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CHURCH ALES.[1]

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In these days when almost all the Christian bodies of the West, however much they may differ in other matters, are exerting themselves to bring under control the habits of excessive drinking which many of us have inherited from our far-off ancestors, it may not be uninteresting to look backward to a time when the Ale Feast and the Church Ale were recognised institutions. It must be borne in mind that in those times ardent spirits were unknown to the English people. I am not going to enter into a discussion of the vexed question, who was the first distiller. The practice of extracting aromatic essences from flowers seems to have been known in the East from a very remote period, and it is, therefore, not improbable that the knowledge may have been applied to the kindred purpose of making stimulating drinks. A physician of the thirteenth century, Arnold of Villa Nova, is said to be the first person who tells us distinctly that an intoxicating spirit could be obtained by the distillation of wine. He seems to have considered this a new discovery. His disciple, Raymond Lully, popularised his master's knowledge. Over this new discovery, or recent introduction, he was eloquently enthusiastic. Bishop Berkeley was not more confident as to the virtues of tar-water than was Raymond that this new fluid was the universal medicine of which philosophers had dreamed and quacks had boasted. To him it came as a new element revealed to man, destined to renew the energies of his decrepit race.

Though, however, ardent spirits were known in the

[1] Read in the Antiquarian Section at the Carlisle Meeting, August 3, 1882.

thirteenth century, they were for several generations afterwards looked upon, not as a beverage but as a medicine. A very few rich persons who indulged themselves in the taste for rare and curious drinks may have consumed them, but the Northern races continued to be content with their beer, except at the tables of the wealthy, where the light wines of France seem to have been as common as they are to-day.

The words ale and beer are now used indiscriminately to signify fermented drink made from malt. Formerly there seems to have been a well understood difference between them. Ale was a sweet drink made without hops or other bitter herbs; beer was a similar liquor flavoured with hops. In the Latin Account Rolls of the fifteenth century, *cerevisia*, when it stands alone, seems to mean this sweet ale; *cerevisia hummulina* this hopped beer. There is a vague tradition, which has been supported, as most vague traditions are, by most respectable authorities, that hops were unknown in England before the reign of Henry VIII.

> "Hops, Reformation, Carp, and Beer,
> Came into England in one year,"

is a jingle of which every one has heard. Now, in the first place, it is highly probable that the hop is an indigenous plant, and in the second we have positive evidence of its use as early as 1482,[1] and there is a very strong presumption that its properties were known to those who brewed beer at a much earlier period. There certainly was a well understood distinction between ale and beer at an earlier time, for in the Hundred Court of Hythe in 1445 presentments were made against certain women who had brewed "*cerevisia et bere*,"[2] and in papers relating to the municipality of Rochester in 1460, we find two shillings paid "for 16 galonys of *bere* and *ale*."[3] In the further remarks which I have to make, I shall treat ale and beer as meaning one and the same thing, but I wish it to be borne in mind that our forefathers used the words with a different meaning attached to each.

[1] Rogers's "Hist. of Agric. and Prices," vol. iii, p. 254.

[2] "Hist. MSS. Com.," vol. iv, p. 431, col. 1.

[3] Riley, "Liber Custumarum," vol. ii, part 2, p. 707.

