



PREPARING THE BONFIRE, WHALTON.

From a Photograph by Sir J. Benjamin Stone, M.P.

## XI.—THE MIDSUMMER BONFIRE AT WHALTON.

BY THE REV. J. WALKER, Hon. Canon of Newcastle  
and Rector of Whalton.

[Read on the 25th November, 1903.]

In the quiet village of Whalton there survives a custom the origin of which is unknown by those who perpetuate it year by year, and is perhaps only guessed at by the antiquary and the student. Every year on the fourth of July as the sun goes down a huge bonfire is made and lighted on the village green, and this is done not only regularly as to time but with certain formalities as to the manner of it. We cannot aver that there is any organization for carrying out the ceremony, yet as the day approaches the question of the fire is mooted and discussed as well by the elders of the community as the more youthful. There is a general concensus that the custom must be kept up as heretofore, and thereupon some of the male adults begin to consider how and where the necessary faggots can be collected, and the more experienced, I mean those who have lived longest in the village and most often taken part in carrying on the custom assume the position of leaders. Fallen trees will be noted, the thinnings of some plantation, or the remains of a demolished fence are bespoken, or often enough permission is asked and readily given to cut down the whin bushes on some 'outby' common or barren land. The young men with the chosen leader will give a few evenings to the collection and preparation of the faggots. Then on the evening of the fourth of July with the same ceremony year after year, the faggots are brought into the village and deposited upon precisely the same part of the village green. A long cart is borrowed from some farmer, long ropes are procured, and all the young men and many boys of the village proceed with the cart to the place or places where the faggots have been collected and load the cart. Then one or two of the strongest take the shafts, the rest are yoked to the cart by the long ropes, and with much noise and shouting, with the blowing of a horn by one seated on the top of the load, it is brought into the village. The scene as a huge load of faggots is run down the village is an exciting one, and on one occasion in my memory

there was a narrow escape from a serious accident. You must imagine a cart with a huge pile of faggots, a youth seated on the top blowing a horn, one or two men holding the shafts, twenty or thirty men and boys dragging by means of a rope the great load and running down the village shouting and laughing, and in their excitement almost beyond the control of the leader in the shafts. No horse is ever used, and mostly two of these immense loads of faggots, as high as a load of straw, are used in the building up of the bonfire. The pile is carefully constructed with the expenditure of considerable energy and some skill. It is always constructed on the same site, hardly varying a yard from year to year. And the place for the fire is not the highest or most commanding station in the village. Then with the building up of the pile of branches and faggots a remarkable scene takes place, the whole village grows interested, old men and women, young men and maidens, and the children, begin to gather in groups and watch the proceedings impatient till, as the twilight deepens and the pile of faggots has been carefully prepared and examined, the word is given to 'light her.' The feminine as usual being the formula used. Then the children joining hands will form a moving circle round the burning pile. This is not as much observed as it was some twenty-five years ago. Still you may see the children racing round the fire with rather more formality than might be seen perhaps at an ordinary bonfire. Meanwhile the groups of people gather nearer the fire, and presently as the fire begins to burn and the flame mounts higher till it illuminates the whole village, a fiddle or some other instrument is heard and the young people begin to dance in the near neighbourhood of the fire. I have never waited until the fire has burnt down to the ground, but I have heard that then it was not unknown for some to leap over the fire. At present the only usual formalities are the bringing of the faggots, the building of the pile on the traditionary site, the lighting as the twilight deepens, the dancing either round or in the neighbourhood of the fire. There is always, too, a quantity of 'sweeties' and 'bullets' scattered and scrambled for by the children.

And I would like to mention how regularly my predecessor, the Rev. J. Elphinstone Elliot Bates, with Mrs. Bates, used to proceed arm in arm down the village to see the fire lighted and to exchange



BRINGING IN FAGGOTS, ETC., FOR THE BONFIRE, WHALTON.

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greetings with the several groups of villagers, adding a charming feature to the picturesqueness of the scene.

It is still a quaint scene and interesting to witness and take part in.

