been expressed to me about the belief that if a bride walks naked to her husband's house she absolves him of all her debts. A confirmation and explanation has, however, since been published in "Confessions of an Uncommon Attorney," page 40/41 (Dent 1945), where the late Mr. Hine, of Hitchin, says "the custom of a bride marrying in a shift and so relieving her husband of her debts is based on the old law that a husband is only responsible for his wife's ante-nuptial debts to the extent of the fortune she brought him."

DAILY LIFE

MOB JUSTICE.

A remarkable example of villagers taking the law into their own hands occurred at Great Gransden in August, 1946. A male inhabitant of the village was tarred and feathered in the belief that he was guilty of an alleged offence which the police investigated but found they could take no action.

The victim was enticed to the Plough Inn at 8 o'clock in the evening by a false message. Here he was seized by several men, stripped of his clothes and spread-eagled under the walnut tree outside the inn. Meanwhile a can of tar was ready warmed up in a nearby baker's oven and a pillow ripped up to provide the feathers. The actual tarring was done by women while the men held the victim down. Tar was even brushed on the man's bald head and then feathers added plentifully. A small audience watched the proceedings, but the intention to march the resulting apparition round the village was frustrated by a heavy shower of rain, and he was let go to race home across the fields. A woman he met on the way was said to have fainted with fright (See "St. Neots Advertiser," August 23rd, 1946, "Hunts. Post," September 5th, 1946, "News of the World," September 1st, 1946).

ANIMAL CALLS.

It is well known that the words used to call or drive domestic animals vary from district to district all over the country, and some local ones are given below:—

Sheep (driving): "Heu, heu."

Cows (calling): "Come on, come on," "Curra-crr"
and "Coof, coof."

Pigs (calling): "Tig, tig."

Ducks (calling): "Dill, dill."

Pigeons and Ferrets (calling): "Hew, hew"
(whistled).

Dogs (to encourage to hunt): "Lew, lew."

HUNTING AND FISHING.

A local farmer recently greatly astonished a London friend, to whom he wanted to present a brace of rabbits, by calling them out of their holes. This he did by placing the back of his hand against his mouth and drawing in breath to make a noise like a squealing rabbit being attacked by a stoat. Besides rabbits and rats, stoats, and even foxes, can often be induced to

come out of cover by the skilful performer. The latter animals no doubt think they have an easy victim caught in a trap or snare.

As eel catching by means of the plaited ozier traps, known as hives and grigs, has now almost died out in the county, it is worth recording that a full description of these traps and the method of using them locally was published in *Man* (August, 1936).

FOODS.

At the killing of a pig or birth of a calf it was (and often still is) the custom to give a dish of fry or a jug of beastins, or bizenings (cow's first milk after birth of calf) to one's special friends. Both plate and jug must be returned unwashed otherwise bad luck will attend the bacon curing or come to the cow and calf.

THE GARDEN

The advisability of sowing crops by the moon is still widely believed. Onions and other small seeds should be sown when the moon is "growing to the full," while for potatoes it should be "under the earth." The date for bean sowing on heavy lands is remembered by

"On St. Valentine's Day
Set beans in clay."

Walnuts should be gathered for pickling at the time of Abbotsley Feast (third Sunday in July).

A dark Christmas foretells a good pea year.

PHOTOGRAPHY

A recent superstition is that it brings bad luck to be photographed on a motor cycle. An accident is sure to follow.

VILLAGE NICK-NAMES AND RHYMES

More rhymes and nick-names associated with particular villages or groups of villages have been collected.

EYNESBURY.

Inhabitants called Eynesbury toe-rags or scallywags.

UPTON, HAMERTON, WINWICK AND THURNING.

"Upton's on a hill,
Hamerton's in a hole,
Winwick blows the bellows,
Thurning supplies the coal."

"Hamerton has the largest tap room in the world," the one public house having only an "Off Licence" the beer is drunk on a seat outside.