Antiquaries have often been laughed at, and I must confess have sometimes richly deserved it, for attempting, with little or no evidence before them, to trace the customs and practices of the present back to a very remote past. I may perhaps be laying myself open to censure of this kind when I affirm that it is my opinion that the Church Ales of the Middle Ages were the direct descendants of the drinking bouts of our unchristened Saxon and Scandinavian ancestors. I cannot directly prove this any more than I can directly prove many other things which seem so highly probable that they pass, in the minds of most of us, for certainties. The love of the uncivilized Teutons for feasting was notorious even in the luxurious Roman world, and it is noteworthy that Saint Gregory the Great in his letter to the Abbot Mellitus, whom he sent over here to aid Saint Augustine in his missionary work among the English, though he does not distinctly mention the fondness of the people for drink, seems to refer to it in a way not very easy to mistake. After telling the Abbot that idols are to be destroyed but that the idol temples, if well built, are not to be pulled down but are to be turned into churches, he says that as these heathens have been accustomed to kill oxen in sacrifice to their gods, so the day of the dedication of a church must be kept as a public solemnity, that the townsfolk may build themselves huts with branches of trees around the church and pass the time in religious feasting.[1] The whole passage shews that as little change as possible was to be made in manners and customs so that the people were but devout christians. Now we well know what feasting meant to a Low German whether christened or unchristened. Little would he have cared for whole herds of slaughtered oxen if there had not been something strong, heady and heart-inspiring to drink with his beef. Saint Gregory does not mention beer or other drink, wine he of course knew, but we doubt whether he had ever heard of beer; but man of the world as he was, one cannot suppose that he imagined that the gentlemen and ladies whom he invited to rejoice themselves in silvan bowers would be content with only such drink as the limpid stream or the neighbouring

[1] Beda, "Eccl. Hist." book 1, ch. xxx.

holy well afforded. Speculative archæology is an entertaining pastime rather than a useful pursuit, but in this instance I think I have made out somewhat more than a speculative case, especially when it is remembered that in the Pœnitial of Archbishop Theodore the chance of ecclesiastics taking more drink than was good for them, especially at Christmas, Easter, and the Festival Days of Saints is deliberately provided for. The passage is somewhat long, but, as a picture of the times, it is worth giving in full—

1. Si quis Episcopus aut aliquis ordinatus in consuetudine vitium habuerit ebrietatis, aut desinat aut deponatur.
2. Si monachus pro ebrietate vomitum facit, xxx dies peniteat.
3. Si presbyter aut diaconus pro ebrietate xl dies peniteat.
4. Si vero pro infirmitate aut quia longo tempore se abstinuerit, et in consuetudine non erit ei multum bibere vel manducare, aut pro guadio in Natale Domini aut in Pascha aut pro alicujus Sanctorum commemoratione faciebat, et tunc plus non accepit quam decretum est a senioribus, nihil nocet. Si Episcopus juberit, non nocet illi, nisi ipse similiter faciat.[1]

The break between the old and the new seems to have been easily bridged over. The Ale Feast of the Middle Ages was the converted child of a heathen sire. How deep the conversion went we may guess, but shall never know. It is not improbable that if some old worshipper of the thunder-god could have arisen from his grave-mound by the churchyard side and joined in "the ale" going on within the sacred enclosure he would have discovered, when all was in full swing, that the difference in morals and manners between the fifth and the fifteenth century was not so great as those who believe so confidently in progress could have wished him to have found it.

It has been often remarked by those who take an intelligent interest in the past, that time, who has spared so few relics of our remote kindred, has in some cases given us almost a profusion of the less interesting, and entirely deprived us of the more interesting facts of their lives. We would willingly exchange some of the saintly biographies—full of interest as even these are to those who know how to use them—for a contemporary picture of society here when it was half Christian and half heathen. Saint Gregory's letter suggests many a quaint

[1] Poenitentiale Theodori, Lib. i in Haddan & Stubbs "Councils & Eccl. Documents," vol. iii, 177.

picture of what must have happened, but, though we may be well sure that the ox was roasted and the mead and the ale drunk in almost every parish in the land, no one thought it worth his while to record that which was so common and so trivial as to be utterly beneath notice. Sir Walter Scott has left us a sketch, a fancy sketch it is true, but one drawn with the intuition of genius, helped perhaps somewhat by personal knowledge of not dissimilar scenes in the far north. It is the account of the christening feast of Witikind the Waster. As it occurs in a poem which I am informed is now but seldom read, I may be pardoned for a few lines of quotation :—

"High was the feasting in Witikind's hall,
Revell'd priests, soldiers, and pagans and all ;
And e'en the good Bishop was fain to endure
The scandal, which time and instruction might cure :
It was dangerous, he deem'd, at first to restrain,
In his wine and his wassail, a half christen'd Dane.
The mead flow'd around, and the ale was drain'd dry,
Wild was the laughter, the song, and the cry ;
With Kyrie Eleison, came clamourously in
The war-songs of Danesman, Norweyan, and Finn,
Till man after man the contention gave o'er,
Outstretch'd on the rushes that strew'd the hall floor ;
And the tempest within having ceased its wild rout,
Gave place to the tempest that thunder'd without."

