XXI.—COQUETDALE CUSTOMS.

BY D. D. DIXON.

[Read on the 29th May, 1889.]

THE origin of many of the interesting old customs usually found in connection with villages of ancient foundation, such as Harbottle, Hepple, and Rothbury, in Upper Coquetdale, can be traced a long way back in the annals of local history. Numbers are of Saxon origin, a few are said to be British, others (mostly sports and amusements) are reputed to be Roman, but probably the greater number have been introduced into our village life since the Norman Conquest. In speaking of the customs of Upper Coquetdale I do not mean to say that they were confined to that district alone—they were general throughout the whole country, differing only according to the *status* of each vill or manor. For instance, in Coquetdale we find that the early lords of Rothbury, Hepple, and Harbottle exercised the rights of life and death, each had the *furcas* or gallows erected within his lordship, besides having many other rights, privileges, and customs, all of which were part and parcel of the feudal system, whilst in the adjoining lesser manors of Thropton, Callaley, Cartington, and Whittingham, although we find traces of several old customs, yet there is a lack of those special customs and institutions the usual concomitants of the more important manors.

THE GALLOWS.

There were, in olden times, four gallows in Upper Coquetdale, viz., at Rothbury, Hepple, Harbottle, and Alwinton; and as there is, in each of the townships mentioned, a certain spot or locality still retaining the prefix *gallows* in its place-name, it may be of interest to notice the traditional sites of those four 'wuddies' which once adorned the landscape in Upper Coquetdale.

The gallows of a Norman lord usually stood on an elevated spot, distant from his stronghold about one mile, in such a position that the gruesome sight could be seen from all parts of the manor, as a terror to evildoers. The gallows of Robert fitz Roger, the first

Norman lord of Rothbury (1205)—if we are to be guided by the place-name—stood on a hill end close to West Hills camp, midway between Rothbury and Thropton. The slopes of the hill are still called the 'Gallowfield Braes.' This spot (500 feet above the sea-level) was admirably adapted for such a purpose.

The gallows erected within the Hepple barony by the Tailbois, the lords of Hepple (1207), has left us a trace of its existence and its site, in the form of a field-name, 'The Gibbet Close.' For some time I had been endeavouring, but without success, to identify its site, and it is quite recently, by the help of an observant native of Hepple, Mr. John Clark, who is well versed in the lore of that ancient barony, that I was able to do so. 'The Gibbet Close' lies at the base of a hill, on whose summit probably stood the gallows. This hill is on the south side of the river Coquet, exactly opposite to Hepple, and distant about a mile from Hepple tower.

The Harbottle gallows occupied an elevated site on a high ridge of moorland stretching between the villages of Harbottle and Holystone, about 800 feet above the sea-level, one mile south of Harbottle castle, the border stronghold of the potent Umfravilles. This hill is yet known as 'Gallow Edge.' How Gilbert de Umfraville, lord of Redesdale and Harbottle (*circa* 1300), exercised his almost regal powers within his franchise there, we gather from the charges brought against him in the Hundred Rolls. One of those charges shows the swift and savage manner in which capital punishment was inflicted by that cruel and unscrupulous baron. Thomas de Holm was taken within the franchise, but he escaped from the dungeon of Harbottle castle, and fled for refuge to the altar in Alwinton church, where, before the coroner, he forswore his country; but Simon Smart and Benedict Grey, porter of Harbottle, beheaded him at 'Simonseth' (Simonside near Rothbury, beyond his franchise) in the body of the county, and took his head thence, and hung it on the gallows at Harbottle.

The same Gilbert de Umfraville held 200 acres of land in the adjoining manor of Alwinton with the royalty of the town of Alwinton, where he also had a gallows and assize of bread and ale. The crest of a steep green hill to the north of, and overlooking, the village of Alwinton, yet called 'Gallow Law,' points strongly to the site of the

Alwinton gallows. This hill—one of the Cheviot range—looks small alongside its huge companion 'Lord's Seat,' but it stands in a prominent position, 884 feet above the sea, and is about one mile north from Alwinton church, which, in those days, was probably near the centre of the manor.

