

## Ancient Court of Minstrels at Tutbury.

By HENRY KIRKE, M.A., B.C.L.



ALTHOUGH the castle is situated on the Staffordshire side of the river Dove, the honour of Tutbury included a great part of the county of Derby. In a survey of the honour taken in the first year of Queen Elizabeth (1558), it is stated: "The castle, sometimes the lord's habitation and capital mansion, is situate very stately on the north side of the towne of Tutbury upon the height of a round rocke of alabaster, and inclosed for the most parte with a stone wall, embattled, where uppon may bee seen all the lordshippes and mannors appertaining to the honor in the countyes of Stafford, Derby, and Leicester, very delightfully situated both for pleasure and profit: for as the river Dove doth from Uttoxatur to the river of Trent divide the countyes of Stafford and Derby, soe did it alsoe att the beginning devide champian and woodland; that on the one side of the water in the county of Derby being all champion and very good and beneficiall for meadows, pastures, and corne soyle, extending from Tutbury to the Peake, in distance twenty miles, and all the Peake high and moorlands parcell alsoe of the said honor, good sheep pasture and large waste."

The castle itself was a mediæval fortress of considerable extent, and was one of the great feudal rallying points north of the Trent. It was held at different times by earls and dukes of great wealth and position, many of them of royal

blood; so it attracted to its walls not only numerous feudal retainers and men-at-arms, but also the usual retinue of minstrels, jugglers, players, and mountebanks, who in an illiterate age furnished the great ones of the earth with amusement during their hours of rest from war and hunting. Many a great nobleman had a band of minstrels as his paid servants, but ordinarily he depended upon the wandering musicians, dancers, and mountebanks who swarmed in feudal England; in fact, they became a nuisance. In an ordinance against the increasing luxury of living issued in the reign of Edward II., notice is taken of the number of idle persons who, under the colour of minstrelsy, steal into great men's houses and obtain meat and drink, and demand payment for their services; so it is commanded that only three or four *minstrels of honour* be allowed in one day in the houses of prelates, earls, and barons, and that none go into the houses of meaner men unless specially ordered.

“The minstrel's dramatic power, his skill in disguise, his feats of dexterity, his lascivious stories, were a common theme, and show that the gleemen sought to entertain the aristocracy as well as the poor people with songs less chaste than those which were put in writing.”<sup>1</sup>

The minstrels are everywhere spoken of with contempt as ready for any employment, however base, and without any sense of shame.

Such was the position of the wandering minstrel in the thirteenth century. A sense of their outlawry seems to have driven them to form themselves into communities, such as were so common in feudal England during the Middle Ages. London set the example, which was followed by many country districts, in establishing a brotherhood of minstrels after the model of the French gild. It was founded “to maintain jollity, peace, honesty, sweetness, gaiety, and love”; the “Amorous Company” agreed to pay certain fees towards their feast and to provide music. A king was chosen every

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<sup>1</sup> *Medieval England*, by Miss Mary Beatson.

year, for "good love, jolly disport, courteous solace, joy and sweetness, to destroy anger, rancour, felonies, and all manner of vice," were the objects of their foundation, and they mutually agreed to support, comfort, and counsel each other in health and sickness. No woman was allowed to be present at the court or feasts of the minstrels; expenses of the feast were borne in common; the king and stewards might array themselves in gorgeous raiment—"cointises, scarves, and fancy dress"—at their own expense. The feasting was limited; the repast was to consist of bread, good beer and wine, pottage, one course of large fish, a double roast in a single dish, cheese, and nothing more.

By joining themselves into gilds and exercising a necessary restraint over the wilder spirits in the community, the status of minstrels was vastly improved. Music was ever popular in England, so it is not surprising to find its exponents treated with largesse. King Edward III. had a company of minstrels attached to his court, and in the city of London letter-books may be found many entries of payment to minstrels of large sums of money. "To the minstrels and palfrey men of our Lord the King, £6." "To Nicholas Holborne, for the cost of minstrels, £16 13s." Chaucer frequently mentions them and their attendance on every occasion of rejoicing, and Edward IV., by letters patent, constituted a corporation of minstrels.

