

GOOD FRIDAY CUSTOMS IN SUSSEX¹

BY RALPH MERRIFIELD

MOST of the old folk-lore of Sussex has been lost without record, and it is perhaps not generally known that certain ancient customs associated with Easter have survived well into living memory, and are even now not quite extinct. Their survival amid the urban development of modern Sussex is an indication of their great tenacity, and although definite evidence of their antiquity is lacking, they may well be a direct link with the pagan Sussex of our Saxon ancestors. In each case we find the surprising, and at first sight inexplicable, association of the most solemn and holy day of the Christian year with a simple game which is not normally played by adults at any other time. The superficial explanation, of course, is that these customs developed among the less religious members of the community as their natural reaction to the first holiday of the year; but this hardly accounts for the survival of such archaic pastimes as an annual practice, and their traditional supremacy on that one day over more sophisticated amusements.

Kiss-in-the-Ring

It is recorded that in the days when the village of Hove was separated from Brighton by open fields an artificial mound, lying slightly to the east of Hove, was the scene of extraordinary festivities every Good Friday.² On that day the young people of Hove gathered together in large numbers to play 'Kiss-in-the-Ring' and other games around the ancient mound. The chorus

¹ Most of the information contained in this article was collected by the writer from many people in various parts of Sussex during the last fifteen years, and it is regretted that these are too numerous for individual acknowledgements to be made. References to publications and other notes are given below.

² Barclay Phillips, 'Discovery of a Tumulus at Hove', *S.A.C.* ix. 119.

of their song, as they danced round the hillock, is said to have been:

Hi diddle derry,
Let's dance on the Bury.¹

In the year 1856-7 the mound was destroyed as a result of building operations and found to be the burial place of a Bronze Age chieftain of about 1600 B.C. Buried with him were found a cup of amber, a stone axe-hammer, and a bronze dagger which are now in the Brighton Museum.

Although there is no definite evidence of the antiquity of the Good Friday games around the Hove barrow, the use of the obsolete word 'Bury' to describe the ancient earthwork in the accompanying song may perhaps be significant. Dr. E. C. Curwen has suggested that the games were a survival of festivities in honour of the Saxon goddess Eostre,² for there is obviously no direct connection between such practices and the solemnities of the Christian celebration. If there is any ceremonial significance in this custom, its origin is clearly pagan, as is emphasized by its association with the ancient mound—the sacred ground of pre-Christian days. The choice of the hallowed place for an annual sport may of course have been a mere local coincidence, but it is noteworthy that there was a similar relationship between Easter games and ancient earthworks at Guildford in Surrey³ and at Kirkby Ireleth in Furness.⁴ The Hove custom is also strongly reminiscent of the Shrove-tide practice of 'clipping the church' by forming a ring about it with joined hands. This ceremony survived in the midlands until the nineteenth century, notably at Ellesmere, Edgmond, Wellington, and Bradford-on-Avon.⁵

It appears, however, that 'Kiss-in-the-Ring' was formerly played in many other parts of Sussex as a traditional Good Friday game, and it was not neces-

¹ Information given to Mr. G. Aitchison by a Mr. Wells, an early member of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society, who himself took part in the Hove games as a youth.

² *Prehistoric Sussex* (1930), p. 34.

³ W. Johnson, *Folk Memory* (1908), p. 336.

⁴ Hadrian Alleroft, *The Circle and the Cross* (1927), II. 276.

⁵ G. S. Tyack, *Lore and Legend of the English Church* (1899), p. 71.

sarily associated with an ancient earthwork or with 'sacred ground'. At Hastings it was regularly played on that day, within living memory, on West Hill, near the Castle. This open hill-side, until about forty years ago, was the scene of great festivity every Good Friday, a prominent feature of the celebration being the sale of penny packets of winkles, complete with pins! Records have also been received of Good Friday 'Kiss-in-the-Ring' at about the same period on the village green at Southwick and at Seaford, in the valley just in front of the site of the Seaford Head Golf Club House. At Southwick the same atmosphere of fair-like festivity prevailed, and about fifty years ago the traditional gilt gingerbread used to be sold there by an old woman who made a special visit to the village for the Good Friday celebrations.