HAROLD THE DAUNTLESS, xiii.

It is not a matter of speculation, but one of absolute certainty that the heathen drinkings were not mere festivals for enjoyment ; pleasure was indeed not the most important part of them. They were originally solemn rites in honour of the gods or of dead ancestors, and so when these feastings became christianized the objects of Christian worship—the Holy Trinity and the Saints—were in like manner pledged. In a northern Saga we find the Princess Hildegonda carrying round the ale to the Vikings. "She takes the silver cup and bows as she begins the ceremonies, and drinks Health to all Ylfing Men ; this cup to the memory of Rolf Rraka."[1]

In latter times the action would have been the same, but the pledge would not have been to a dead forefather, but to Saint George, Saint Michael, or some other of the

[1] Elton, "Origins of Eng. Hist.," 212.

grand figures of the celestial hierarchy. Cups yet exist with such-like invocations carved around their lips.

"In the name of the Trinitie,
Fill the kup and drinke to me"

is inscribed on a mazer-bowl which belonged to the late Mr. Evelyn Philip Shirley.[1]

Pembroke College, Oxford, has one with the legend—

"Sayn denis y^{t} es me dere,
For hes lof drenk and mak gud cher."[2]

The Ironmongers Company of London possess a similar vessel, on which occurs the angelic salutation.[3] Among the treasures preserved in York minster is a bowl to which, as an inscription on it testifies, the martyred Archbishop Richard Scrope attached, "Unto all them that drinkis of this cope xl dayes of pardon,"[4] and the Gild of our Lady of Boston, before the spoliation of its goods, had a cup dedicated to Saint Thomas of Canterbury.[5]

It is impossible for us to separate the secular from the religious in these featings. To many they would be merry-makings only; to persons of grave temperament, or those on whom the cares and sorrows of the world weighed, it is probable that the religious side would be the more prominent. In the earliest times I do not think we trace anything beyond the feast alone, but as time flowed on an important change seems to have taken place. The ale became not a feast only but also an easy and effectual way of raising money for purposes secular and religious. These secular drinkings were called scot ales; with them we have at present little to do, they are not intimately connected, at least in the later time with the Church ale, and their nature and history is surrounded by difficulties. When I direct attention to the fact that the greatest of living historical students has declared their nature to be "very obscure,"[6] I may be forgiven for not venturing on a confident opinion concerning them. This we know, that they were considered an exaction, from which the people were glad to free themselves. The payments made at them were handed over to the sheriff. It is difficult to tell whether the offerings made

[1] Parker, "Hist. Dom. Arch.," vol. ii, 62.
[2] "Gent. Mag.," 1851, i, 172.
[3] *Ibid*, 1852, ii, 27.
[4] "Roy. Arch. Inst.," York vol.
[5] Peacock, "Eng. Ch. Furniture," 195.
[6] Stubbs' "Const. Hist.," i, 628.

on these occasions were voluntary or not. It is certain that those who did not attend these public drinkings were heavily fined.

Church ales were widely different. They seem to have been commonly though not always free both as regards the givers and the drinkers, and until puritanism arose were not, as far as can now be made out, viewed with displeasure by any one.

The parish is the unit of our social life, from which many of the things in Church and State that we set most store by have been evolved. It was in the Middle Ages a much freeer and simpler organization than it has now become. The great land-owners have cramped it in one way, and the cast-iron rigidity of acts of parliament, often draughted by persons who were almost wholly ignorant of rural affairs, have well nigh crushed the life out of it in another. In the Middle Ages the parish was in a healthy condition and consequently full of vitality. Justices of Peace in the earlier time were unknown, and in the latter—almost down to the reign of Henry VIII—they were by no means the important functionaries that they afterwards grew into. The criminal business of the village, except when some very grave matter indeed occurred, was transacted at the Manor Court, and most things ecclesiastical, except those directly affecting the sacraments and the priestly character, by the parishioners assembled under the direction of the rector or vicar and the churchwardens. If we would understand what country life was in those days we must try and call up in imagination the rural village before the Reformation had divested the Church of its outward splendour, and before the great inclosures had altered the status and character of its inhabitants and their institutions. No two villages could in the nature of things be identical, but from Cumberland to Cornwall a very strong family likeness prevailed.