"Hamerton folk put their hands out to see if it is raining,
Alconbury Weston folk look at the brook."

"Buckworth, Barham, Spaldwick and Stow,
Four little villages all in a row."

"Godmanchester for a sire,
Huntingdon for a boar,
Brampton for a pretty girl,
Buckden for a whore."

ABBOTS CHAIR.

A further story has come to light relating to the Abbots Chair, or Hurstingstone, that stands on the roadside between St. Ives and Old Hurst, and gave its name to the Hurstingstone Hundred. This is to the effect that should the stone sink below ground, blood will flow in Bluntisham street.

In my previous article, reference is made to a corner stone in Noble Lane, Bluntisham, which turned itself round and was associated with cocks crowing. In "Country Life," August 14th, 1946, a letter describes similar stories in connection with "The Cheese Ring" stones on St. Cleer Moor, Cornwall.

CALENDAR CUSTOMS

PLOUGH MONDAY.

A cutting from the "Peterborough Advertiser" of January 14th, 1927, records that Plough Monday was still being celebrated at Ramsey in that year.

From Alconbury comes a plough witching song, the same as that from Yelling previously recorded.

At Easton, plough boys, dressed in rags with black faces and a tin and stick band, used to parade the village collecting money. The song remembered would seem to have been the chorus of "The Farmer's Boy." This was continued by children up to 1939.

At Sawtry and Alconbury Weston, up to 1944, boys collected money with black and whitewashed faces and coats turned inside out. They sang:—

“I am a little plough boy,
 My shoes are very thin,
 I have a little money box to put a penny in,
 If you haven't got a penny a half penny will do,
 If you haven't got a half penny, God bless you.”

At Spaldwick in 1943 boys with black faces took round a money box with the request “Remember the poor plough boy,” but it is said that formerly men took a plough round and if no money was forthcoming from a house, ploughed over the lawn. The owner was considered to have no redress.

At Southoe, plough witches had black faces and collected money. A slice of cake and a bowl of milk were always given them at Squire Thornhill's at Diddington.

MAY DAY

Although May Day is still celebrated in many Hunts. schools, the centuries old custom of the children taking round garlands seems to have died during the late war, probably owing to the children being given more pocket money by their parents.

Many more details of May Day celebrations of the past have, however, been recorded

At Alconbury, it is remembered that about 1890 an old soldier, who lived in the corner house (east end) of the row of six cottages facing Maypole Square, used to dig holes in the road in a line opposite the row and set up May bushes there on May Day.

Hamerton had a Maypole until about 1920 and the song was “Nuts in May.” Garlands, either made on hoops or heart shaped, were taken round the village and money collected.

At Sawtry in 1943 girls were carrying round a garland with a black doll covered by curtain net and collecting for the Prisoners of War Fund. They sang:—

“Two little maidens here we stand
 With our garland in our hand,
 We have come to your door to-day
 Because it is the first of May.
 May May, merry, merry, May,
 May May, merry, merry, May,
 Because it is the first of May.”

It is remembered that in the past, at dusk, a garland used to be hung on a rope stretched across the street,

and children took sides and threw balls over to each other and then changed ends.

Another Sawtry song was:—

“It is May, it is May, and all the earth is gay,
At last cold winter’s gone away.
It lingered away in a cold, cold snow
To see the delicate primrose glow.
So now it is May, it is May, it is May.
The Nightingale he sings by night,
The Cuckoo sings by day,
So I hope you will think of our money money box
Before we go away.”

At Southoe about 1880 young men would go out early on May morning and cut large branches of hawthorn and put them in front of people’s houses, especially where village girls lived. An unpopular man sometimes had a gate-post or heavy piece of wood placed leaning against his door, so that it fell in when he opened it.

At Yelling, Mr. Meeks (aged 78 in 1946) told me he had often helped to cut May bushes as a boy and put in front of people’s doors where they hoped to get a tip. Mothers used to make garlands for their daughters to carry round.

