

SOUTH-DOWN SHEPHERDS,

AND THEIR SONGS AT THE SHEEPSHEARINGS.

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At the time when, in the words of Camden, "the Weald of Sussex was full of iron mines, and the beating of hammers upon the iron filled the neighbourhood round about with continual noise," another large portion of the county, that of the South Downs, was, perhaps, one of the most solitary, noiseless districts in England. Princely Brighton was only a village of fishermen; Worthing a hamlet of another village, that of Broadwater, and within its boundaries there was but one town, that of Lewes, which really belonged to it. Here and there only, as is testified by maps of comparatively very recent date, along its southern slopes, or in the bottom of its valleys, was the land under tillage; over all the rest were spread vast flocks of sheep, which, with their attendant shepherds, ranged over a thousand breezy hills.

Few people, probably, are aware of the immense number of sheep which, under the twofold impulse of foreign demand and that given to it by the great woollen manufacture at home, were reared in England at an early period of our history. A large exportation of English sheep to Spain took place as early as 1273, in the reign of Alonzo X, when they were first imported there. According to a modern Spanish writer, Copmany, they were again imported in 1394, in the reign of Henry III of Spain, as a part of the marriage portion of his wife, Catharine Plantagenet, daughter of John of Gaunt; and Holinshed tells us, that "on occasion of a treaty of alliance between Edward IV of England and Henry IV of Castille, license was given for certain Cotteswolde sheep to be transported into the countrie of Spaine, which have there so mul-

tiplied and increased, that it hath turned the commoditie of England much to the profite of Spayne." "Above all," says an Italian writer,* in the year 1500, "the English have an enormous number of sheep, which yield them wool of the finest quality;" and we learn from an old record in the Exchequer, that in the 28th year of Edward III, in 1354, there were exported 31,651 sacks of wool and 3036 cwt. of fells. "In 1551, no fewer than sixty ships sailed from the port of Southampton only, laden with wool for the Netherlands."† But that which throws the strongest light upon this point is a statute of the 29th Henry VIII, showing to what an extent the pasturage of the flocks had superseded the tillage of the land. The following is an extract: "One of the greatest occasions that moveth and provoketh greedy and covetous people so to accumulate and keep in their own hands such great portions of the land of this realm from the occupying of poor husbandmen, and so to use it in pasture, and not in tillage, is only the great profit that cometh of sheep. . . . So that some have 24,000, some 20,000, some 10,000, some 5000, some more, some less, by the which a good sheep for victual, that was accustomed to be sold for 2*s.* and 4*d.*, or 3*s.* at most, is now sold for 6*s.*, 5*s.*, or 4*s.* at the least; and a stone of clothing wool, that in some shires was accustomed to be sold for 18*d.* or 20*d.*, is now sold for 4*s.*, or for 3*s.* and 3*d.* at the least:" and then it enacts, that no tenant occupier shall keep more than 2000 sheep, exclusive of lambs under a year old. This large conversion of pasture lands into tillage accounts for the ridges and furrows which we see so frequently in grass fields.

Very different in form and symmetry was the sheep of those days from the beautiful animal which is now the pride and boast of our county. The flocks were then reared more for their fleeces than their flesh. The wool trade, which had greatly advanced under the encouragement given to it by Edward III, went on improving, and extending itself under many succeeding reigns, till it became the great staple manufacture of England. In Henry the Seventh's time it had established itself for the coarser manufactures in Yorkshire,

* Italian Relation of England, p. 10.

† Anderson's Hist. of Commerce, vol. ii, p. 58.

particularly at Wakefield, Leeds, and Halifax; and in the reign of Elizabeth it was firmly fixed in the west of England, where all the finer manufactures were, and indeed still are carried on. Its influence on the social and political condition of the people was very great, wealth flowed in, towns and villages were created by it, prices rose, rents increased, labour became more valuable, and gradually the middle and lower classes of the people took a higher place in the social scale. When John Winchcomb, the clothier, commonly known by the name of Jack of Newbury,* sent forth a hundred men, armed and clothed at his own expense, to meet the Scots at Flodden Field, the feudal baronial system had been shaken to its centre, and the loom was one of the most powerful of the levers which overthrew it.