First in prominence stood the lord's hall. If he were a great man, or if the part of the country where he lived were liable to be harried by Scotchmen, Welshmen or Humber pirates, it would be fortified and moated round, having indeed much the appearance of a miniature castle. If on the other hand the region were peaceful there would

in many cases be little to distinguish it, except its somewhat greater size, from the number of dwellings which clustered around it. If it were in a country which produced slates, all the houses would be covered by that material, but throughout the greater part of our land thatch was used for almost all buildings including in many cases the church. Near the hall stood the church, almost always within a carefully fenced enclosure, that swine and other foul beasts might be hindered from desecrating the graves of the dead. In the churchyard itself or almost immediately adjoining would have frequently been seen, if a careful antiquary could have made his survey before the surface changes of the last three hundred years, the slightly raised grave mound of the Teutonic ancestors of the villagers who had gone to their rest ere the faith in the God of Abraham had supplanted the old northern worship of the forces of nature. Near the churchyard wall, too, usually indeed forming a part of it but sometimes within the enclosure and sometimes without, stood the church-house.

The church-house was an ecclesiastical edifice which seems to have almost entirely passed away. As far as I have been able to ascertain not a single undoubted specimen has been spared to us. Though it is not improbable that the half-timbered building attached to the west end of the church at Langdon in Essex, and now called the Priest House is really one of these. We have evidence from all part of the country that they were once very common. There is, indeed, hardly an old churchwarden's account-book, which goes back beyond the changes of the sixteenth century that does not contain some reference to a building of this kind. They continued in being and to be used for church purposes long after the Reformation. The example at All Saints, Derby, stood in the churchyard and was in existence in 1747.[1]

The church-house at Tetbury, in Gloucestershire, was sold a few years before this for the purpose of raising money for the repair of the church.[2] At Ampthill there is still remaining—adjoining the churchyard on the south—a half timbered cottage which may have been one of these structures, but its identification is very uncertain.

[1] Cox and Hope, All Saints, Derby, 24-25. [2] Lee's Tetbury, 105.

Though I have been unable to discover the existence at the present time of a single building which can be demonstrated to have been a church house, I think it is not at all improbable that some few examples may still survive, having been preserved by being turned into cottages.

Mr. Hartshorne informs me that at Horton, near Slough, Buckinghamshire, a public house, known by the sign of the "Five Bells," with a small garden attached, is let by the churchwardens and the income derived therefrom devoted to the repair of the church and church-yard. The title by which the property is held is unknown. It is probable that the "Five Bells," stands on the site of the old church house, and that there are no deeds belonging to it because it has come down from churchwarden to churchwarden from a very early time.

As we have no existing examples to guide us in drawing our picture we are driven back upon the few data which can be gleaned from parish records. These give forth a feeble light, but we may learn something. It appears that the church-house was not a dwelling-house. I do not remember that I ever came upon any entry that pointed to its ever having had a permanent tenant. In many instances the building must have been of considerable size for wool, lime, timber, sand, and other matters were stored therein. At one place, Stratton in Cornwall, it was let to pedlars or wandering merchants at the fair time, and the parish books shew a rent paid on this account from year to year.[1] In other places there are charges for forms and benches.

