



TISSINGTON WELL-DRESSING. THE HALL WELL.

DERBYSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL
AND
NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY.

Tissington Well-dressing.

By MRS. MEADE-WALDO.

IN these days of change, when so many things which link the present with the past are being swept aside and forgotten, and the old speech, the old customs, are becoming rarer every day, it may be appropriate to give some account of the well-dressing which takes place every year at Tissington, and hazard an attempt to show how it may have come down to us from the very remote past—a legacy from our predecessors who, two thousand or more years ago, peopled the hills and valleys of this country of ours, and rejoiced over the bountiful supply of good water, as do their successors at Tissington to-day.

On Ascension Day, or, as it is often called in these parts, Holy Thursday, the wells at Tissington are all decorated. Frames made of thin board are filled with clay, and on this foundation all kinds of designs are worked in flowers, berries, and lichens. Mottoes, elaborate borders, even pictures, are to be seen. At the well-dressing in 1900 one well had a medallion portrait of the Queen, whose birthday fell on Ascension Day that year, and another had a view of Windsor Castle. This

last was worked out almost entirely with elder catkins and grey lichens, and was very effective. The same wells have for years been decorated by the same families, and great pride is taken in the execution of the various designs.

There are five wells, called respectively the Hall Well, opposite to the Hall, and only separated from the front gate by the road which runs through the village; the Coffin Well, so called from its suggestive shape; Hand's Well, named after the family of Hand, who lived at the adjacent farm for some two hundred years; the Town Well; and the Yew Tree Well. This last name is quite modern; the well used to be called Goodwin's Well, from a family of that name who, till forty or fifty years ago, owned, and lived in, the house close by.

After a service in the Church, the clergy, choir, and congregation go in procession to the wells. At each, a portion of Scripture is read, or a Psalm chanted, and a hymn sung. At the last well the hymn is usually the "Old Hundredth," and then the Benediction is pronounced, and the crowd disperses.

Everyone in the village keeps open house for his friends. Neighbours from all the country side come for the festival, and the day is observed as a holiday. Farm servants in the district used always to stipulate, when hired, for leave to attend the well-dressing. It is interesting to observe that, unlike the "wakes" in most parts of the country, which have degenerated into mere pleasure fairs, this festival has never lost its religious character. The service in the Church and the procession with its Psalms and hymns form the principal part of the day's celebrations, and even now, when railways bring more strangers into the village to see the decorations at the wells, they, when joining in the procession, catch some of the reverent and attentive demeanour of those who, all their lives, have been used to look on the well-dressing as a religious festival. Long may the pretty old custom retain the simple religious character which now marks it!

Everything regarding the origin of the well-dressing is pure conjecture. Tradition says that in the fifteenth or sixteenth century there was a great drought in the land, and when every

other place lacked water, Tissington alone, had a plentiful supply, and the festival was instituted as a thanksgiving at that time, and has continued ever since. It is the writer's opinion that we should have to go back to Neolithic times to find the origin of what is now a Christian festival.

It is believed that well-and-water worship—that is to say, the worship of the spirits of wells and springs—was prevalent among our Neolithic precursors, for, wherever Neolithic remains are plentiful, there we find also vestiges of water worship—holy wells, wishing wells, etc., and, even to this day, it is customary to hang rags, and sometimes wreaths, to the bushes near by, or to the sides of such wells, or to drop a pin or a coin into them. Not to mention other instances, this is notably the case in Ireland, where the Neolithic period was of very long duration, and during which the people rose to a height of culture and civilization unsurpassed elsewhere.

The hill country of Derbyshire abounds in Neolithic remains: tumuli, stone circles, and single "standing stones" are of frequent occurrence. It seems possible that the well-dressing at Tissington may be the representative of an ancient prehistoric custom. When the Romans came they would bring their own religion, and they were always ready to adopt gods and ceremonies belonging to other beliefs. May we not suggest that they assimilated to their own Floralia the custom they found already in existence?

As time went on, Christianity spread over the hills and valleys of our country, and we find that it has always been the method of the Church to christianize heathen customs, rather than do away with them. The holy wells in Ireland have usually received the name of some saint, and we find heathen gods transformed into Christian saints, S. Elias, for instance, a saint much venerated in parts of Greece, being a Christian form of the Greek god Helios. Thus it seems possible that the well-dressings may have assumed something of their present form when, *circa* 460 A.D., the Rogation Days were instituted by Mamertus, Bishop of Vienne. It is also possible that the procession to the wells may have been added or

adopted, as tradition says, as a thanksgiving for the plentiful and unfailling water supply with which Tissington is blessed, a good supply of water being by no means the rule in the limestone country. The water at Tissington must come from a considerable depth, as may be proved by the fact that the temperature is the same—about 47 degrees Fahrenheit—both in hot or cold weather, and it is likely that it is “held up” by rocks of volcanic origin, there being evidences of volcanic action in many parts of the immediate neighbourhood.

It is not known that this festival ever fell into disuse, and it is much to be hoped that the pretty old custom may long survive, and keep its religious character, linking us, who take part in it, with the untold generations of thankful people who for so many centuries, have walked in procession to the wells in the little hill village.

We are indebted to the Rev. Reg. H. C. FitzHerbert, M.A., for the loan of the typical photograph,* which is reproduced in our illustration. He also furnishes us with the following early reference to the custom.

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER OF NICHOLAS HARDINGE, M.A., CLERK
TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS, WRITTEN IN THE YEAR 1758.

“Next day we decamped for Dovedale. The roads were good, and the face of the whole country picturesque. At Tissington, Fitzherbert’s village, we saw the springs adorned with garlands; in one of those was a tablet inscribed with rhymes, composed by the schoolmaster, in honour of these fountains, which, as Fitzherbert informs me, are annually consecrated upon Holy Thursday, the minister, with his parishioners, praying and singing over them. In this town the old parochial custom of acting Plays is also observed, though I never had the good fortune of being present at any of these Interludes. Have you more superstition interspersed with poetry in your Italian villages?”—*Poems, etc.*, by N. Hardinge, 1818. B.M., 79; d., 2.

* By Mr. Robert Bull, Sturston Road, Ashbourne.