Independently of higher associations, there is a peculiar interest attached to the shepherd and his flock, and indeed to his faithful dog, arising from the general solitude of his life, from the scenery, particularly on the South Downs, in which he moves, and from the importance of his charge; and, under the influence of this feeling, it seemed desirable to collect and preserve any old customs and habits connected with his mode of life, which have passed, or which are about to pass away. Little, indeed, has been collected, but that little may not be uninteresting.

Solitary as the shepherd's life generally was, there was one month in the year, and that the most beautiful of all the months, that of June—the sheepshearing month—when they met together in considerable numbers to shear the various flocks. Their work was hard; but there was much that was enjoyable in it, for it was a season of social merriment, which contrasted strongly with the usual solitary tenor of their lives. The shearing used to be performed by companies, consisting generally of above thirty men, and most of them formerly were shepherds. Each company received its distinctive name from some place within the sphere of its labours. One was called, for instance, the Brookside, another the Portslade Company; each of them had a captain and lieutenant placed over it, and these men, selected by the party for their trustworthy character, their superior intelligence, and their skill in the shearing

* Bischoff on Wool, vol. i, p. 55.

art, exhibited a pleasant specimen of a good elective government. Nor were the outward symbols of authority wanting, for the captain was distinguished by his gold-laced, and the lieutenant by his silver-laced hat ; but this distinction has now passed away.

We are indebted to the Rev. John Broadwood for the following and for other " old English songs," still sung by the peasantry of the weald of Surrey and Sussex, who collected them, after having heard them sung every Christmas from his childhood, by the country people, when they went about wassailing to the neighbouring houses at that season. With the true feeling of an archæologist, he had the airs set to music exactly as they are now sung, with a view, to use his own words, to rescue them from oblivion, and to afford a specimen of old English melody. They were harmonised by Mr. Dusart, organist to the chapel-of-ease at Worthing. The stanzas, as now published, are in some degree varied from those of Mr. Broadwood, those of an old shepherd in this neighbourhood having been adopted where the variation seemed to be an improvement.

There is a springy, joyous spirit in this old Sussex song, which was sung at the sheepshearings, and again at Christmas.

Here the rose buds in June, and the violets are blowing,
The small birds they warble from every green bough ;

Here's the pink and the lily,
And the daffydowndilly,

To adorn and perfume the sweet meadows in June.

'Tis all before the plough the fat oxen go slow ;
But the lads and the lasses to the sheepshearing go.

Our shepherds rejoice in their fine heavy fleeces,
And frisky young lambs, which their flocks do increase ;

Each lad takes his lass,
All on the green grass,
Where the pink and the lily,
And the daffydowndilly, &c.

Here stands our brown jug, and 'tis fill'd with good ale,
Our table, our table shall increase and not fail ;

We'll joke and we'll sing,
And dance in a ring ;
Where the pink and the lily,
And the daffydowndilly, &c.

When the sheepshearing's over, and harvest draws nigh,
We'll prepare for the fields, our strength for to try ;

We'll reap and we'll mow,
We'll plough and we'll sow ;
Oh ! the pink and the lily,
And the daffydowndilly, &c.

As soon as the company was formed, all the men repaired to the cottage of the captain, where a feast, which was called the "White ram," was provided for them, and on this occasion the whole plan of the campaign was discussed and arranged.