We must picture to ourselves then a long, low room with an ample fire place, or rather a big open chimney occupying one end with a vast hearth. Here the cooking would be done, and here the water would be boiled for brewing the church ale. There would be, no doubt, a large oak table in the middle with benches around, and a lean-to building on one side to act as a cellar. This, I think, is not an inaccurate sketch of a building which played no unimportant part in our rural economy and rural pleasures. All the details are wanting and we can only fill them in by drawing on the imagination. We

[1] "Archæologia," xlvi, 195—236.

know that almost all our churches were made beautiful by religious painting on the walls. I should not be surprised if we some day discovered that the church-house came in for its share of art and that pictures, not religious in the narrow sense, but grotesque and humourous, sometimes covered the walls. It was in the church-house that the ales were held. They were provided for in various ways, but usually by the farmers, each of whom was wont to give his quota of malt. There was no malt tax in those days and as a consequence there was a malt kiln in almost every village. These ales were held at various times. There was almost always one on the Feast of the Dedication of the Church. Whitsuntide was also a very favourite time; but they seem to have been held at any convenient time when money was wanted for the church. We may be certain that the assembly whenever called together would be well attended, for English folk are seldom very careful of money when drink and good company are to be had. And good company would, no doubt, be forthcoming on the occasion, for the wandering ballad singer would be there, the pardoner with his tales of foreign lands and wonderous miracle lore. The begging friar, too, was not an austere man. He also would, no doubt, make the ale an occasion for delivering a stirring discourse from the pedestal of the village cross and then adjourn to the church house with his auditory. We must not be too severe on our forefathers because they enjoyed coarse revelry and what we might perhaps think low society. Travelling was exceedingly difficult and costly; few of the villagers ever went far from home, and it was at gatherings such as these that they learnt very much of the little they knew of the great world which stretched far away beyond their own narrow horizon. In the case of the church ale there was added an inducement to drinking which could not be pleaded in favour of the delights of the hostelry or the wayside ale-house. Those who enjoyed themselves at the Church Ale were not only doing the very best possible thing to amuse themselves, but also performing a highly meritorious work, for every pot of ale which they swallowed on their own part, or which they gave to their companions, was so much good done to a holy cause.

Might not a man's orthodoxy, nay, even his Christianity be called in question if he absented himself? So thought Launce, for does he not tell Speed—"Thou art an Hebrew, a Jew, and not worth the name of a Christian;" and on Speeds enquiring "Why," he answers, "Because thou hast not so much charity in thee as to go to the ale with a Christian" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, act ii, sc. 5). This has commonly been interpreted to signify the ale-house, but the point of the accusation of Judaism is lost if we do not understand that Launce invited his clownish companion to a drinking bout for the good of the Church.

Philip Stubbes, the author of the *Anatomie of Abuses*, only knew Church Ales in their decline. He was, Anthony Wood informs us, a most rigid Calvinist, a bitter enemy to Popery,[1] so his picture must be received with allowances for exaggeration. His account of them is certainly not a flattering one. He tells us that "The churche Wardens . . of euery parishe, with the consent of the whole parishe, prouide halfe a score or twentie quarters of mault, wherof some they buye of the churche stocke, and some is giuen them of the parishioners themselues, everyone conferryng somewhat, accordyng to his abilitie; which mault beeyng made into very strong ale or beere is sette to sale, either in the churche or some other place assigned to that purpose. Then, when this . . . is sette abroche, well is he that can gette the soonest to it and spend the most at it; for he that sitteth the closest to it, and spendes the moste at it, he is counted the godliest man of all the rest, and moste in God's favour, because it is spent vppon his church forsoth! but who, either for want can not, or otherwise for feare of God's wrath will not sticke to it, he is counted one destitute both of vertue and godlines . . . . In this kind of practise they continue sixe weekes, a quarter of a yere, yea halfe a yeare together, swillyng and gullyng, night and daie, till they be as dronke as rattes,[2] and as blockishe as beastes . . . . That money . . . if all be true which

[1] Ath. Ox., Ed. 1721, I, 282. :—

[2] "Dronke as rattes" is a comparison that is new to me. "Drunk as mice" is a phrase common in Lincolnshire at the present time. Chaucer has:—

"We faren as he that dronke is as a mous."
Knighte's Tale, l. 403.

cf. Songs and Carols of Fifteenth Century (Percy Soc.), p. 90. *Letters on Suppression of the Monasteries* (Camd. Soc.), p. 133.

