

XVI.—OLD COQUETDALE CUSTOMS : SALMON POACHING.

By D. D. DIXON, of Rothbury.

[Read on the 26th November, 1890.]

THE paper I am now going to read to you is, perhaps, not exactly an antiquarian paper in the true sense of the word, and, I am probably running some risk of being called to order by the more learned members of the Society for bringing forward time after time these simple papers on Coquetdale; nevertheless, for your amusement, if not for your profit, I intend during the coming winter to read a series of three such papers, viz., 'Notes on the Jacobite Movement in Upper Coquetdale,' also an account of two old Coquetdale Customs; 'Foot Ball Play,' and 'Salmon Poaching,' not that these two customs are peculiar to our district alone, but because they are found to have been observed so thoroughly in the spirit of olden times amongst the inhabitants of Upper Coquetdale up to a very recent date. My notes on our Foot Ball Customs treat only of the old style of playing of Foot Ball Fights, rather than Foot Ball Matches. Whilst of Salmon Poaching (the subject of to-night's paper) my notes are both 'Ancient and Modern,' as I need scarcely tell you that this very ancient custom of salmon poaching is not yet numbered amongst our obsolete customs, nor, indeed—so far as Upper Coquetdale is concerned—has it any appearance of becoming so. It is in hilly districts, and in remote valleys, such as Coquetdale, Redewater, and North Tyne, where we find that old traditions, old faiths, old families, and old customs, cling the longest. To me it is a matter of regret that, in this utilitarian age of ours, many of those old country customs are fast dying out. It is only from the lips of some aged villager, here and there throughout the county, that any account at all can be got of several interesting customs now entirely obsolete. For instance—The May Pole—The Kirn Supper—Candle Creel—Riding for the Kail—Hogmanay—Barring out—and Gizorting are nearly all of them memories of the past.

It is rather a doubtful compliment to myself and to my fellow villagers, but there exists a 13th century record which, notwithstanding

the extreme severity of the forest laws, clearly shows the poaching proclivities of our ancestors. About a century after the coming of the Normans the manor of Cartington, which lies on the northern limits of the ancient Forest of Rothbury, was held by Ralph fitz Main, on a tenure of Forest Sergeanty, and in the Pipe Rolls from 1158 to 1198 numerous records are found of accounts rendered to the sheriff of the County by Ralph fitz Main for fines and amerciaments, collected by him in his capacity as King's Forester in Northumberland. In the Pipe Rolls for the year 1235, the 19th of Henry III., under the head of "Amerciaments of the Forest," John fitz Robert, lord of Rothbury, is fined 40 marks for the transgressions of the men of Rothbury. The vassals of fitz Robert had been poaching in the King's Forest of Rothbury, for which offence their lord had to pay the fine, whilst the villains themselves would be severely punished and put in prison. Again, in 1252, the 37th of Henry III. we find that Richard, the rector of Rothbury, was amerced the sum of £10, also for poaching in the King's Forest. The rolls of the next year tell us that this poacher ecclesiastic paid the fine, in full, to William Heyron, sheriff of the county, and got his discharge. We cannot be surprised, therefore, that the love of sport, the love of poaching game or salmon, continues to be so predominant a characteristic amongst the sons of Coquet, when we learn from those early records such as I have just quoted that the self same spirit ran so strong in the veins of our forefathers some six hundred years ago, a vestige, no doubt, of the free born spirit of the sturdy Saxon.

In Hodgson's *History of Northumberland*, part III. vol. iii., at page xxx of the preface, there occurs the following note on the Pipe Rolls, alluding to the reign of Henry III., which says:—"The King's Forests in these times seem to have been as much plundered by noble poachers, as the preserves are now by a less dignified description of game stealers. Bagsmen all. But the baron then poked a deer; now, the poor wretch, that a natural passion for hunting converts into a poacher, bags a wild fowl or a hare."

