The Sparsholt Nine Men's Morris

By A. G. Shirreff

Based on a paper on Nine Men's Morris and similar sedentary games read to the Society on the 21st of January, 1950 ; which was followed by a demonstration of various line and counter games.

IN the Church of the Holy Rood at Sparsholt there is a Nine Men's Morris " board " cut on the face of a stone in the north wall of the chancel. It is at 4½ feet from the ground, on the jamb of the interior opening of the priest's doorway, which is to the west of the Easter sepulchre (Pl. I). The pattern measures 5 by 2½ inches over all. An attempt has been at some time made to obliterate it by filling in the lines with cement, and it does not therefore come out very clearly in a rubbing (Pl. II), but Mr. F. M. Underhill's photograph (Pl. III) shows it distinctly and it is also just visible in a photograph of the Easter sepulchre in Volume XI (1905) of the *Journal*, Plate VI.

Nine Men's Morris is a game for two players, each of whom has nine " men " (counters or other small objects). The pieces of one player must be distinguishable from those of the other by shape, size or colour. The players play alternately, and first bring all their nine pieces one by one on to the board (Pl. IVA), placing them on any point which is vacant out of the 24 points at which the lines meet or cross. When all pieces are on the board the players move them alternately to a vacant point next to the point on which they stand. The object of placing or of moving pieces is to get three men in an unbroken row on any straight line and to prevent the other player doing so. Whenever a player gets a row of three he is entitled to remove one of his opponent's men (provided it is not in a row of three), and the game is won by the player who reduces his opponent's men to two. When a player has only three pieces left he may move to any point on the board, not necessarily an adjacent one.

As the pieces have to be moved about, the " board " must be in a horizontal and not in a vertical position. The Sparsholt pattern, if intended for a game, must therefore have been cut before the stone was built into the wall ; *i.e.* in the first half of the 14th century, when the chancel was rebuilt. The priest's door is not later, as its " segmental headed " interior arch is a characteristic piece of 14th century work. Even if the pattern was not used as a game board but was an unusually elaborate mason's mark, the same date would apply, and it would still be the pattern of a game which was popular in the 14th century.

For the game's popularity in the 14th century we have the evidence of Strutt,[1] who gives the rules of " Merelles, or, as it was formerly called in England, Nine Men's Morris ", with an engraving (from a Manuscript in the British Museum) showing the form of the Merelle table and the lines on it " as it appeared in the 14th century".

[1] *Sports and pastimes of the people of England* (1801).

These lines, he says, have not been varied.

Actually, there are two points of difference, as Strutt's figure (Pl. IVB) is square and not oblong, and it has four diagonals. Both these variations are found in different countries and in different ages in which the game has been played, but the first does not affect the game at all, and the second very little, only adding 4 to the 16 possible rows of three. With the diagonals the game is sometimes played with 11 or 12 pieces on each side.

Mediaeval English Morris boards are not infrequently to be seen marked on stones in castles or cathedral cloisters, where the game was no doubt played by soldiers in the intervals of guard duty and by schoolboys in the intervals of lessons. In an article on " The indoor games of schoolboys in the Middle Ages "[2] J. T. Mickelthwaite mentions examples in Norwich and Scarborough castles and on the benches of the cloisters at Gloucester and Salisbury. To these may be added Dover castle (see later) and Furness Abbey.[3] Besides the Sparsholt example, three others have been noted in the interior of churches, at Ickford (Buckinghamshire), Kirkby Underdale (Yorkshire) and Hargrave (Northamptonshire). The last is perhaps the same one as is referred to by Udal[4] in a church in "one of the upper counties", which was only found when a 13th century wall was pulled down, and which probably no longer exists.

The name " Merelles " or " Nine-penny Merrills " or " Marls " came from the old French " merel " (a counter), and a game of this name is twice mentioned in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1390), but it would be misleading to see references to our game in every mention of " Merelles " in English. For instance, we are told that the household of Edward IV purchased for the game of " Merelles " two foxes and 26 hounds of silver over-gilt. This would no doubt be a game similar to that of " Fox and Geese " which Strutt describes as somewhat resembling " Merelles". In France, " Marelles " now means the by no means sedentary game of " Hopscotch", though Cotgrave's dictionary in 1611 explained it as " Nine Men's Morris". This, the "larger Merelles", must be distinguished from the " smaller Merelles " or " Nine Holes " of which I shall have more to say later.

The best known reference to our game in English literature is in Shakespeare's " Midsummer Night's Dream", where Titania tells Oberon that owing to their tiff the seasons have changed—that " the fold stands empty in the drownéd field " and that " the Nine Men's Morris is filled up with mud ". Brand in his *Popular Antiquities* has collected what the 18th century commentators on Shakespeare

[2] *Arch. Journ.*, 49 (1892).

[3] Mr. J. L. Hobbs of Barrow-in-Furness has given me this example, and has drawn my attention to an article by P. V. Kelly in the *Trans. of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiq. and Arch. Soc.* (1926), 267.