Skipping

Even more important than 'Kiss-in-the-Ring' in the traditional Good Friday of the Sussex fisherfolk was the custom of communal skipping with a long rope—a practice that is still not quite extinct. It played a principal part in the festivities at Hastings and Southwick, and in Brighton was so popular that Good Friday was actually called 'Long Line Day' on account of the custom.¹ Fifty years ago the annual ceremony might have been seen in nearly every side-street in the poorer parts of Brighton. Long scaffold-ropes (originally well-ropes, according to one informant) were turned, usually, though not invariably, by the men, while the women skipped, and it is said that the men would generally expect a few pence as payment for their services. At one period Easter Monday was apparently a second 'Long Line Day', but this has long been forgotten.² The Good Friday skipping, however, survived on the forecourt of the Brighton Fish-Market until the beaches were closed during the late war. As recently as last Good Friday (1949) a party of skippers from Newhaven

¹ F. E. Sawyer, in *S.A.C.* xxxiii. 242.

² *Ibid.*

walked over the hills to Alciston, where they performed the annual ceremony.

An important feature of the Good Friday skipping seems to be the large number of people that join in the skipping on a single rope. The number is gradually increased until twenty or more are skipping together. Individual skipping with small ropes is not customary.

In Sussex Good Friday skipping seems to have been practised mainly in the coastal region, at least in recent years, and it appears to have been distinctly less popular in the inland towns and villages, apart from Lewes, where it continued until a few years ago. The custom is, however, by no means confined to the Sussex fisher-folk, but apparently has a sporadic distribution throughout England. No systematic investigation of the whole country has been made, but records have been received from London, Cambridge, Warwickshire (Leamington), and as far west as Monmouthshire (Pontypool). This wide but scattered distribution in itself strongly suggests a respectable antiquity for the custom.

Marbles

Another pastime which had equally close associations with Good Friday in Sussex was the game of marbles, and in the towns and villages of the Weald, especially, men of all ages almost invariably spent part of the day in playing marbles. The custom has survived to the present day in the so-called 'World Marbles Championship' of Tinsley Green, which according to a local legend originated in a marbles contest for the hand of a sixteenth-century maiden. Such a contest may well have taken place, but it seems likely that the rival suitors merely made use of a custom that was already flourishing, and was by no means confined to Tinsley. It was commonly practised at Burgess Hill and Ditchling at the close of the last century, and still survives at Battle, where the annual matches are played on the Abbey Green. These games now end at noon, when the children scramble for the marbles. As in Brighton Good Friday was called 'Long Lines Day' on account of the skip-

ping, so at Cuckfield seventy years ago it was called 'Marble Day'.¹ In the coastal towns the Good Friday marble-playing seems to have been less popular, or less persistent amid the increasing road-traffic, than the skipping, but it survived within living memory at Seaford and Southwick.

It is interesting to note that a protest against the desecration of Good Friday by marble-playing was made in 1948 by the parish priest of Tinsley Green, who tried in vain to persuade his parishioners to hold the match on Easter Monday instead. Such opposition must have been exerted many times by the Church during the long history of our Good Friday games, and Sussex obstinacy alone can hardly account for their survival through periods when the influence of the Church was far stronger than it is to-day. If, however, these customs, or some earlier practices from which they subsequently developed, had been in existence before the introduction of Christianity, and had then been so firmly established that they could survive the replacement of a pagan festival by a Christian Holy Day, the Early Church might well have tolerated them, provided that its own ceremonies were not neglected. In modern times (about fifty years ago) a typical compromise was found at Streat, where the farm-labourers, after performing their essential tasks early in the morning, were given the rest of Good Friday as a holiday on condition that they should go to church. They attended the morning service, and then all went out to play marbles, continuing their games until the evening.

The Vicar of Selmeston, writing to *Notes and Queries* in 1879, observed that his parishioners played marbles on Good Friday until the service began, continuing their games at the very gate of the church until the last possible moment. As soon as the service was over they hurried out to resume their play, and continued for the rest of the day.²

The games of marbles played on Good Friday seem

¹ S. M. Kingsley, in *Notes and Queries*, 5th Series, xi (1879), 427.

² W. D. Parish, *ibid.* xii (1879), 18.

to have been mostly of the 'Ring' variety, in which the aim of the player is to knock as many marbles as possible out of a circle chalked on the ground, with the aid of his 'shooting alley' or 'tolly' (called a 'bossor' at Battle).