There appears to have been curious degrees of dignity even in so hideous an erection as the gallows of feudal times. It is said, 'The earl of a county was entitled to an imposing instrument, for while, by the Norman law, the gallows of a simple lord of a manor had only two supporting pillars, that of an earl was distinguished by having six.'

Rothbury Market Cross.

During the Middle Ages when weekly markets and statute fairs were of greater importance than they are in these days, the village cross or market cross was the centre of the whole commerce of the district; from its steps royal proclamations were read, and many other public announcements were given. When, in 1291, Robert fitz Roger obtained from king Edward I. a charter for a weekly market to be held on Thursdays, and a fair yearly, on the eve, day, and morrow of S. Matthew the Apostle, within his manor of Rothbury, whether there was then a market cross or not we have no record, and it is not until so late as the beginning of the 18th century that we have any certain account of Rothbury market cross. We must, however, bear in mind that during the Commonwealth anything in the form or bearing the name of a cross was held in great abhorrence by our Puritan forefathers, who destroyed many of our fine old market crosses; therefore, when Rothbury parish church was denuded of its ornaments (as we know it was) during that unfortunate period, the older cross may have shared in the general despoliation. The Rothbury market cross of which we are accustomed to speak was erected in 1722 by several of the then influential inhabitants of the village to afford a shelter to the country folks when attending the weekly market with their produce—butter, eggs, poultry, etc. It was a square building with a hipped roof, and had four open sides, round-arched, very similar to Stamfordham market cross. About the beginning of the present century the cross was in so ruinous a condition that it was considered dangerous. Therefore in 1827, instead of having it restored,

the freeholders had the building entirely pulled down, and every stone of it removed. Luckily, however, a person who evidently had a little of the antiquary in his composition, got the mason, for half a gallon of ale, to carry a stone containing an inscription into his garden. This stone is yet in existence.

It is said that the Duke of Northumberland (lord of the manor), who then came to Rothbury every year on his way to Kielder castle, and luncheoned at the 'Three Half Moons,' was so much annoyed at the destruction of the cross that he gave up visiting Rothbury altogether, and journeyed to his shooting box in North Tyne by another route. There was a great to do about it amongst the villagers, and the vandals who had been instrumental in its destruction were threatened with legal proceedings. An old woman composed a long doggerel rhyme in memory of the cross; there is neither poetry nor beauty in its composition, but it is valuable in preserving a record of the cross and of its destruction as well as the names of several old families in Rothbury. The following three verses quoted below are thought sufficient:—

'Ye ancient inhabitants mourn for the loss
Of that venerable pile, I mean Rothbury cross,
Where oft in my childhood I happy did play
With youthful companions, long since away.

There was the Grahams, and the Milburns, the Storers and Storeys,
The Clennells, the Snawdons, the Todds, and the Dores,
The Matthews and Mavins—that's just half a score,
Believe me, dear neighbours, there is very few more.

If the age of the cross you are wishful to know,
To the 'Black Bull' yard I ask you to go,
Where with letters inserted, conspicuous to view,
Is seventeen hundred and twenty-two.'

Urged by a query in the *Weekly Chronicle* of November 24th, 1888, respecting Rothbury market cross, and acting upon the advice given in the last verse, I went to the 'Black Bull' yard and found the tablet already mentioned built into the gable end of a house, the property of Mr. John Clark. The only name legible is that of 'Archibald Douglas,' an ancestor of the querist in the *Weekly Chronicle*, Christopher Douglas of West Hartlepool. The others may have been Robert Snawden and Robert Redhead, both of whom were men of

some note in the parish at that time (1722). A few of the inhabitants of Rothbury can remember the ruins of the cross, and a very old man informed me that he could recollect, when a boy, watching the countrymen go into the cross when trying on the leather breeches they were about to buy at the October fair. He also informed me of the price of salt and tobacco at that time (90 to 100 years ago). He said when the pig was killed—a great event in the country—his mother sent him to Philip Nairn, a shopkeeper in Rothbury, for 'a staen i' saat an' a yerd i' baccy;' the salt cost 5s. and the tobacco one penny.

Near to the cross the pillory was wont to be erected, and not far off stood the village stocks, whilst about 20 yards to the west lay the Rothbury bull ring, described to me by an old Rothburian, who knew the spot well, as being 'a fearful big staen flag wi' a greet iron ring in't as thick as yor airm.'