The fish in the river Coquet appear to have been of much more value to the lords of the soil in early times than they are now, owing to the scarcity of fresh meat during certain seasons of the year. Fish and pigeons would probably form chief items of diet. Hence we find

a culver-house in connection with nearly every ancient manor.¹ In those days only the squire and the parson were allowed to have dove cots. When king John in 1205 granted the manor of Rothbury to Robert fitz Roger, baron of Warkworth, *merc* and *mere* were included amongst the rights and privileges of the new owner. *Merc* the right of market, *mere* the right of fishing in the Coquet, or rather the ownership of the fish. The monks of Brinkburn also had liberty from the baron of Mitford to have fish out of the river Coquet as much as they required.

Salmon poaching is no new thing in Upper Coquetdale, as early as 1269, to prevent the destruction of salmon when coming up the river to spawn, two conservators were appointed for the river Coquet, near Rothbury. These were Adam Gallon, *Tirwhite inferioris*, and John de Kestern, both of whom were men of importance in the district. Adam dwelt in his strong tower at Low Trehwhitt, and John, the owner of Caistron, was a great benefactor to the monks of Newminster. The law then ran thus:—‘Any fisher, miller, or other man convicted, his lord to give the king a mark for each offence, the fisher, miller, or other person to go to prison. Nets found to be burnt.’ (25th June, 1269, before Gilbert de Preston, justice itinerant.)

The following curious entry relative to salmon poaching is found in the Stanton Court Rolls, quoted by Hodgson in part II. vol. ii. page iii., the 18th Charles II., 1678:—‘Henry Henderson, for keeping a *junket* (a basket for catching fish), and taking the smelt at spring time of the year, was presented and amerced 16s. 4d.,’ and ‘Henry Hamling for killing salmon at kepper time’ was fined 6s. 8d. These entries show that salmon frequented the river Font at that time.

The term ‘kipper,’ or ‘kepper,’ frequently occurs in the parish church records of Rothbury, where we see entered time after time fines for salmon poaching. These fines were appropriated by the churchwardens and overseers, and wisely utilized by being placed to the credit of the poor rate account in the vestry books. We there read—‘April 2nd, 1724. An account of ye fines due to ye poor for kipper-

¹ “Had not the religious house of Tynemouth its Columba Cotes (Cullercoats)? Were not similar pigeonries common on the coast all the way to the Borders? Stockton had its ‘Doocote,’ giving name to ‘Dovecote’ Street, and determining the portions of the thoroughfare.”—The late J. Clephan’s Note in his copy of the *Arch. Aeliana*, vol. iv., 133. Cullercoats=Culvercotes.—Ed.

killings, 21s.' At Felton, within a very recent date the inhabitants spoke of going a-kippering—which meant salmon spearing. We therefore see that the love of salmon poaching has descended from generation to generation; whilst of the survival to our own day of this exciting sport we have abundant proof, in spite of the laws and regulations of the River Coquet Conservancy Board. A few details of local fishing expeditions gathered at various times from old poachers and water bailiffs may be of some interest to the members.

Forty or fifty years ago the ordinary method of poaching salmon in the river Coquet at Rothbury was with lights and leister, or with the gaff or cleek when the poacher went single-handed. The net, which is a much quieter and more deadly instrument, was first used at Rothbury some thirty-five years ago, being made by old Tommy Redhead, of Whitton (Redhead is one of the oldest families in the parish of Rothbury). A Coquet salmon leister usually had five prongs about seven inches long, placed one and a half or two inches apart, with a housel six inches long, and a handle or shaft about five or six feet long. Occasionally the ends of the prongs were armed with two barbs (locally called *weekers*.) Country people also speak of the *weekers* of the mouth, the corners of the mouth. 'A leister,' says Brockett, 'is a prong or trident used in spearing salmon by torchlight.'

It requires some dexterity and a considerable amount of practice to use the salmon leister in a proper manner, to transfix the fish without damaging it. Henderson, in his delightful book, *My Life as an Angler*, gives his experience in salmon spearing:—'Now steady!' said his friend Charles, when he had seen his fish at the bottom of the river, 'turn the leister so that the prongs may cross his back; glide it slowly down till it is about a foot from him, and then strike. Pin him firmly to the ground, and if you do not hold him firm he will wriggle off.' This advice (says Mr. Henderson) I carefully followed, and succeeded in pinning the fish tight upon the ground; but the thrill which tingled through my arms from the poor writhing creature was very painful. I felt quite sick, and, for the first time in my angling career, felt something of the self-reproach of a murderer.