That great nobleman, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and King of Castile, when he possessed the honour of Tutbury, lived in splendour and kept open house, so the swarm of entertainers became so numerous and unruly that he was compelled to regulate their proceedings, and issued the following mandate:—

"John, by the grace of God King of Castile and Leon, Duke of Lancaster, to all them who shall see or hear these our letters greeting: Know ye we have ordained, constituted, and assigned to our well-beloved the king of the minstrels in our honour of Tutbury, who is or for the time shall be, to

apprehend and arrest all the minstrels in our said honour and franchise that refuse to do the services and minstrelsy as appertain to them to do from the ancient times at Tutbury aforesaid yearly on the day of the Assumption of our Lady; giving and granting to the said king of the minstrels for the time being full power and commandment to make them reasonable to justify and to constrain them to do their services and minstrelsies in manner as belongeth to them, and as it hath been then and of ancient times accustomed. In witness of which things we have caused these our letters to be made patent.

“ Given under our privy seal at our castle of Tutbury this 22nd August in the 4th year of the reign of the most sweet King Richard the Second.”

The minstrels of Tutbury were mainly drawn from the counties of Stafford and Derby, and they evidently had become, at an early date, a gild; similar to the one founded in London, with well-defined rights and privileges, as these were recognised by John of Gaunt, who addressed their king as a well-known and respected person. The abbot of Tutbury presented them each year with a bull on the occasion of the annual festival. As the old records tell: “ Item est ibidem quædam consuetudo quod histriones venientes ad matutinas in festo assumptionis beatæ Mariæ habebunt unum taurum de priore de Tuttebury si ipsum capere possunt citra aquam Dovæ propinquiorem Tuttebury; vel prior dabit eis xld., pro qua quidum consuetudine dabuntur domino ad dictum festum annuatim xxd.”

This festive gathering was held on the 16th of August, after the festival of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. The minstrels assembled under their king and stewards in front of the bailiff's house, where he or his deputy met them. A procession was formed, the king of the minstrels walking between the bailiff and steward of the honour, the other minstrels following in pairs, and they all marched to the parish church, where a special service was held, with appropriate lessons and psalms. After the service the procession was

reformed in the same order, and marched to the hall of the castle, where dinner was served, the king sitting between the bailiff and steward on the daïs. Music and singing enlivened the feast. After dinner a court was formed; twenty-four jurors were selected, twelve from Staffordshire and twelve from Derbyshire, and they left the banqueting hall to elect the officers for the succeeding year. Before their departure the bailiff charged them as to their duties, expatiating on the glory of their calling, the high position of minstrels, the great excellence of music, and their solemn duty to elect good and trustworthy officers to represent them. He continued his address by tracing the history of music from the earliest times—from Jubal, Orpheus, and Apollo down to his own era; waxing eloquent in its praise and quoting with approbation the epistle of Theodoric, in which music is said “to come forth in her gay dress, and all other thoughts give way, and the soul rallies its powers to receive the delight which she gives; she cheers the sorrowful, softens the furious and enraged, sweetens sour tempers, gives a check to loose, impure, and wanton thoughts, and melts to pure and chaste desires; she captivates the straying faculties, and moulds them into a serene, sober, and just economy.”

The jurors, under the influence of such an inspiring charge, elected a king and four stewards, two from Staffordshire and two from Derbyshire; the king was chosen alternately from those counties. On their return into the hall they notified the result of their election, and presented their newly chosen officers. Thereupon the king arose from his seat, and handing to his successor the white wand as token of his sovereignty, pledged him in a goblet of wine, wishing him joy and prosperity in his office. All the minstrels present at the festival offered 1d. each as their contribution to the gild.