[4] " Dorsetshire Children's games," *Folklore Journal* (1889).

have to say about this game. They all follow Farmer, and could not do better, for Farmer was skilled in country lore and justly claimed to have " removed a deal of learned rubbish, and pointed out Shakespeare's track in the ever pleasant paths of nature". He described the game as played in his time (1766) " in that part of Warwickshire where Shakespeare was educated and the neighbouring parts of Northamptonshire, where the shepherds and other boys dig up the turf with their knives, making a square pattern sometimes only a foot in diameter, sometimes three or four yards ". Hone's *Everyday Book* has a letter from a correspondent which describes the game in 1826 : " There is an ancient game, played by the shepherds of Salisbury Plain and village rustics in that part of the country, called ' Nine-penny Marl.' The scheme is cut in the clay or it might be drawn on the crown of a hat with chalk." The game was also mentioned in the 1820's in a poem by John Clare, who started life as a shepherd boy in Northamptonshire. It did not altogether die out with that generation of shepherds. Evidence has been collected (by Cox[5] and Gomme[6]) for its survival in the 1860's in Essex, Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Cornwall, Leicestershire and Oxfordshire, and in the 1890's in Yorkshire, Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire and Dorset, to which (from correspondence in *Notes and Queries* in 1897), can be added Derbyshire, Wiltshire and Norfolk. Mickelthwaite (1892) also mentions having seen the board chalked on a doorstep in London, and pebbles lying on it, " within the last twenty years." It is now, I believe, obsolete as a traditional game in England, though efforts have been made from time to time to revive it. For instance, rules and examples are given in " The Boy's Modern Playmate " published by Warne in 1895, and in 1902 the Army and Navy Stores put it on the market as " Morelles, a game of skill for Railway travellers and for home amusement." It is also among the games shown in the " Week-End Book."

I used to think (wrongly of course) that when Titania spoke of the Nine Men's Morris, she was thinking of a ground marked out for a Morrice Dance to be performed by nine men. There is some excuse for the mistake. That " Morris " should have been derived from " Merelles " is etymologically improbable, though Douce thought it might be a corruption suggested by the sort of dance which the counters perform in the course of the game. But it seems more likely that both game and dance were introduced as " Moorish " (morisco) from Spain, where the game was known in the 13th century by an Arabic (Moorish) name (*al querque*). When I first learnt the game it was not as an English one and it was not under the name of Nine Men's Morris or of Merelles. This was on a voyage to India, when a Czech fellow-passenger taught me his game of " Mlyn " (or " mill ") in exchange for some similar line and counter games which I had been collecting in India. It was on a later voyage to India

[5] 1903 edition of Strutt.

[6] Alice Bertha Gomme, *Traditional Games of England* (1894).

round the Cape that I first learnt the English name. I was showing this game to a white hunter from Tanganyika (this time in exchange for an African " Hole and Pebble " game) when another passenger who was walking the deck stopped and said, " Why, that's the old English game of Nine Men's Morris. I've seen it marked out at Dover Castle. They say Henry V's soldiers played it while they were waiting to cross to France." This was the first Englishman I have met who knew the game, and that only as a matter of antiquarian interest.

On the same voyage I learnt that the game was known not only in Europe, but also in Africa and Asia. This was from reading Burton's " First Footsteps in East Africa." Burton in 1854 found the game on his journey through Somaliland to Harar, and noted that a similar game was played in Germany under the name of Mühle (this still holds good) and in Afghanistan under the name of Kitār.

I have since found evidence for the game in other parts of the world. In the Indian sub-continent it is current in the Punjab, in Bundelkhand and in the extreme East in the Naga hills of Assam. In Bundelkhand Mr. Humphries,[7] in his cold weather tour of 1905, found this game among others commonly played at village meeting places in the Karwi subdivision, and also found evidence for its antiquity remarkably similar to the evidence we have at Sparsholt. This was a " board " marked on a slab in the wall of the inner shrine of a ruined twelfth century temple. From its vertical position Humphries found it " impossible to resist the conclusion that the game had been played on the stone before it had been used for the building of the temple."

The game is current in Ceylon, and Parker[8] also mentions incised patterns which he is inclined to date as early as the first century A.D. He has even found the same design in ancient Egypt, on the roof of the Kurna temple which was built in the 14th century B.C. But the Kurna pattern has a " guarded cross " in the middle, and may have been simply magical, as no doubt were the similar patterns found on pottery from Troy and on Indian punch-marked coins, which certainly could not have been used as game-boards. In chapter 14 of his book Parker has collected a great deal of information about this and similar games in other countries besides Ceylon. But the fullest treatment which this subject had received till recently was in an appendix on " Merels and allied Games " in H. J. R. Murray's *History of Chess* (1913). This is a storehouse of information as to the rules and patterns of these games, the countries in which they are found and the names by which they have been known in ancient and modern times. For Nine Men's Morris the list includes (besides those already mentioned) most European countries, Arabia, China and the U.S.A. An even fuller compendium is Mr.

[7] E. de M. Humphries in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1906).

[8] H. Parker. " Ancient Ceylon " (1909).