At Godmanchester in 1943 I saw two parties of girls carrying garlands, but singing no song. They were collecting for Mrs. Churchill’s Aid to Russia Fund. One doll was in a double hoop and lying in a bed of flag leaves decorated with blue-bells and cowslips. The other garland consisted of two dolls lying in decorated wicker work beds. These garlands, unless the fancy of individual children, seem a different tradition from the usual Hunts. type.

LITTLE PAXTON.

In my previous article I quoted Miss Ethel Ladds as saying that the Little Paxton Maypole Tree disappeared about 1897. A reference has now been found in the “St. Neots Advertiser” recording that it was blown down in a great gale on March 24th, 1895.

WEATHER SIGNS

“Ice in November to carry a duck,
The rest of the winter all sludder and muck.”
“Rooks building high foretells a wet summer”
(and the converse).

Candlemas Day is the day when the weather for the rest of the winter can be foretold. If it is fine and sunny more hard weather can be expected. At Sawtry it is known as Badger's Day, probably on account of the old saying "If a badger can see the shadow of his tail on Candlemas Day, the winter is only half over" (See Chambers' "Book of Days" for similar German proverbs).

"A January Spring is worth nothing."

"As many mists in March,
As many frosts in May."

"Summer lightning ripens the corn."

WITCHCRAFT

A cutting from the "Peterborough Advertiser" (undated, but about 1920) records a story by Beresford Stevens of an Upwood witch who lived opposite the "haunted house." Men were bringing a load of wheat past her door when the horses stopped and refused to draw the wagon further. The old witch came out of her cottage and picked up a straw that lay across the road, saying "There, my man, the horses are not likely to draw the load while that straw is in the way." The horses then proceeded without difficulty.

Many references to Huntingdonshire witches and witch trials can be found in Dr. Murray's "The Witchcult in Western Europe" (Clarendon Press, 1921) which contains a printed list of all known sources of information as well as a topographical index.

In January, 1950, I saw a fox's foot nailed on a board and hung on the wall of one of the Oley Alms Houses at Great Gransden. This was possibly originally done as a protection from witchcraft.

Although referring to events just over the Cambridge-shire border, the following story is, I think, worth telling. My informant was Mr. Smith, who in 1940 kept the Spread Eagle Petrol Station, Croxton, Cambs.:—

In 1908 he was working as blacksmith's helper for Mr. Calver, of Bourn, who had a blacksmith named George Kirk (who afterwards left for Histon and worked for Chivers, and is now dead).

A farmer disputed with Calver about his bill, declaring he had paid Calver's workmen cash for the work charged for. The workmen denied this and bore the

farmer a grudge on account of this imputation on their honesty.

One morning about 9 a.m. the farmer was seen approaching in his pony cart. Geo. Kirk turned towards the road, saying "I'll teach him a lesson," took out his handkerchief and and put it to his nose and then back in his pocket. The pony stopped and refused to go on in spite of his master's efforts to make him continue, and remained stationary. Geo. Kirk said to the farmer "He'll stay there all day until I let him go, and if you hit him, I'll hit you." The pony stayed there until about 5 p.m. and then Geo. Kirk went over and patted its neck, and it went forward immediately.

My informant asked Geo. Kirk how he did this. "Take a frog and put it in an ant-hill and leave it for the ants to eat. When nothing but the bones are left, take them and throw them into a stream and carefully watch for one bone that floats up stream. Keep this bone, and you can then give yourself to the devil and have the power I have got." My informant said he would do this. "Take my advice and don't," said Geo. Kirk. "You will never rest if you do."

They never had any trouble in shoeing horses while Kirk was there. If a young or shy horse was brought in, he would first go and pat it and speak to it and then leave it to the others with the assurance that it would be quite quiet, and it always was, even horses being shod for the first time were no trouble.

My informant saw these episodes and obviously believed in the explanations he gave.