They generally got to their place of shearing about seven, and having breakfasted, began their work. Once in the forenoon and twice in the afternoon, their custom was "to light up," as they termed it; they ceased to work for a few minutes, drank their beer, sharpened their shears, and set to work again: their dinner-hour was one, but this was not the great meal of the day, their supper being the time of real enjoyment, and when this was over, they would remain for several hours in the house, smoking their pipes, and singing their sheepshearing songs, in which they were joined by the servants of the farm, and sometimes the master and mistress of the house would favour them with their presence. The following was a favorite song, and though the rhymes are anything but perfect, and here and there the metre halts, there is a rude spirit in it, which will justify its being preserved.

Come, all my jolly boys, and we'll together go
 Abroad with our masters, to shear the lamb and ewe;
 All in the merry month of June, of all times in the year,
 It always comes in season the ewes and lambs to shear;
 And there we must work hard, boys, until our backs do ache,
 And our master he will bring us beer whenever we do lack.
 Our master he comes round to see our work is doing well,
 And he cries, "Shear them close, men, for there is but little wool."
 "O yes, good master," we reply, "we'll do well as we can."
 When our captain calls, "Shear close, boys!" to each and every man;
 And at some places still we have this story all day long,
 "Close them, boys! and shear them well!" and this is all their song.
 And then our noble captain doth unto our master say,
 "Come, let us have one bucket of your good ale, I pray."
 He turns unto our captain, and makes him this reply:
 "You shall have the best of beer, I promise, presently."
 Then out with the bucket pretty Betsy she doth come,
 And master says, "Maid, mind and see that every man has some."
 This is some of our pastime while we the sheep do shear,
 And though we are such merry boys, we work hard, I declare;
 And when 'tis night, and we have done, our master is more free,
 And stores us well with good strong beer, and pipes and tobacco.
 So we do sit and drink, we smoke, and sing and roar,
 Till we become more merry far than e'er we were before.
 When all our work is done, and all our sheep are shorn,
 Then home to our captain, to drink the ale that's strong.
 'Tis a barrel, then, of hum cap, which we call the black ram;
 And we do sit and swagger, and swear that we are men;
 But yet before 'tis night, I'll stand you half a crown,
 That if you ha'n't a special care, the ram will knock you down.

Among the toasts drank at rural meetings in Sussex, there was one which was always followed by a very curious song, called the "Maiden's Health." I have not been able to ascertain whether it was sung at the sheepshearings; but as it certainly was at harvest-homes, and was very popular, at all events it ought to be preserved.

Our maid she would a hunting go,
 She'd never a horse to ride;
 She mounted on her master's boar,
 And spurr'd him on the side.
 Chink! chink! chink! the bridle went,
 As she rode o'er the Downs.
 So here's unto our maiden's health,
 Drink round, my boys! drink round!

When the supper was finished, and the profits shared, they all shook hands and parted, bidding each other good-bye till another year, and each man found his way home as best he might; on the whole, however, there was no great degree of excess.

Of this festive spirit at sheepshearing we find traces in the records of Scripture:

"Nabal had three thousand sheep, and a thousand goats; and he was shearing his sheep in Carmel."—When David's ten young men applied to him, he repelled them, saying, "Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give it unto men, whom I know not whence they be?"—"Behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king, and his heart was merry within him, for he was very drunken."*

The social mirth has of late years very much abated, for since it has ceased to be the custom to shear the lambs as well as the ewes, the number of men in each company has much lessened, and now the shearers frequently bring their own provisions with them, and board themselves, perhaps never entering the master's house at all. Whether it be a change for the better or the worse, let others, who are best acquainted with the present system, decide; but so it is.

To Mr. John Dudeney, of Lewes, the descendant from a long line of shepherds, I am indebted for all the information I have received on the subject of this paper. Having begun life as a shepherd's boy, he is now, at an advanced age, engaged in a different but kindred pursuit, that of schoolmaster,

* 1 Sam. ch. xxv, v. 2, 11, 36.

attending kindly and carefully to his flock of boys. Possessed by nature with a strong innate love of knowledge, he has afforded a striking instance of its acquisition, by turning to good account the peculiar leisure of a shepherd's occupation; and as the simple narrative of his progress refers to many particulars of the former habits of living on the South Downs, I trust the reader will follow with interest the peaceful tenor of his way, as here described in his own words.