After the feasting and court were over, the whole company adjourned to the abbey gate, where the bull given by the abbot was turned loose and the “bull-running,” as it was

called, began. After the monastery had been dissolved, the bull was presented by the Earl of Devonshire. This wretched beast was deprived of its horns, its tail was cut off, and all its body smeared over with soap; pepper was blown into its nostrils, when, maddened by pain, it was turned loose, to be chased and, if possible, captured by the whole body of minstrels. Proclamation was made that "All manner of persons (except the minstrels) shall give way to the bull, and not come within forty yards of him at their peril, nor hinder the minstrels in the pursuit of him." A somewhat unnecessary precaution, one would have thought, as all would be anxious to escape from the maddened brute. The bull must be caught before the setting of the sun, and his capture was held good if his pursuers could hold him long enough to cut off a small portion of his hair and bring the same to the market cross. Even when captured the sufferings of the poor beast were not at an end; he was then led into the town and fastened to the bull ring in High Street, where, defenceless and bleeding, he was baited for some time by dogs. When the people were satiated with this cruel pastime, the ill-fated animal was at length slain, and his carcass divided amongst the minstrels. A strange commentary on the bailiff's charge as to the softening and ennobling influence of music.

That ingenious antiquary, Dr. Plot, in his *History of Staffordshire*, asserts that this bull-running was introduced at Tutbury by John of Gaunt in imitation of the bull-fights which he had seen in Spain, but it bears no resemblance to that exciting and dangerous, although cruel, pastime; it more resembles the sports of bull-baiting, bear-baiting, and torturing of other animals which were common amusements of our rude forefathers in English villages. A similar though less cruel custom was at one time observed in Kidlington, a small village near Oxford, as described in Blount's *Ancient Tenures*. On Monday after Whitsun week a fat, live lamb was provided, and the maids of the village, having their thumbs tied behind them, run after it, and she that with her mouth takes and

holds the lamb is declared "Lady of the Lamb," which, being dressed with the skin hanging on, is carried on a long pole before the lady and her companions to the village green, attended with music and a morisco dance of men and another of women, when the rest of the day is spent in dancing, mirth, and merry glee. The next day the lamb is part baked, boiled, and roasted for the lady's feast, where she sits majestically at the upper end of the table and her companions with her, with music and other attendants, which ends the solemnity.

As time went on the ancient court of minstrels at Tutbury became more or less obsolete; attendance was slack, the intention of its founders was forgotten, and it became a mere scene of vulgar revelry. In 1772 the Honourable and Ancient Court of Minstrels assembled at Tutbury wrote to the Duke of Devonshire, who was at that time bailiff:—

"May it please your Grace,—

"We, the Jury of this Court, humbly petition your Grace that the writings concerning this Court may be laid open before the King and Stewards of this Court, that we may understand our rights. We apprehend we have a right to a piece of ground called 'The Pipers' Meadow,' formerly in the hands of Pratt of Tutbury, now Thomas Tatler of Etwall, who lets it to Samuel Salt of Rolleston. This rent has been publickly demanded at the Castle, but without any redress. Therefore for the want of the rest of the perquisites we received our dinners for twenty-five men, viz., twelve Jurymen of Staffordshire and twelve Jurymen of Derbyshire, and beer to the aforesaid dinners; and twelve shillings acknowledgment for the rent of this piece of ground, which said twelve shillings we expect to be made whole rent of the said Pipers' Meadow, as it is now let for the yearly rent of ——. Likewise the perquisites of the amerciaments, which used to be 3s. 4d. for every minstrel that doth appear if enrolled, and 6s. 8d. for playing upon an instrument and not appearing in this Court.

"Most gracious Duke, we cannot maintain the rights of straining for these misdemeanours of the minstrels of

Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, and Warwickshire without the protection of your Grace. It hath been therefore concluded, and believe Derbyshire stands to the conclusion, that without the rent of the said Pipers' Meadow be paid to the King of the Minstrels the said Jurors do not appear.

“ There is want of members, want of jurors, want of stewards, and in consequence must in a short time be a want of a Bull-running. If the rent was paid and the members came into their office according to order, there would not be so many minstrels absent. They would be willing to come at a profit of £20 a year, as well as the honour of being King. Much ado there has been for several years to get to the honour of being King, and when they only find honour and no profit they directly leave the Court, which said Court cannot be upheld without its members, which said members being met there, then upon Juries panelled, and not before that same day, for the perquisites will not pay extra sixpence.