they saie . . . they repair their churches and chappels with it, they buie bookes for seruice, cuppes for the celebration of the sacramente, surplesses for Sir Ihon, and suche other necessaries."[1]

This is a post-reformation picture, and of course not a favourable one, but there is no reason for regarding it as very much overdrawn. We know from other and less unfriendly sources that persons of all ranks and classes, women as well as men, went to the ale. The popular poetry of the time is evidence of this. A volume of *Songs and Carols* of the fifteenth century or earlier, published by the Percy Society, contains the lament of an unhappy husband who had a wife by no means to his liking. Among other unpleasing traits in her character we are told that—

> "If she wyll to the good ale ryde
> I must trot all by her syde,
> And when she drinks I must abide."[2]

And in the Romance of Merline in the Percy Ballad Book we find an account of another lady who—

> "With neighbours to the ale went,
> Long she sat and did amiss
> That drunken she was I wiss."[3]

Strange as it may seem to some of us who are too apt to judge all other times by the one in which we chance to live, there is the most positive proof that it was the common practice, and considered in no degree improper for ladies of what we should now call the cultivated classes, to frequent such like gatherings and to partake when there of the good things provided. In the old poem entitled "How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter," an old English directory of manners and deportment which was assuredly intended for the use of the upper classes, we have this piece of most excellent advice—

> "And if thou be in place where good ale is on lofte,
> Whether that thou serve thereof, or that thou sette softe,
> Mesurabli thou take ther of that thou falle in no blame,
> For if thou be ofte drunke it falle thee to shame."[4]

It is not to be hoped for that ecclesiastics should have a higher code of manners than that of the more refined

[1] Ed. by W. B. P. P. Turnbull, 1836, p. 173.
[2] P. 26.
[3] *Ib.* 446.
[4] E. E. Text Soc., vol. xxxii., p. 39.

section of the laity. There seems, however, to be some evidence that it was held to be improper for high dignitaries of the church to be present at these enticing festivities, for there is more than one twelfth century instance of Abbots not going to the ale themselves, but sending someone else there to drink for them.[1] Although permitted to drink by deputy there can be no doubt that these eminent persons would be required to contribute their full share at least to the expenses of preparing the feast. With such encouragement it was not to be feared that many persons would be so "left to themselves" as to stay away from the Church Ale, at least without sending a substitute of strong head and good digestion. Even in those days, however, it would seem that there were some persons who took the more modern view of things. When they appeared the parish authorities knew how to meet the case, and dealt with the offenders sternly. We learn from the Dodsworth Manuscripts as quoted in the *Archæologia*, that at Elverton and Okebrook, in Derbyshire, there were four Church Ales in the year, and that those of the inhabitants who did not put in an appearance were to be mulct at the next ale, in as much money as if they had drunken freely at the last, and if they did not go to the next and the next the payment were to go on progressively increasing.[2]

What will seem to not a few of us one of the most strange things connected with these festivals is the fact that, evil as their influence must have been, they seem to have drawn forth hardly any remonstrance until the rise of Puritanism. Then, of course, they were protested against, but, as they were denounced in common with many other things which were from our point of view quite harmless, one cannot but feel that the clamour did not spring entirely from motives with which we can sympathize.

The Reformation which gave so great a shock to all our national institutions no doubt had its effect upon Church Ales. They continued long after, the ghost of them may even yet not have absolutely departed, but the alteration in modes of thought and living which that great change introduced caused the church ale to lose its old character.

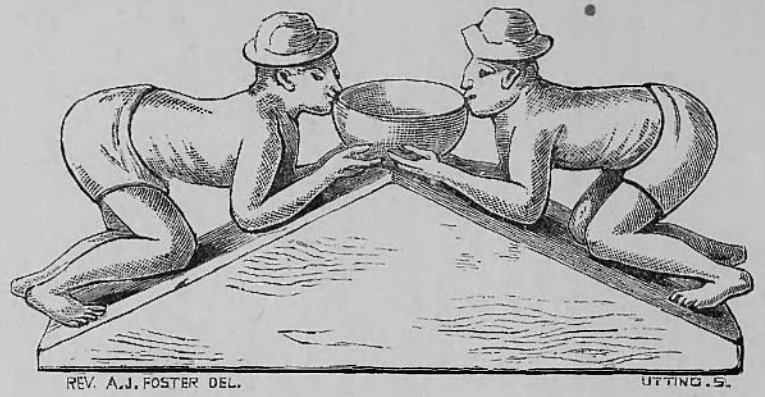
[1] Chronicon Monasterii de Bello, p. 21. [2] "Arch.," ii, 13.