"I was born at Rottingdean the 21st April, 1782, my father, Henry Dudeney, being shepherd to John Hamshaw, Esq. We lived with my grandfather, John Dudeney, in what is now called Plumpton Cottage, which was then his property. He was shepherd to Mr. Falconer, of Walls Farm, for many years, and my father had the care of the flock belonging to Messrs. R. Verral, of Warningore, J. Verral, of Courthouse, and R. Comber, Esq., of Allington. I was sent to school to an old woman who lived at Plumpton Place, of the name of Mascall, whose husband was bailiff over a few fields for Lord Pelham. I learnt nothing there but to drive the ducks into the moat, and my mother, fearing I might fall in, took me away after I had been there only a few weeks. This was all the day-schooling I ever had. My mother taught me to read, and my father taught me to write a little in the winter evenings, and also to do addition and subtraction, which was all he knew of arithmetic. I did not learn the multiplication table till I was near eighteen years of age.

"When I was eight years old I began to follow the sheep during the summer months; in winter I sometimes drove the plough. I was fond of reading, and borrowed all the books I could. When I was about ten, a gentleman (whom I afterwards found to be Mr. Dunvan, author of what is called Lee's History of Lewes) came to me on the hills, and gave me a small History of England and Robinson Crusoe, and I read them both with much interest. When he first came he inquired of the boy who was tending my father's flock, while I was gone to sheepshearing, for a wheatear's nest, which he had never seen. These birds usually build their nests in the chalk-pits, and in the holes which the rabbits had made. I afterwards bought, when I came to Lewes fair, a small History of France, and one of Rome, as I could get the money; indeed, when I came to the fairs, I brought all the money I could spare to buy books.

"What I consider a very fortunate circumstance was my father's borrowing a book on Geography of Mr. Cripps, father of J. M. Cripps, Esq. I think it was Salmon's Geographical Grammar. As my father was fond of reading in winter evenings, this was a choice book with him, and lest I should injure it, I might only look at it when he was by me. I took great interest in the maps, and obtained tolerably correct notions of the relative situations of the principal kingdoms, cities, &c. When a town was mentioned in conversation, or in the newspapers, I could often tell them where it was, &c., for which I got praise, and that encouraged me to go on.

"My mother sometimes tended my father's flock while he went to sheepshearing. I have known other shepherds' wives do the same; but this custom, like many others, is discontinued. I have not seen a woman with a flock for several years.

"The masters allowed me the keeping of one sheep, the lamb and the wool of which brought me about 14s. or 15s. a year, which I saved till I had enough to buy a watch, for which I gave four guineas, and which has now shown me the time of day for more than half a century. My father let me have the privilege of catching wheatears, which brought me in a few shillings. These birds are never found in great numbers so far from the sea-coast, and I very seldom caught a dozen in a day. The bird called the bustard, I have heard old shepherds say, formerly frequented the Downs, but their visits have been discontinued for nearly a century. I have

heard my father say, that his father saw one about the year 1750; he saw that near to *Four Lords' Dool*, a place so called, because at the tumulus or dool there four parishes meet—St. John's, under the Castle, Chailey, Chiltington, and Falmer. When I was sixteen I went to service, as under-shepherd, at West Blatchington, where I remained one year. When the transit of Mercury over the sun's disc took place, on the 7th of May, 1799, my curiosity was excited; but in looking for it without due precaution I very much injured one of my eyes.