The lights used on these nocturnal fishing exploits at Rothbury were composed of canvas thoroughly steeped in tar, this was made up into small bundles or faggots, and carried aloft on a two-

pronged fork, having an extra long iron housel specially made for the purpose, to prevent the flaming tar from burning the wooden shank. A good light carrier was a great acquisition to a fishing party ; it required a person with a considerable amount of coolness and decision for that office. This instrument, as well as the leister, could be used as a weapon—offensive or defensive, according to circumstances. An inveterate old salmon poacher, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, naively remarked to me the other day, ‘That a dad along the side i’ the heed, wi a bleezing tarry light, wis mair than ony witter baillie wid stand.’

A gaff is simply a large hook, a cleek is a large hook with a barb or wicker ; these were carried in the pocket, and when required could easily be fastened to the end of a walking stick. This method of poaching had one advantage, the fisher could go alone.

One dark November night about 8 o’clock, a few years ago, I was returning home from the country, when, walking along the highway, a few miles from Rothbury, I heard, but could not see, that someone was approaching ; suddenly, with a bang and a rattle, something was thrown into the roadside ditch, then I saw a form looming through the darkness. According to the fashion of us country folk I shouted, ‘it’s a dark night,’ immediately the well-known voice of a countryman (who lived close by) replied, ‘oh ! that’s ye Mr. Dixon, aa’ thought ye war somebody else ; wait a bit, or aa’ git thor things oot the dykeside.’ Thereupon, after grappling about in the dark, he produced a lantern, a salmon gaff, and a poke ; shouldering these implements of the chase, we went chatting along the road together, until we came to a small burn—a tributary of the Coquet—the spot where my poaching friend was ‘gan te try for a fish ;’ here I left him, as I did not care to be mixed up in a poaching expedition.

No doubt most of you will be aware that the fish caught in the river Coquet are not the real salmon, but are commonly known as Bull Trout. They are the *Salmo eriox*, and not the *Salmo salar* of the Tyne or the Tweed. Brockett thus describes the fish : ‘Bull Trout, a large fine species of fish peculiar to Northumberland, and much esteemed. The larger kind of salmon trouts taken in the Coquet, are in the Newcastle market called *bull trouts*,’ but these fish

are larger than salmon trouts in the head, which is a part generally admired for its smallness.

' Billhope braes for bucks and raes,
 And Carit haugh for swine,
 And Tarras for the good *bull trout*,
 If he be ta'en in time.'

(*Old Rhyme.*)

The last line refers to the proper season when the fish should be taken. In September or October a Coquet bull trout fresh run from the sea is very prime indeed ; but during November, December, and January, when with every flood the fish come up the river to spawn, they are certainly not so good. Yet hundreds of them are taken out of the river between Felton and the head of Coquet, particularly during the early part of November, and dried by the country people for winter use. After the fish have spawned they are filthy—in fact, 'they are neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring.'

Apart from the actual sport of catching fish by torch-light, which is both exciting and full of amusing incident, there is about the whole proceeding a spice of adventure in the risk of being caught, most congenial to the natives of Upper Coquetdale, who seem even yet to possess somewhat of the lawless and daring spirit of their border ancestors.

The poachers generally fished in parties of ten or twelve men each, who, at the commencement of the season, mutually banded themselves together—fishing together, dividing the spoil equally, and who, when attacked by the water bailiffs, stuck to, and fought for one another to the bitter end. When the river was in 'fettle,' with plenty of fish running at the 'Thrum,' the members of a party quietly arranged during the day at whose house they would meet at night. Accordingly, at 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock, they assembled at the place of rendezvous armed with leisters, each also brought a poke in which to carry the fish, whilst to prevent the bailiffs from identifying them, every man was so thoroughly disguised that, as one of these crafty old poachers told me the other day—'Mony a time the yen didn't knaa the tother.' Some had their faces black and their eyes white, others these colours reversed, a third, with a yellow face, had, perhaps, red eyes and a red chin, and so on. All wore the oldest and the duddiest of clothes they could procure ; their head-dress was often a battered long hat, or a

woman's straw bonnet, the latter was the favourite head gear, as the protecting front of the old-fashioned coal-scuttle bonnet shaded the eyes from the flare of the tarry rope lights. An amusing story is told of an old weaver, who, from all accounts, did not spend much time in the performance of his daily toilet. There were going to be some fishers on the water, and he was to be one of the party, so, on asking his wife—'Nanny, how shud aa' guise me'sell the night?' She replied—'Aa'l tell ye what, John, just wesh yor fyce, an am sure nebody'll ken ye.'