The village green or market place, an open space in the middle of the village, more commonly known as the 'Cross,' whereon the market cross stood, is now the rendezvous of all the travelling tinkers, besom makers, muggers, and gipsies that peregrinate the country, and who, without let or hindrance, encamp upon it, such being the right of an ancient village green; but I hope shortly there will be a scheme set on foot to remedy this nuisance.

Cockfighting.

Without going into a long dissertation on the origin of cockfighting, I may say that it is a generally held opinion that the custom was first introduced into this island by the Romans, although it is thought the bird itself was here before Caesar's arrival.

William fitz Stephen, who wrote during the time of Henry II., is the first of English writers that mentions cockfighting, and describes it as 'the sport of schoolboys on Shrove tuesday.'

The custom of cockfighting at schools was practised on Shrove tuesday both in the North of England and the southern counties of Scotland, until about the end of the last century, the master himself presiding at the battle and enjoying the perquisite of all runaway cocks—fugies they were called.[1] 'Gamecock, bancock, and fugie,'

[1] 'Hammies' they were sometimes called in other places.—Ed.

was a school rhyme in former years, and evidently alludes to some older custom. The scholars also paid a fee of a penny, known as a cockpenny. The following Yorkshire rhyme may possibly have reference to this practice:—

> 'A nick and a nock,
> A hen and a cock,
> And a penny for my master.'

But cockfighting had patrons of higher rank than dominies and their pupils: country squires, city merchants, noblemen, and even royalty itself, frequented the cockpit. It was called the royal diversion. The cockpit at Westminster was erected by Henry VIII., and James I. was passionately fond of the sport.

During the first half of the present century the custom of cockfighting was universal throughout the whole of Northumberland, and was a favourite sport amongst the pitmen of Tyneside, as well as amongst the rural population of upper Coquetdale and Redewater. But in my researches into the old customs of our parish (Rothbury) I am rejoiced to find no trace whatever of such cowardly cruelty as *throwing* or *shying* at cocks on Shrove tuesday—a most barbarous custom, compared with which cockfighting, savage as it may appear, is to be reckoned among 'the tender mercies' of barbarity. To us it is no doubt amusing to hear old tales of the cockpit; but we must at the same time admit that cockfighting was very barbarous sport, and cannot but rejoice that the practice is now to be numbered amongst the things of the past.

In the village of Rothbury, some fifty or sixty years ago, there were no less than five cockpits, viz.:—

One at the foot of the present 'Blue Bell' Garden, connected with an old public house then called the 'Malt Shovel.'

Another behind the modern 'Turk's Head,' known at that time by the name of 'The Fighting Cocks.'[2]

A third at the west end of the village, close to the site now occupied by the Independent chapel, where chairs and tables, stools and crackits, made by 'Aad Tommy Haa,' a joiner at Whitton, were regularly fought for.

[2] The village of Fighting Cocks in South Durham got its name from the barbarous sport. The name of the new railway station on the Stockton and Darlington line has been changed to the more euphonious 'Dinsdale.'—Ed.

There was a fourth in a yard behind 'The Fox and Hounds,' a public house which was done away with many years ago. The peculiar merchandise fought for at the cockpit of the 'Fox and Hounds' were legs of mutton, webs of homespun linen, and bottles of gin.

The fifth and most important, which might be termed 'the village cockpit,' was situated on the 'Haa Hill,' near to the church, now part of the churchyard, where many a savage main was fought.

There were also cockpits at Great Tosson, Snitter, Thropton, Sharperton, Harbottle, Netherton, Holystone, Harehaugh, and at Swindon, near Hepple, where there was also a 'badger-hole,' kept by Oliver Proudlock, the landlord of the 'Badger Inn.'