"In the winter of 1798-9, during a snow, my flock was put into a barn-yard, the first instance I know of putting the sheep into the yard, except in lambing time. There we caught more wheatears than at my father's. I used to sell some to the gentry on their excursions to the Devil's Dyke for 2s. 6d. or 3s. a dozen, at the beginning of the season sometimes catching three dozen in a day, but not often. At Midsummer, 1799, I removed to Kingston, near Lewes, where I was under-shepherd for three years. The flock was very large (1400 the winter stock), and my master, the head shepherd, being old and infirm, much of the labour devolved on me. While here I had better wages, £6 a year; I had also a part of the money obtained from the sale of wheatears, though we did not catch them here in great numbers, a dozen or two a day, seldom more. The hawks often injured us by tearing them out of their coops, and scattering their feathers about, which frightened the other birds from the coops. During winter I caught the moles, which, at twopence each, brought me a few shillings. I could, therefore, spare a little more money for books. I still read such as I could borrow, on history, &c., for I never, after I was twelve or thirteen years of age, could bear to spend my time in what is called light reading.

"The first winter I was at Kingston I did not do much; but by the help of a ciphering book, which I borrowed of a schoolboy, I practised a little. My father frequently entreated me to try and improve my mind. I had no one to advise me as to what books were most suitable for me, and as I had only advertisements to go by, I often bought books by no means the best for me, and had not money to spare to buy more.

"By some means, I believe from seeing an advertisement in another book, I found there was a book called Turner's 'Introduction to Geography.' I bought it, and read it over and over; soon after I procured his 'Introduction to the Arts and Sciences,' which opened new scenes to my mind. I also bought his 'Introduction to Astronomy,' and so eager was I to con over its contents, that in taking it home from Lewes, I went into a shaw quietly to look it over. This book assisted me much in forming correct ideas of the distances, magnitudes, &c., of the planets, and other phenomena of the heavens. I also bought a small dictionary, and an English grammar. About that time I happened to see, on an old book-stall in Lewes, 'Les Aventures de Télémaque, Fils d'Ulysse.' I bought it; but when I got home I found I could not read it, and as I had given 9d. for it, I bought a French grammar, and set about learning French. Some time after, a gentleman riding by, and seeing me reading, after a little conversation gave me a seven-shilling piece, and with that I bought a French and English dictionary, and thus I learned to read French a little. The last year I was at Kingston, I prevailed on a poor man in the village, named George Coleman, to open an evening school, and I attended it for a few weeks in the winter.

"I had very little opportunity of reading at home, so used to take a book or two in my shepherd's coat-pocket, and to pursue my studies by the side of my flock when they were quiet. I was never found fault with for neglecting my business through reading. I have sometimes been on the hills in winter from morning till night, and have not seen a single person during the whole day. In the snow, I have walked to and fro under the shelter of a steep bank, or in a bottom, or a combe, while my sheep have been by me scraping away the snow with their fore-feet to get at the grass, and I have taken my book out of my pocket, and, as I walked to and fro in the snow, have read to pass away the time. It is very cold on the Downs in such weather; I remember once, whilst with my father, the snow froze into ice on my eyelashes, and he breathed on my face to thaw it off. The

Downs are very pleasant in summer, commanding extensive views of both sea and land: I very much wanted a telescope, and could not spare money to buy one; but I met with some lenses, and putting them into a pasteboard case, I contrived one, which afforded me much amusement in pleasant weather.

"In 1802 I began practical geometry from Turner's 'Introduction.' I bought some paper and a pair of iron compasses. I filed off part of one of the legs so that I could fasten on a pencil or pen, then laying my paper on the greensward on the hill, I drew my circles, triangles, &c.

"On that part of the hill where my sheep required least attention, I dug a hole in the ground amongst the heath, and placed a large rough flintstone over it. No one would think of there being anything under it if they had seen it. In that hole I kept some books and a slate, which, when convenient, I took out, and went to work at arithmetic, algebra, geometry, &c. This under-stone library was on Newmarket Hill, not far from a pond, near to which a cottage and a barn have since been erected. For more than thirty years the place where the hole had been was to be seen; and I have several times gone a little way out of my road to visit it, and offer up my thanks to that gracious Providence who has so directed my way; but within these last few years the plough has passed over it, and I can no longer find the exact spot.