One of these fishing parties having met at the rendezvous at the time appointed, proceeded in a body to the riverside, and as each man knew every foot of the river, and the favourite haunts of the fish, there was little difficulty in selecting the spot at which to begin their operations. One of the party was generally stationed to keep a look out for the water bailiff, of whose approach he gave the alarm by a preconcerted signal. The light carrier took up his position in mid-stream and waded slowly up the river, closely followed by the others, who with their leisters struck the fish, which by the blaze of the tarry lights were quite easily discerned lying on their *redd* in the streams (that is the spot where they were depositing their spawn). As the salmon were leistered they were thrown out of the water and lay on the banks to be afterwards gathered up, put into sacks, and carried home. The sacks were emptied on the floor of a joiner's or blacksmith's shop, or an empty house. At Rothbury, the shop of old Alek Watson, the blacksmith, at the foot of the town, or Jimmie Smith, the weaver's, up Providence Lane, was often used for this purpose. The doors and windows having been securely fastened, the spoil was divided in a very primitive fashion. Suppose the party numbered ten persons, the fish were divided into ten heaps, and one of the men went out of the room whilst another took a leister shank, touched a heap of fish, and asked his partner outside to name an owner for the particular heap; this was repeated until every heap was allotted, one to each of the ten members of the party. The next day the fish were sold at 6d. each (regardless of size) to muggers and travelling tinkers, who during the season gave up their ordinary vocation of selling besoms and crockery ware and hawked the fish throughout the country.

At that time very great numbers of these bull trout were in this manner taken out of the Coquet every season, between the months of

November and January. On one occasion a fishing party had no less than 700 fish laid out on the Goosehaugh—a level green sward on the north side of the river midway between Rothbury Bridge and the ‘Thrum.’ On remarking to the old poacher who told me this, that fish must have been very plentiful then—‘Aye,’ he said, ‘there was a hunder gat up the witter then for one now, an’ its a greet shem ther stoppd.’

This very much resembles the lamentation of an old Coquet angler recorded by Stephen Oliver, the younger, in his *Rumbles in Northumberland*. ‘Talk o’ fishen’, says he, ‘there’s no sic fishen’ in Coquet now as when I was a lad. It was nowse then but to fling in an’ pull oot by tweeses an’ threeses, if ye had sae money heuks on, but now a body may keep threshin’ at the watter aa’ day atween Hallysteun and Weldon, an’ hardly catch three dozen, an’ money a time not that. Aboot fifty years syne I mind o’ seein’ trouts that thick o’ the Thrum, below Rothbury, that if ye had stucken the end o’ yor gad into the watter amang them it wad amaist hae studden upreet.’

Although our Rothbury salmon poachers obstinately resisted any interference on the part of the water bailiffs, yet I have never heard of serious personal injury having been inflicted on either side. Nò doubt, as became true borderers, the water bailiffs and salmon poachers alike, enjoyed the fun and excitement of a hand-to-hand scuffle in the dark; in fact, I have been told by the men themselves that they would, many a time, rather have seen the bailiffs còme in their way, than not.

One November night, some years ago, the most expert salmon cleeker amongst our Rothbury poachers was fishing alone with a cleek and gaff at the ‘Thrum.’ Sitting on the rock close to the water’s edge, he was pulling out fish after fish, when suddenly the light from a bull’s-eye lantern shone down upon him. But the owner of the bull’s-eye being uncertain how many of the enemy might be sitting in ambush round the corner of the rock, and the rock being in rather close proximity to fifteen feet of water, he decided not to attack the poachers single-handed. Therefore, for a considerable length of time he paced backwards and forwards on the road above, thinking thus to tire the fishers out. The solitary salmon cleeker meanwhile went on pulling out his fish; but after sitting until he was cold and stiff in the limbs, he thought to himself that either the water bailiff or himself would have to shift his camp. Being provided with a pocketful of