Old men over 80 years of age have told me that they never knew the fire omitted or the custom fail. There is a tradition that twice the fire was postponed to the next evening because of the 'great rain' but it was never omitted—and these old men, one of whom 80 years of age and upwards had never slept out of the village but twice in his life, asserted that they had received the same story from their elders—on the other hand, oddly enough, I have never come across a written record or printed account of the custom. There was some opposition to it within my own memory but the fire was lighted all the same. The old thatched cottages have disappeared, more modern dwellings have been built, migration and immigration take place, but whatever the changes this custom survives.

One factor in its unbroken continuance is, I think, found in the enduring affection of the people for the village. They leave it only of necessity, they return to it again whenever it is possible, and a few years ago there were I think more old men and women whose lives have been lived in the village than in any similar community.

Another factor is doubtless the comparative isolation of the village, it lies some distance from the old coach road and is still but little affected by the railway, the nearest station being two miles distant, and we are not likely to be troubled yet with either trams or light railways.

This year in consequence of a conversation with Sir Benjamin Stone, kt., he did us the honour of coming down to witness the fire. The 4th of July, Old Midsummer Day, occurred on Saturday, and at my request those who are usually most active in carrying out the proceedings gave Sir Benjamin a daylight rehearsal, and he took quite a number of groups. It is but fair to say that those groups are just such as could be witnessed in the evening any year. Beyond the mere pause of the procession shall I call it, and a little arranging to bring the groups within the focus of the camera, and perhaps the addition of one figure in the group you have a picture of the annual event just as it happens year after year. Sir Benjamin on this occasion set the fire alight, and one of the photographs is taken

just as it is getting hold of the pile. I have not got the group of children as they run round the fire, but a whole series of these photographs was sent to me and I have had them framed and hung in the village reading room. Sir Benjamin also gave me a sufficient number of copies to give one to each of the more active participators in the carrying out of the proceedings.

I know of no other village or place where the custom is observed now, but the late Mr. Thomas Arkle of Highlaws, told me he had known those who had witnessed the observance at Elsdon and there is some tradition of its being observed years ago at Belsay.

One or two observations may be permitted in conclusion. And first it seemed undesirable to discuss the possible origin of the custom, that it is very ancient there can be no doubt. Traditionary evidence is very strong. It is now practised without any superstitious feeling, although it has been reported to me that there has in times past been a stealthy appropriation of the ashes, and while it is extremely doubtful and indeed improbable that the fire has anything to do with the Baal or Molech of the Old Testament; yet it may be a witness of the extent to which the use of fire for purification prevailed either among British or Anglian races and perhaps in both.

## NOTE.

*Beltane* adopted in Lowland Scotch from Gaelic (*bralltaina*); Irish *bralltaine*, the Celtic name of the 1st of May; older forms *beltene* (in a text), *belltaine*, *beltine* in Cormac's Glossary (9th to 12th. cent.). The first is probably the earliest quotable form of the word of which the original meaning seems to have been unknown even to the Glossorist since he makes a desperate guess at it by transposing *beltine* or *biltene* into *tenebil*, and explaining *bil* as 'Bil from Bial, *i.e.*, an idol god, evidently meaning the Bal or Baal of the O.T., so that *beltine* became fire of Bel? or Baal.' Dr. Whitley Stokes has shown that the latter part of the word is not 'teine' fire, since this is a *t* stem (old text *tened*) while *Beltene* is a fem. *ya* stem. Whether it can be parallel derivative of the same root or whether as is more likely the notion that '*teine*' was = '*teine*' fire is due thereby to popular etymology cannot be determined. The ancient Gauls kindled bonfires not only on *Beltane* but also on *Lammas* and *Hallowmas* (the rubbish about Baal, Bel, Belas, imported into the word from the O.T. and classical antiquity, is outside the scope of scientific etymology).

1.—The first day of May (reckoned since 1752 according to O. S.), old May day of Church Feast, invention of the Cross, May 3. Whit Sunday May 15.

2.—Name of an ancient Celtic anniversary celebration on May day.

—*The New English Dictionary, sub voc.*