Marble-playing was always considered to be especially a game for men, while skipping was more appropriate for the women. At Fulking, for example, where both games were equally popular on Good Friday towards the end of the last century, the boys and men played marbles all down the village street, while the women brought out their clothes-lines and skipped on the grass, twenty in a row.

Bat-and-Trap

Another game which now has definite associations with Good Friday in Brighton is the old English game called 'Bat-and-Trap' in Sussex, but more generally known as 'Trap-Ball'. As far back as memory goes, matches of this game have been played every Good Friday on the Level, usually between teams organized by the local public-houses and beer-shops. An essential feature is the presence of a large barrel of beer, paid for by the losing team! With the possible exception of some of the war years, this custom has been practised annually until the present day, although only one match was observed in 1947, whereas before the last war half a dozen or more were usually to be seen.

As a Good Friday traditional game, however, 'Bat-and-Trap' does not seem to have been generally practised in Sussex. It is said to have been played on that day at Lewes and Southwick, but in both of these places it was apparently also played on other special occasions. The antiquity of the Brighton custom is therefore doubtful, though it is interesting to note that the game used to be played at Bury St. Edmunds on Shrove Tuesday, Easter Monday, and at Whitsun;¹ while an allied game called 'Knur-and-Spell' was especially associated with Shrove Tuesday at Cleveland, in the North

¹ A. Gomme, *Dictionary of British Folk Lore*, Part I, vol. II, p. 307.

Riding of Yorkshire.¹ The game itself is certainly ancient, for it is illustrated in a Bodleian manuscript of the early fourteenth century; and there is evidence of its development from the primitive game of 'Tip-Cat',² which, like marbles and skipping, was played by children until recent years as a seasonal amusement of the early spring.

The Brighton version of the game is played as follows. The ball is placed on the lever of the shoe-shaped trap, and is made to rise by a sharp tap with the bat on the end of the lever. The batsman then tries to strike it downwards and in the direction of the fieldsmen, who stand in a line about 40 to 50 feet from the trap. He is out if he fails to hit the ball after three attempts; if the ball falls short of the line of fieldsmen, or is caught by one of them; or if the man who stops the ball succeeds in hitting the end of the trap with it.

Knock-Orange

For the sake of completeness, mention must be made of a simple game called 'Knock-Orange' which used to be played at Southwick on Good Fridays. In this game the player rolled an orange along the ground and tried to hit his opponent's orange, which he won if he succeeded. 'Knock-Orange' was also played at Southwick on Boxing Day. Until recent years oranges were obtainable in this country only from about Christmas to Easter, and the games therefore marked the beginning and end of the 'season'. No record of this custom has been obtained elsewhere, and in this form it is probably a local development of comparatively recent origin. Oranges, in any case, were not imported to this country before the Middle Ages, and it is very unlikely that the custom is as old as that. It is, however, very reminiscent of the games which used to be played, in many parts of the country, with the hard-boiled coloured 'Pasque' eggs, which were rolled along the ground, or thrown about and caught before being eaten. The oranges might well

¹ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 423.

² John Holland, in *Reliquary*, 1st Series, VI (1865), 233 et seq.

be substitutes for the eggs used in these ancient Easter customs. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the landlords of certain public-houses in Brighton used to distribute oranges among the children of their customers on Good Friday.

Seasonal Games

A very unconvincing theory (which may be traditional) is sometimes offered to account for the association of marbles and skipping with Good Friday. This is that both are derived from incidents in a dramatic representation of the Passion of Christ. It is suggested that the marble-playing represents the dicing of the soldiers at the foot of the Cross, and that the 'long lines' have some connection with the rope with which Judas Iscariot hanged himself! This explanation seems to be merely an attempt to justify in Christian eyes two customs whose origin has been forgotten and can now be discovered only by the methods of comparative investigation.