stones, the fisherman watched his opportunity, and the next time the bull's-eye was turned on him, he, with a steady hand and a true aim, threw with all his might, what he termed, a 'gae canny sized staen,' hitting the bailiff *below the belt*, straight on the bull's eye, smashing the glass, and extinguishing the light, thereby causing the guardian of the fish to beat a hasty retreat unhurt leaving the salmon poacher to himself, who quietly gathered up his fish and went home. Next day the poacher was highly amused to hear from the village gossip that 'ten or a dozen men had set on the witter baillie at the 'Thrum' last night an' varry near killed him.' On another occasion, many years ago, a large party when fishing with lights and leisters at the Scottish Ford, 300 yards below Rothbury Bridge, was attacked by a body of water bailiffs. The alarm was immediately given, and all rushed to the rescue, the light carrier, as usual, charging with his blazing tarry light. One sly dog of a poacher, under cover of the darkness, mounted a heap of newly broken stones, from this coign of vantage he hurled volley after volley of the sharp cornered road metal amongst the watchers, and was elated to find from the frequent exclamations of pain that his shots were taking effect in the ranks of the enemy. This was confirmed next day when the faces of the watchers were seen to be covered by large patches of sticking plaster. At last the attacking party fled with cries of help and murder. By this time the villagers had heard the fray, immediately the 'hot trod' was raised, and all ran to help the poachers. One old amazon (the mother of one of the poachers) hastened down to Coquet-side armed with a big stick, when, meeting several of the bailiffs flying from their foes as fast as ever they could, and shouting for help, she managed to give one of them a good sound whack over the head, at the same time exclaiming, 'Aye aa'l help ye ye scoonderells.'

On the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, very often the water-watchers, or bailiffs, had themselves been most determined poachers. Therefore, occasionally the old passion for illicit sport overcame their scruples of allegiance. A well known character who resided within the ancient barony of Hepple some fifty years ago, after having served a long term at salmon poaching, in which art he was a great proficient, became in turn a salmon watcher. Lying in wait one night, he espied lights on the water; a band of poachers from the quaint old village of Holystone were leistering salmon in the Coquet

near to Hepple Wood Houses. Being novices at the work, they were striking very few fish. The 'baillie,' disgusted at their want of skill in his favourite pursuit, could restrain himself no longer, but joined his quondam companions, saying, 'Yor sic fishers as aa' never saw. Lend me a leister, an' aa'll sune show ye how to spear salmon.' Snatching at the same time a leister from one of the men, he stalked into the stream, and in a short time leistered as many salmon as they could carry. Throwing down the leister, he then left them, allowing the 'Halysteu'n' poachers to carry off their fish unmolested, and highly pleased at the generous exploit of the water-watcher.

XVII.—AN ACCOUNT OF THE PRESBYTERIAN MEETING HOUSE AT BRANTON.

By J. C. HODGSON, OF LOW BUSTON.

[Read on the 25th March, 1891.]

IN the valley of the Breamish at Branton, an old manor of the Collingwoods, one of the oldest Presbyterian congregations in Northumberland has its 'meeting house' or chapel.

During the Commonwealth the parishes around were all ministered to by zealous and learned Puritan clergy, who, before their ejection on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1662, had sown the seeds of Puritanism amongst the scattered population. From Eglingham was ejected Mr. John Pringle, and from Ingram Mr. Jas. Aird.¹ The predecessor of the latter at Ingram was the famous Mr. Luke Ogle; M.A., a member of the Eglingham family, and the Commonwealth vicar of Berwick, where he died in 1696 at the age of 66 years. Of him Calamy says that 'he was a Man of great Learning; and particularly well skilled in Ecclesiastical History: he was a laborious, judicious and affectionate preacher, and a wise and prudent person for government.'

By the Toleration Act of 1689, the worship of those who accepted the doctrines of the Church of England, but who dissented from its

¹ Mr. James Aird, rector of Ingram, ejected in 1662; afterwards conformed in Scotland.—Calamy's *Account*.