FOLK MEDICINE

New examples of folk-medicine can be collected almost indefinitely.

The late Dr. Cross, of St. Neots, told me that in his early days of practice it was the usual custom when a child was vaccinated for the parents to put on a cow dung poultice, and to stop bleeding by applying a cob-web.

An informant from Easton tells me that his mother used to grow the Greater Celandine in order to squeeze out the juice from the stalks and flowers and mix it with lard. This was rubbed on warts or any sort of skin sores suffered by members of the family or farm animals.

From Somersham I was told that about 1920 a midwife, to cure a new-born baby of wind, dropped a red hot cinder into a glass of water and gave the baby some of the water.

In my own family it was a custom, once a year in April, to make Cowslip Tea. An afternoon was spent gathering cowslips and picking off the flowers without leaving any of the green attached. These were put in a teapot and boiling water added. A rather sickly yellow liquid was produced, which, as children, we all enjoyed, and it was said to do us good.

At Great Paxton sloe wine was given for diarrhoea, and a "clover pillow" to cure insomnia.

TREES AND PLANTS

The magic significance of elder was emphasized at Ramsey Heights in 1943 when a child told its teacher "When my mother burns elder in the copper she says she is burning the Devil."

The reverence for the hawthorn, possibly bound up with its significance in the May Day celebrations, produced many named thorn bushes, generally of great age and often forming boundary marks in the pre-inclosure open fields. An M.S. map of 1591, now deposited among the Hunts. County Council archives, depicts land between Stow and Kimbolton. On it are marked Tilbrook Bush and Lowsey Bush. (A Lowsey Bush still exists on the Northampton-Daventry road just beyond Dallington). An ancient thorn, cut down 20 or 30 years ago, used to stand in a field near the river marking the parish boundary between Great Paxton and Offord. Part of Monks Wood (N.W.) is known as Old Saul and this is said to have been named from a very tall poplar tree that once grew there near the site of a keeper's cottage. This tree was named Old Saul and was a well known landmark.

Timber fellers often have curious superstitions about trees. One is that they always look bigger when it is raining, and; therefore, that is the time when it is advantageous to take on a piece-work job. The belief that a felled tree will try to take its revenge by injuring the feller or sawyer is often expressed or implied.

The lasting qualities of fir when used inside a house is expressed by the rhyme:—

"Cover me up and keep me dry,
Hearts of oak I will defy."

TOLLS PAYABLE at this GATE.

	s.	d.
For every Horse, Mule, Ass or other Cattle drawing any Coach, Chariot, Landau, Sociable, Chaise, Curricie, Phaeton, or Hearse.	8	0
For every Horse, Mare, Gelding, Mule or Ass drawing any two wheeled Chaise, Chair, Gig or any Taxed Cart	9	0
For every Waggon, Wain, Cart or other such Carriage with six or nine Inch Bellies drawn by 7 or 8 Horses, or other Beasts of draught	2	8
by 5 or 6 D ^o	2	0
by 4 D ^o	1	4
by 3 C D ^o	1	0
by 2 D ^o	0	8
by 1 D ^o	0	4
For every Waggon, Wain, Cart or other such Carriage with Wheels of the breadth of four inches and a half and less than 6 inches drawn by 4 Horses, Oxen or other Beasts of draught including the additional Toll authorized by the General Turnpike Act of 3 rd Geo. 4 th Cap. 126.	1	8
by 2 D ^o including 1 D ^o	1	5
by 1 D ^o including 2 D ^o	1	0
by 1 D ^o including 1 D ^o	0	5
For every Waggon, Wain, Cart or other such Carriage with Wheels of less breadth than four inches and a half drawn by 4 Horses, Oxen or other Beasts of draught (including the additional Toll authorized by 3 rd Geo. 4 th Cap. 126.	2	0
by 5 D ^o (including 1 D ^o)	1	6
by 2 D ^o (including 1 D ^o)	1	0
by 1 D ^o (including 1 D ^o)	0	6
For every Horse, Mare, Gelding, Mule or Ass laden or unladen and not drawing.	1	8
For every Drove of Oxen or neat Cattle . . . Per Score . . .	1	8
And so in proportion for any greater or less number.		
For every Drove of Calves, Hogs, Sheep or Lambs . . . Per Score . . .	1	5
And so in proportion for any greater or less number.		