“ We therefore knowingly and wittingly, considering the want of our members with the reason of their absence, most humbly petition your Grace that a writing proper to this affair be transmitted to the King of this Minstrel Court, and that the said writing be ordered to be delivered from King to King. There might be a voluminous subject on this affair, but this is enough to let your Grace understand the reason of the decay of this Court, which we do not doubt your Grace will hereby remedy.

“ Done at Tutbury according to the tenour of our oath.

“ Henry Coxon, King.

“ Henry Coxon.

Joseph Conway.

“ Thomas Ault.

Jeremiah Heath.

“ John Hill.

John Burton.

“ Robert Tunecliff.

George Authorborough.

“ Cornelius Duffield.

Thomas Launder.

“ William Walles.

John Adams.

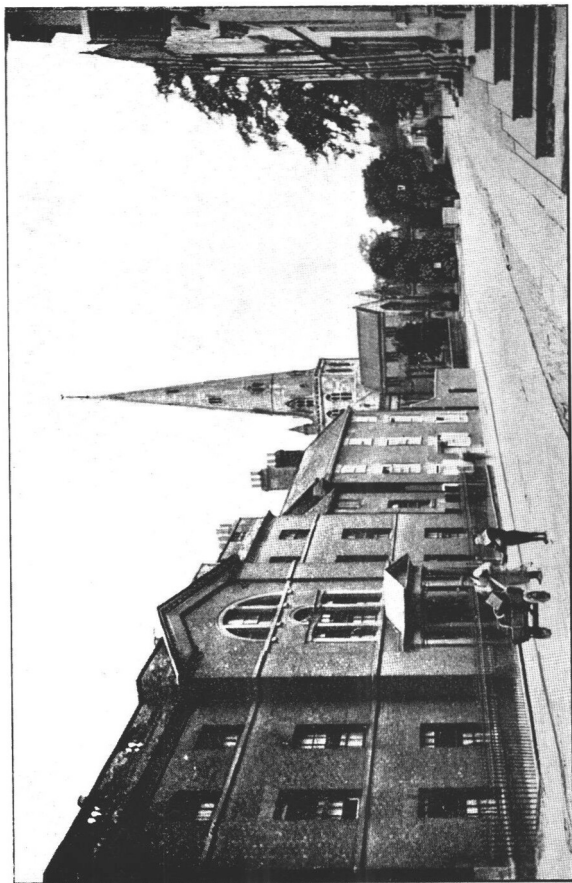
“ Jurors.

“ Joseph Conway.

Thomas Ault.

“ Stewards.”





DR. TAYLOR'S HOUSE, ASHBOURNE.

What reply the Duke made to this letter we know not, nor what became of Pipers' Meadow. We do know that a petition from the inhabitants of Tutbury was forwarded to his Grace protesting against the continuance of the minstrels' feast and bull-running, which had degenerated into a scene of drunkenness and vulgar revelry, faction fights between the men of Staffordshire and the men of Derbyshire constantly occurring; the white wands of office had developed into cudgels, and instead of promoting "jollity, peace, honesty, sweetness, gaiety, and love," "rancour, felonies, and all manner of vice" were instigated at this feast. On receipt of this petition, the duke made enquiries, and finding that the annual festival had lost all its original significance and become a public nuisance, suppressed it in 1778.

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### **Dr. Johnson in Derbyshire.**

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The bicentenary of the birth of Dr. Samuel Johnson has been celebrated with much enthusiasm a few months ago at Lichfield. Everywhere Lord Rosebery's panegyric has aroused popular interest in that remarkable man, and a greater appreciation of his works and character. Although born at Lichfield in the neighbouring county of Stafford, we might claim Johnson as a Derbyshire man, his father having been born at Cubley in our county; and it was only the accident of poverty which drove him to set up the shop at Lichfield, over which the great lexicographer was born. In his mature years Johnson never forgot that his ancestors were Derbyshire men, and he always visited the county with much interest and enthusiasm; yea, when he was about to be married to Mrs. Porter, he refused to allow the ceremony to take place in Birmingham, where the lady resided, but insisted upon being married at Derby.