The last cockfight held within the 'Haa Hill' cockpit took place about 1838, when between fifty and sixty cocks were entered, to be fought in what were known as four cock mains. The entry money was 12s. 6d. each bird, spectators paying 6d. for admission to see the fights. Persons came from great distances to the Rothbury cockings, and on this particular day Wullie Thompson, a shoemaker, came all the way from Otterburn with eleven game cocks, each cock being tied up in a tartan bag, and hung in the bows of a carrier's covered cart. It was an unfortunate day for the poor shoemaker: his eleven birds were defeated. Amongst the well-known local cockfighters of that period who were present at this, the last of Rothbury's cockfights, and whosé names are written according to local phraseology, were:—

Jim Blaaket of Yetlington,
Tom Amory of Snitter,
Tommy Embleton of the Sneugh Banks,
John Wuntrip of Big Tosson,
Bob Smith the weaver,
Geordie Ramsay the tailor, and his son Bob,
Tom Mavin and his brother Wullie, the tailors,
Aad Wullie Burn the brower,
Wat Mavin the fisher,
Lang Ned Pyle, i' the Forest Burn Gate,
Fargy Jordan of Lang Horsley,
John Watson the theeker (known as the 'Jovial Thatcher'),
Besides Cocker Bill, Sweerin' Jim, the Scammeller, and others whose names are now forgotten.

It was just midday, when the proceedings were in full swing, that the Rev. C. G. V. Harcourt, the rector of Rothbury, whilst taking his accustomed walk through the rectory fields, saw the motley crowd assembled on the Haa Hill. Surmising at once that a cockfight was in progress, he hurried down to the village, and calling in the assist-

ance of the village constable—the late John Watson, the sexton, a stalwart fellow, better known as 'Saxon Jack'—attempted to disperse the crowd, but in vain. A smatch of the old lawless spirit of their ancestors yet lingered in the breasts of the men of Coquetdale; therefore, regardless of consequences, they were determined to fight the mains out, and did. So at the next magistrates' meeting, held at that time in the 'stone parlour' of the 'Three Half Moons,' 'Jim Blaaket,' Willie Leighton, and several more of the ringleaders, were fined pretty heavily. This prompt action of the rector virtually put an end to cockfighting in Rothbury, with the exception of an odd fight or two which were held in a secluded spot at the east end of the village.

Many villages had properly built cockpits with a roof,[3] but those at Rothbury were in the open air. The pit or circle was generally 18 feet in diameter, surrounded by a low earthen rampart about 2 feet high, outside of which stood the spectators, whilst two men termed handlers were the only persons allowed inside the ring when the cocks were fighting. The floor of the pit was laid with fine ashes; after each battle this was carefully swept, and the feathers cleared away. The gamecocks of the ancients fought only with the spurs nature had provided for them, but those of modern times were armed with steel or silver spurs 2 or 3 inches long, and very sharp. With these bayonet-like weapons it often happened that the enraged birds would, at the very first onset, transfix each other, and both fall down dead on the floor of the cockpit, with such force did they strike. A Rothbury cockfighter whom I knew well carried the mark of such a stroke to his dying day. He was a celebrated handler, and during a fight when lifting a poor blind and exhausted bird which was thought to be dead, it unexpectedly struck out and sent the three inches of steel through his hand.

Every bird had a particular name by which he was known and entered in the lists. Here are a few of the Rothbury names:—Tom Mavin had one called 'Burke'; John Wintrip of Tosson had 'Jim Crow'; Tom Wintrip of Thropton had 'The Weary Barnman'; Jack the Theeker's was 'Mary wants him back again'; and Wat Mavin had

[3] Like that in the village of Coxhoe, county Durham, now used as a smithy. The pit at Middleton-one-Row, traces of which may still be seen, was on the bank in front of the village sloping to the Tees. It was about the same size, and had an earthen rampart as that at Rothbury, but outside of it there was a ditch. The spectators sat on the bank above. At Ponteland and on the village green at Elsdon there were cockpits similar to that at Rothbury.—ED.

a favourite game cock which was fed and walked by Nanny Trummell on the 'Haa Hill': his name was 'Nanny wants him back again.'

'Walking a cock' was the feeding and tending of a game cock. This was frequently part of the rent of a farm. About sixty years ago it was noted in the conditions of the lease of the hill farm of Wilkwood, in Upper Coquetdale, that the tenant—then a person named Wood—'should feed a pointer dog, spin a stone of lint, and *walk a game cock for the Squire*' (Clennell of Harbottle).