"My master, the head shepherd, at Kingston, had the keeping of twenty sheep as part of his wages; and I have heard old shepherds affirm, that in the generation before them, some of the shepherds had nearly, or quite all, their wages in this way, and it seems to have been of very ancient practice. We have an instance in the case of Jacob and Laban; and I think it probable that the wages of the labouring man were, almost of necessity, money being scarce, paid in this manner.

At Midsummer, 1802, I went (at his request) to be head shepherd to James Ingram, Esq., of Rottingdean. Mr. Thomas Beard and Mr. Dumbrill, had each of them sheep in the flock, but Mr. Ingram having most, he was my real master. The farm was called the Westside Farm, extending from Rottingdean to Black Rock, in Brighton parish; it was a long, narrow slip of ground, not averaging more than half a mile in width. My flock required very close attention, as they had to feed so much between the pieces of corn, and there were no fences to keep them off. In such situations a good dog is a most valuable help to a shepherd, and I was fortunate in having a very excellent one.

"The farm extending along the sea-coast, I caught great numbers of wheatears during the season for taking them, which lasts from the middle of July to the end of August. The most I ever caught in one day was thirteen dozen; but we thought it a good day if we caught three or four dozen. We sold them to a poulterer at Brighton, who took all we could catch in the season at 18*d.* a dozen. From what I have heard from old shepherds, it cannot be doubted that they were caught in much greater numbers a century ago than of late. I have heard them speak of an immense number being taken in one day by a shepherd, at East Dean, near Beachy Head. I think they said he took nearly a hundred dozen; so many, that he could not thread them on crow-quills in the usual manner, but took off his round frock and made a sack of it, to put them into, and his wife did the same with her petticoat. This must have happened when there was a great flight. Their numbers now are so decreased that some shepherds do not set up any coops, as it does not pay for the trouble.*

* In a note at p. 96 of vol. i of 'Sussex Archæological Collections,' there is an extract from Fuller's 'Worthies,' describing the wheatear as feeding upon wheat, but this is altogether a mistake; though they frequent fallows, and are hence called fallow-chats, neither their name nor their food is connected with corn: they feed on a kind of winged ant, clouds of which are occasionally met with on the South Downs. Pennant states that 1840 dozen of these birds were annually ensnared by the shepherds in the Eastbourne district alone.—*Brit. Zool.*

At Rottingdean I had greater advantages for study than I ever had before. The Rev. Dr. Hooker, the vicar, heard of me, and sent for me to his house: he kindly let me see a planet through his telescope, lent me his globes, and gave me free access to his library, and this gave me abundance of work, and I studied hard in my way, though I still mostly followed my studies by the side of my flock. I had, however, better opportunities for study at home. I lodged at a kind aunt's, who gave me all the help she could, and I now procured a case of mathematical instruments.

"I had a good father and mother, though they were poor, my father's wages being only £30 a year, and the keeping of ten or twelve sheep, having a family of ten children, yet we were never in want. They attended very strictly to our morals, and it might truly be said of them, that they brought us up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; they never suffered us to read any other books on the Sunday than the Scriptures and religious books, and I am thankful that I never, in my earnestness for temporal knowledge, meddled with my books of science on the sacred day. I had but few opportunities of attending church or any place of worship, so I made my Bible my companion on that day. I felt a strong desire to be able to read the Scriptures in the original tongue, and, some time after, I fortunately met with a copy of Van Der Hooght's Hebrew Bible, which I bought, and having purchased a Hebrew grammar and lexicon, I was soon enabled to find out the meaning of words, and to read a little in its original of that most interesting of all books, and have often felt pleasure in doing so."

In 1804 Mr. Dudeney gave up the flock altogether. He came to Lewes, and there opened a school, with, as he modestly says, no other qualification for it than a real love of learning; but, to use his own words, indulging in the hope that it may be justly said of him when he is gone, that "he had been of some little use in his day, and to the generation and place in which he lived."