Very closely associated with the problem of our Good Friday customs is that of the seasonal recurrence of children's games. The season for both marbles and skipping comes in the early spring, and is at its height just before Easter. There is, in fact, a definite tradition that after Good Friday the children's skipping-ropes and marbles should be put away. In Sussex the marble season was formerly strictly limited to the period between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; and according to a lady who spent her childhood at Battle over sixty years ago, if the boys began to play after Good Friday the girls used to confiscate their marbles with the cry, 'Goblins after Good Friday!' The girls usually waited until there was a fine collection of glass marbles in the ring before making their raid, but the boys never made any attempt to get them back. In Hove about thirty years ago similar measures were taken by the boys, probably to deal with a breach of the seasonal 'taboo', but here the slogan was 'Lobbing Day', and strong resistance was made by the victims. The capture of

the marbles was, however, considered to be legitimate confiscation, and not theft.¹

Tradition is perhaps rather less definite about skipping, which according to some was continued after Good Friday. It did, however, certainly begin on Ash Wednesday, and about forty years ago the laundry girls in the Lewes Road district of Brighton used to skip with 'long lines' on their way to work on that day, to celebrate the beginning of the 'season'. Most of my informants, moreover, were quite certain that the Good Friday games of the grown-up people formed a sort of grand finale to both the children's marbles and skipping seasons.

This adult interest at the end, and sometimes at the beginning, of the season may well be a survival from a time when both games were serious pursuits, practised by the whole community. T. E. Sawyer, in his article on 'Sussex Folk-Lore and Customs', published in 1894 (*Sussex Archaeological Collections*, xxxiii), states that he was told by an old Brighton fisherman that on Ash Wednesday the *fishermen* used to commence to play marbles, which they continued throughout Lent. Here, then, is a definite record, which there seems no reason to doubt, of the playing of marbles during Lent, until comparatively recent times, as an adult activity.

Among many modern primitive peoples we find that various simple games are played at definite seasons for magical purposes. The Central Eskimo, for example, play at 'Cup-and-Ball' in the spring in order to hasten the return of the sun after the long winter night of the Arctic, and play 'Cat's Cradle' in the autumn in order to entangle him, and thus delay his disappearance.² The Kai of New Guinea play 'Cat's Cradle' for a different purpose—to make the foliage of their yams spread luxuriantly—and swing to make the yams grow tall. They also spin acorns when the taro is planted to make

¹ There is some doubt whether this custom was practised in Hove at that time in order to prevent the playing of marbles out of season, but it is obviously related to the older custom at Battle, which was explicitly for that purpose.

² Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1913), vi. 168.

it 'turn about and broaden'.¹ Similarly, the Kayan of Borneo spin tops during the season of sowing rice as an essential part of their agricultural magic; and it is interesting to note that during the same season many of their more usual activities and pleasures are forbidden.² Among the Wichita of Oklahoma a form of hockey is played in the spring in order to aid the defeat of winter and the renewal of life.³

It is therefore not unreasonable to interpret our Sussex Good Friday customs as survivals of ancient magical practices, which continued long after the primitive ideas from which they originated had been forgotten. No superstitious belief concerning them seems to have survived, and they can now be explained only through a comparative study of European and other folk-lore.

'Kiss-in-the-Ring', for example, apparently includes two well-known magical elements. The round or ring dance, which played an important part in religious festivities from the remotest antiquity, was especially associated with fairies and witches in the Middle Ages, and was a central feature of the strange fertility cults which were still flourishing in that period.⁴ Since, moreover, there are many instances of the belief that the union of the human sexes, real or symbolical, has a beneficial effect on the productivity of the earth, it seems likely that 'Kiss-in-the-Ring' developed from a simple rite of fertility, which was performed in the early spring to assist in the re-birth of life.⁵

Henry Bett has suggested a relationship between skipping and the magical leaping which in some parts of Europe accompanies the sowing of seed.⁶ In Germany, for example, it was the custom for those who were sowing hemp to leap as high as possible at every few steps in order to make the hemp grow as high as they leaped.⁷ In many countries this simple act of imitative

¹ J. G. Frazer, *Golden Bough* (3rd edition), Part V, vol. I, pp. 101-3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 94-6.

³ Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1913), vi, 168.

⁴ Margaret A. Murray, *The God of the Witches*, p. 115.

⁵ J. G. Frazer, *op. cit.*, Part I, vol. II, ch. xi.

⁶ Henry Bett, *Games of Children*, p. 55.

⁷ J. G. Frazer, *op. cit.*, Part I, vol. I, pp. 137-9.

magic became formalized into a dance. The leaping dance performed in March by the Roman priests called the *Salii* almost certainly originated in this way, and a similar element of leaping is found in many English folk-dances performed in the spring. By a natural extension this action seems to have become, at a very early period, a rite to ensure general fertility and abundance. This idea is clearly expressed in a Cretan inscribed hymn which refers to the ceremonies of the ancient spring festival.