Murray's new book, *A History of Board games other than Chess*, (Clarendon Press, 1952), which contains the results of more than forty years' research into this fascinating field of study. An earlier compendium of great interest, also originally an appendix to a major work on Chess, is Thomas Hyde's *De Ludis Orientalibus* (1694), which formed part of his " Shahiludium " or " Mandragorias." Hyde was a worthy successor to the great Berkshire orientalist Edward Pococke in the Laudian professorship of Arabic at Oxford. He did not himself, like Pococke, travel in Eastern lands, but he lost no opportunity of meeting men who had, and for his encyclopaedic account of games ancient and modern, European and Asiatic, he laid his visitors under contribution—Greeks and Armenians, Chinamen and Arabs and servants of the East India Company among them.

A game to be distinguished from Nine Men's Morris (the greater Merelles) is the smaller Merelles, or " Nine Holes." This also is a line and counter game for two players with the object of getting three pieces in a row on points of junction. Each player has three pieces. In the form in which I first learnt the game (the Bengal " Tant Fant ") these pieces start in position, three in a row, on opposite sides of the board (Pl. IVC), and are then moved alternately to any adjacent points of junction which are vacant. The game is won by the player who first gets his row of three on any other line than that on which they started. A Spanish friend to whom I showed this game told me that he had played it as a boy under the name of " Tres en Raya," but that the pieces should be brought on to the board one by one. This is the more usual and the better form of the game.

The smaller Merelles is current in many European countries, in Arabia, in India, in the Philippine Islands, and in China and Japan. A full list of names and of countries is given by Murray, who, incidentally, makes a distinction between the rules of the smaller Merelles and those of Nine Holes. In both, he says, the counters are brought on one by one, but in Nine Holes they can subsequently be moved to any vacant point, not only to an adjacent one.

This game is now practically extinct in England, though it was played fairly recently in Galloway with the name of " Corsicrown " (Gomme[9]) and in London streets as " Knockings in and out " (Mickelthwaite[10]). The somewhat similar game of "Noughts and Crosses," in which there is no movement of counters, is still played surreptitiously in school ; a Berkshire name for this is " Tit-tat-toe" (Gomme[9]). Hyde in the seventeenth century recorded several other names for " Nine Holes," such as " Copped Crown," " Three Men's Marriage," "Threepenny Miracle" and "Three Pin Morris." This, like Nine Men's Morris, was a popular game with mediaeval schoolboys, and Mickelthwaite notes examples of the patterns shown as D,E,F in Plate IV in the cloisters of Canterbury, Norwich, Chichester and

[9] *Op. cit.*

[10] *Op. cit.*

Westminster Abbey, also in Ardeley Church in Hertfordshire and Heydon Church in Norfolk and in Norwich Castle. Miss Curtis has shown me some very good examples of D in the cloisters at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. The same pattern as E, along with a circular pattern G, is found on the roof of the temple at Kurna in Egypt, but these are more likely to be magical symbols or mason's marks than game boards. However, the game was certainly known in Augustan Rome, as it is described by Ovid and markings can be seen in the Forum.

Mr. J. W. Roberts has sent me from Chichester a copy of a pattern H which varies slightly from Mickelthwaite's three, and allows more freedom of movement than E and F at any rate. There is an intriguing coincidence about this pattern ; it is identical line for line and circle for circle with a symbol which occurs more than once in a recently discovered Hittite inscription at Karatepe, and which (with the aid of the parallel Assyrian inscription) has been found to be phonetically equivalent to DANA (the city of Adana). Now there is a Greek legend that the Danaoi were taught line and counter games by the hero Palamedes as a diversion when food ran short during the siege of Troy. Could the fact that a game pattern was used to represent the sound DANA be due to its having originally been used as an ideogram for the Danaoi, owing to their addiction to games of this sort ? The coincidence of the patterns is certainly a striking one, and the idea of tracing a connection between the heroes of Homer and the choir-boys of Chichester is not so extravagant as it might appear. For the purpose of this article I must confine my subject to the limits of the two games of the greater and smaller Merelles ; otherwise I might have shown how the " Five Line Counter " game, which is mentioned by Sophocles as an invention of Palamedes at Troy, is still played in the ancient form by herd-boys in Northern India.

Sedentary games of this class are primarily pastoral games for boys (and men) who have to sit about watching animals grazing. They are games of skill and not of chance ; they require no paraphernalia, and the rules are simple, though there may be a good deal of variety and ingenuity in the play. These are good reasons for their persistence, and a reason for their wide diffusion can be found in the relief they afford to monotony on long voyages. Trivial they may be, but the study of their diffusion is important for the study of human culture ; so important in fact that no less an authority than Sir Edward Tylor[11] took the distribution of games for the subject of a presidential address to the Anthropological Institute. And the games in themselves are not without interest ; they are particularly suitable as a pastime on journeys either on board ship or by rail, being more sociable than crossword puzzles and less irrational than the collection of engine numbers.

[11] " On the distribution of Games " in *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* (1880).