Where it did not die out altogether it ceased to be a fashionable entertainment. High-born ladies no longer patronized it, so that by the end of the seventeenth century it had sunk in a vulgar gathering of drunken boors, whose potations brought little gain and much scandal to the church. The last instance I remember to have come upon in literature of the church ale being spoken of as a living reality, occurs in Francis Beaumont's *Exaltation of Ale.* Among the other many blessings we derive from that beverage are told that—

> "The churches much owe, as we all do know,
> For when they be drooping and ready to fall,
> By a Witsun or Church Ale up again they shall go,
> And owe their reparing to a pot of good ale."

Something of the nature of a church ale seems to have survived at Bicester till the year 1816[1] and at Kirton, in Lindsey, existed until within my own memory. The church-house had long been swept away and no money for the fabric was raised by the ale, but the salary of the sexton was in part paid by a feast given at his house, to which all persons could go who were willing to pay for what they consumed. How the licencing laws were evaded or suspended I do not know. There were no rural police in those days, so there was little fear of any of the revellers being brought before the justices on a charge of drunkenness. This, I have no doubt, was also specially provided against by the two parish constables being of the party. The memorials that have come down to us of the social age of our forefathers are on many ways painfully scanty. This is especially the case with the subject now under consideration. I have, however, met with two, one a piece of stained glass and the other sculpture, which I think are representations of Church Ales. Where the glass now is I know not. There is an engraving of it in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for 1793, i, 397. It is a small roundel seemingly of late fifteenth or early sixteenth century work. In the centre stands a gigantic man—the demon of the feast—and around him are human figures, two women, a priest, a soldier, and a blind crippled beggar with his dog, all of whom seem to be in various stages of intoxication; in the upper part of

[1] "The Antiquary," Jan. 1883, p. 34, quoting Dicken's "Bicester."



Bench End, Stevington Church, Bedfordshire
Scale 3-16th inch to 1 foot.

the picture are two large tubs and sundry ale pots. The engraving is rude and probably by no means accurate. If this curious picture be yet in existence it ought to be reproduced in colours in its full size. The sculpture to which I refer is on two of the bench ends in the church of Stevington, Bedfordshire. The one represents a man lying down hopelessly drunk, and the other two men crouched down drinking out of a large bowl which they hold between them. From the certificate of chantries it seems that there was in this parish, before the Reformation, certain lands given for the purpose of drinking there. Their rent in the second year of Edward VI was 4*s.* 8*d.*

Drinking Bush hill was the name of a place on the western side of the parish. When the people were in the habit of beating the bounds a hole was dug at this spot and certain men used to jump into it and drink as much as they possibly could. Whether this practice was a genuine relic of old heathendom or whether it was a kind of symbolic representation of the church ale kept up after the feast itself had fallen into disuse it is impossible now to say.

It may be well to note that by the Canons of 1603 it was ordered that "the churchwardens or quest-men and their assistants shall suffer no plays, feasts, banquets, suppers, church-ale drinkings . . . . . in the church, chapel, or churchyard."[1]

Though an archæologist must, from the very fact that he is one, be in many ways a lover of what is old and an opponent of such changes as would needlessly sever the present from historic continuity with the past, there is probably not a single one of us who is so ardently antiquarian in his tastes as to wish that church ales, however picturesque their surroundings may have been, had retained a place in modern life. Something very like them seems to have sprung up in recent days in America. These institutions are called church fairs and lager beer it seems is sold in the churches.[1]

[1] Canon, 88.

[1] "Pall Mall Gazette," Sep. 25, 1882, p. 11.