To us also leap for full jars, and leap for fleecy flocks, and leap for fields of fruit and for hives to bring increase. Leap for our cities, and leap for our sea-borne ships, and for our young citizens, and for goodly Themis.¹

In addition to the leaping, a significant feature of our Good Friday skipping is the gradual increase from a single skipper to a line of twenty or more, jumping in unison. This, again, may well be a magical representation of growth, and a symbolical imitation of the result which it is hoped to achieve.

In the case of marbles the problem is more difficult. We know very little of the history or ancestry of the game, and it is possible that it is a degenerate survival of a game that was once played with much larger balls. In that case it would fall into the large and varied class of spring ball-games, which would also include our Good Friday 'Bat-and-Trap' and 'Knock-Orange'. Ball-games of many kinds seem to have been especially associated with Easter in all parts of England. Thus 'hurling', a primitive form of hockey, was one of the principal sports played on the ancient earthwork at Kirkby Ireleth on Easter Monday. Football, also, was in many places considered to be especially appropriate to that day. It may seem unnecessary to seek a magical origin for these Easter ball-games, but there is good reason to believe that they once had a ceremonial significance which the Early Church was obliged to recognize. In what other way can we explain the extraordinary custom of playing at ball in the church itself at Easter?

¹ Miss J. E. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1918), pp. 114-17.

This strange ceremony was formerly performed at Chester Cathedral, among other places, on Easter Monday.

The deacon received the ball, and immediately began to chant an antiphon, moving meanwhile in a stately step in time to the music; then with his left hand he tossed, or handed, the ball to another of the clergy; when it had reached the hands of the dean, he threw it in turn to each of the choristers, the antiphon, accompanied by the organ, meanwhile continuing.¹

No reasonable explanation of this rite in terms of Christian symbolism has ever been offered; and it is very probable that in this instance, as in many others, the Church in its wisdom sanctified a harmless pagan custom which could not easily be destroyed.

There may well be a close relationship between these Easter ball-games and our Good Friday marbles, and both are possibly connected with the ceremonies performed with the hard-boiled, coloured 'Pace' or 'Pasque' eggs. It is generally agreed that the custom of rolling or throwing these eggs originated as a magical rite of fertility.

It seems, however, to be very probable that marbles was never a ball-game at all, in the usual sense of the word, but that it has always been played with small pellets, probably originally natural objects of some kind, such as nuts, cherry-stones, beans, or small pebbles. The former use of some perishable or indistinguishable natural object in the game may account for the lack of definite archaeological evidence of its antiquity.²

In our Good Friday marbles the player shoots his alley into the chalk circle, with the object of knocking out as many marbles as possible. It is tempting to see in this a magical symbol of the planting of the seed, and its subsequent manifold return in the harvest; but in the absence of any comparative evidence, this suggestion

¹ G. S. Tyack, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

² It is sometimes stated that the ancient Egyptians played marbles, but according to Mr. I. E. S. Edwards, of the Dept. of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities of the British Museum, there is no definite evidence of this, although spherical stone objects of unknown use, about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter, have been found in early dynastic tombs. Games resembling marbles were played by the Greeks and Romans with knuckle-bones, nuts, beans, acorns, or pebbles, according to Mr. R. A. Higgins of the Dept. of Greek and Roman Antiquities.

must be made with reserve. We have perhaps a definite clue, however, in the fact that marbles seems to have been considered a masculine activity, which was complementary to the skipping of the women. If, therefore, the magic of the women was concerned with the germination of the seed and the vegetative growth of the crops, it would not be surprising if the corresponding magic of the men had some connection with the sowing of the seed and its eventual multiplication.

We are now so accustomed to consider amusement as an end in itself that it is difficult to accept the idea that sport, like dancing and the drama, developed from an act of ritual. This is strongly suggested, however, by the close association between games and religious festivals commonly found in the ancient world, and apparently surviving in degenerate form in our local Good Friday customs. Furthermore, at a lower stage of cultural development, represented by certain modern primitive peoples, we find that various magical practices have developed into something very much like sport. It is therefore not surprising to find a strong suggestion of magical symbolism in the simplest of our traditional spring games, which have apparently survived, fundamentally unchanged, from very early times, preserved in the annual rhythm of peasant life as the proper accompaniment of the sowing season.