It is interesting to notice how strong the spirit of antipathy to the French showed itself amongst the rural population of North Northumberland for many years after the close of the great French war. As in the olden days the cry was Scotch and English, so at the period of which I am speaking the very children played at French and English. But the most amusing manner in which this feeling showed itself was in the names our fathers and grandfathers gave to their game cocks. This I shall best illustrate by giving a short account of a notable cockfight held at the little village of Netherton, in the parish of Alwinton, some fifteen or twenty years after Waterloo, on which occasion the feathered warriors on one side were named after the English generals, and those on the other after the French generals, who had taken part in the campaign, and whose names were then household words throughout the country. The match was arranged by James Blacklock of Yetlington, a veteran of the cockpit, and John Buddle of Alnham, a Waterloo hero. The Yeldomites, with Buddle as their captain, chose the names of the English generals, whilst the Yetlingtonians, with Blacklock as their leader, adopted those of the French. Many of the persons present that day had vivid recollections of the FALSE ALARM, and not a few had served as volunteers in the ranks of the Coquetdale Rangers, the Cheviot Legion, the Percy Artillery, or had been drawn for the Northumberland Militia, whilst Buddle and several others had actually fought the French under the command of those generals whose names they had assumed for their birds; therefore the excitement was great. Nicknames or sobriquets were, and are yet, very common in Coquetside, therefore some of the assembly were known by such names as Harry i' the Rig, Willie the Weaver, Geordie Scott, Kit Mordue, Cleesh, The Buck, Talleyrand, The Scammeller, Young Renny, The Gravit, Bendigo, Brassy, Pilpan, and Billy the Butler.

The main having been drawn, the birds fell together in the order and with the results following:—

	{Jack Buddle's	Duke of Wellington	BEAT
	{Dode Avery's	Murat.	
	{Bob Dodds's	Marshal Ney	BEAT
	{Jimmy Elshender's	Sir John Moore.	
	{Stephen Atcheson's	General Wolfe	BEAT
	{Ned Hibert's	General Grouchy.	
(1.)	{Jim Blaaket's	Napoleon	BEAT
	{Jimmy Turnbull's	General Picton.	

The second time:—

(2.) {Wellington BEAT Ney, and
{Napoleon BEAT Wolfe.

And, strange to relate how history repeats itself, at the third and last time—

(3.)	{Jack Buddle's	Duke of Wellington	BEAT
	{Jim Blaaket's	Napoleon.	

Much to the delight of the Yeldomites. According to custom the day's proceedings were finished up by a 'carding' in the 'Fighting Cocks' Inn' at night.

The usual doggerel rhyme commemorating the event began thus:—

'Jim bagg'd Napoleon and off he went,
To Netherton cockin' the lad was bent;
But Wellington lick'd him to his heart's content
That varra day.'

In giving notice that a cockfight was going to be held, it was customary at Rothbury, during the last century, to affix a written notice on the church doors, as well as on the doors of the village smithy. Often, too, the notice was simply verbal; one person told another, and soon the news spread far and near. In larger towns, such as Alnwick and Newcastle, the coming events were duly advertized in the newspapers. Numerous cockfighting advertisements are to be found in the old files of the *Weekly Courant* and *Weekly Chronicle* lying on the shelves of the society's library in the castle. Complete official lists were also sent out from the Gallowgate cockpit, containing the names of the birds, their handlers, and owners. Three of these I have in my possession, viz., for Race week 1833, Easter week 1835, and Easter week 1846. On the back of the last mentioned list,

which has evidently been sent by a person residing in Newcastle to his cockfighting friend in the country, is a most characteristic letter worthy of record, a verbatim copy of which shall conclude this paper:—

'Dear James.

I am happy to tell you that the stag was good Game but we ware afrade of him and the Feaders Baley did not Like him and I Fought him on Saturday for 12^{s}. 6^{d} and he Paid a grand Cock but it was a hard Battle and I Tride him the next morning an he still shoed Fight But verry Bad and the old Cock win a Four mane on Monday Oliver Parker Fed him and If you have anything good For the next meating to send It In as I have got Baley to Fead at my house and you can stand as much on them as you Like and this is a correct markd List and we call the Black Cock the Deavel amang the Taylors.

I Remain yours Truley

George Hudson.'