SAINT NEOTS and ELTISLEY GATES are ticket Bars to each other. **COTON** is not a Ticket Bar.

While the quick growing quality of the willow is thus described:—

“Plant an oak, it will buy you a saddle,
Plant a willow, it will buy you a horse.”

ANIMALS

At St. Nechts it is said that hens and pullets will not start winter laying until they have drunk “Tandrey Water.” This probably refers to St. Andrew’s Day (November 30th).

Beresford Stevens records (“Peterborough Advertiser,” 28th December, 1912) that adders were then still common in the neighbourhood of Ramsey Heights. They were popularly believed to be deaf, and “Deaf as an adder” was a common expression. On the belly of an adder was said to be an inscription “in Latin”:—

“If I could hear as I can see,
No man should be the death of me.”

Swallows are said to build their nests only against the houses of people with money.

MYTHICAL CHARACTERS

WICKED NICK FROM WINWICK.

Children from the Oundle district of Northamptonshire used to be frightened by threats of “Wicked Nick from Winwick.” Nothing more is known of this personage, but Winwick village itself is still known as “Wicked Winwick” and apparently its inhabitants used to enjoy an evil reputation.

JINNY BURNTARSE.

She seems to have been the Will of the Wisp, said to have been common in the days of the undrained fens, and regarded by farmers as a bringer of bad luck.

People at Leighton and Alconbury remember being frightened, as children, into coming in early for fear of being caught by this evil spirit that haunted ponds and watercourses at night with a light.

TURNPIKE TOLL BOARDS

The last of the toll gates in this county, that at Chatteris Ferry Toll, was bought out by Hunts. and Ely County Councils in 1949. Others at St. Ives Bridge and Earith Hermitage existed in living memory. Sawtry

Toll Bar was done away with many years ago, but the board with a list of tolls is preserved at the Durham Ox public house, Sawtry. Wintringham toll, on the St. Neots-Cambridge Road, was said to have been moved from a site between Cressener Terrace and Shady Path, Cambridge Street, St. Neots, to the position of the present toll cottage at Wintringham. This move worked greatly to the detriment of the Turnpike Trust when the railway was built, as all traffic to St. Neots Station used the Trust's road, but did not pass through the gate. The toll board, long preserved at Wintringham Hall, has now been removed and is therefore thought worth illustrating, from a photograph reproduced by kind permission of Mr. G. A. Gearey, of Bedford.

PLASTER CASTS OF BABY'S HANDS

I have been informed of a curious find at Holmwood House, Holme, in 1945. Concealed in a wall or nailed up behind panelling was a small deal box covered with blue paper and provided with lock and key and brass fittings. It appeared to be early 19th century. In the box were the white uncoloured plaster casts of a pair of baby's hands up to just above the wrists. Round the ends were roses (cut into the mould). The significance of the find is not known, but it seems worth recording.

THE FOUR MOST USUAL FEAST DAYS

A marriage settlement made in 1728 between Claudius Formareau and Mrs. Anne Banbury, both of Little Catworth, mentions the four most usual feast days in the year: The Annunciation of the B.V.M., the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, St. Michael the Archangel, the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ST. IVES BRIDGE

Evidence quoted (given before 1868) in "An Appeal to the House of Lords: *Simpson v. the Attorney General and Hunts. C.C.*, 1901" states that "barges were not allowed to pass under St. Ives Bridge on Sunday, and anyone so passing could be summoned." This belief may have dated from the time when the bridge was monastic property.

