

VI.

NOTES ON THE SPINNING GEAR OF FORMER TIMES.

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These notes are brought forward on the occasion of presenting the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland with specimens, namely, two distaffs or rocks, two spindles with whorls, and one reel. The distaff, the spindle, and the reel are ancient implements, the whole constituting the spinning machinery of ages long past, up till a comparatively late period. The spinning wheel and check-reel then came into use, but were soon supplanted by machinery. Specimens of either description will, even now, be difficult to procure; for through disuse and careless keeping, articles made of wood fall a ready prey to rot, or to the beetle (*Annobium tessellatum*).

1. The distaff or rock is staff-like, square at the lower end, commonly octagonal in the middle, and from thence of round form to the top, in all two feet eight inches in length. Two-thirds from the upper end the thickest part occurs, being about one inch diameter, tapering gradually to the extremity or point to four-tenths, and in the opposite direction to about half an inch square. The square portion is eleven inches in length, half of which is rudely, but effectively carved, with the date 1704; the octagonal part, five and a half inches long, is more elaborately carved, and the round portion, fifteen inches and a half long, is without ornament. The ornamentation in this specimen consists of the St Andrew's cross of different sizes, of zig-zag patterns, and of lozenge-shaped work, all slightly relieved. At the lower end, within an inch of the extremity, there is a perforation or hole to admit the apron-string for fixing purposes. This rock may be reckoned a typical specimen, although perhaps no one can say that two were ever made perfectly alike. Distaffs were fabricated with the knife by young men, and presented to a sweetheart as a love-token, bearing the initials of both, a ceremony generally accepted by "outrals" and "frem folk" as a formal engagement.

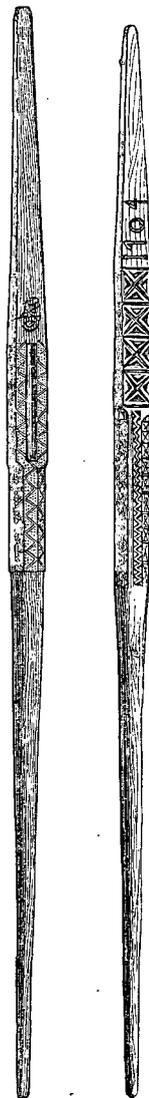
2. Another distaff of similar character, but not bearing quite the same relative proportions or style of carving. The square portion, in this example, is feebly carved, and has a cross mortise-like slit, giving that part

the appearance of square columns, carved in a similar manner; below this there are a cypher apparently (C Y), and the initials EM, of inlaid metal, with the date 1733.

3 and 4. Spindles of two sizes, with whorls, all formed in the lathe, used to give the twist to the thread,—the one for wool and tow (coarse part of flax), the other for fine prepared lint (flax). The larger is nearly a foot in length, and at the middle or thickest part is fully half an inch in diameter, from which part it tapers to two-tenths at the ends. On one end there is a peculiar notch for placing the thread, centrally, while being “let out” and undergoing the “twining” process. The small specimen is nine and a fourth inches long, and half an inch in diameter in the middle, tapering off towards the ends to three-twentieths. No doubt the turned and perforated iron-stone nodules (whorls) were added to the spindles to aid, by their greater diameter and weight, the required rotation.

5. The reel, which completes the series of parts of the spinning gear, is for the purpose of winding off the spun thread from the spindle. It consists of a short beam, near the ends of which cross-heads are fitted of anchor-like form. Measuring along the stem, from the outer curve of one cross-head to the other, it is twenty-five inches, but the length of the thread by turning over both cross-heads will be twenty-six inches; and it appears that, when the cross-heads are rightly adjusted, all the threads are of one length when “reeled on.”

The manner of using these implements few now living can have witnessed. Not having seen the shield or socket—often an extemporised thing—which was attached to the spinner’s waist, in front, to set the distaff in position, one can only conceive



Carved Scottish Distaffs (32 inches in length).

of many methods of doing so. The rock so "set," was properly "dressed," *i.e.*, surrounded with outspread flax connected at the top of the distaff with a band sufficiently firm to keep it in place, while free enough to admit of being turned from time to time, in order that the flax might be drawn out equally all round. The rock and spindle were now connected; fibres were drawn, but not severed from the rock, with one end fixed to the spindle, and the thread placed in the notch at the end; the spinner, with the palm of the right hand applied to the spindle placed across the right thigh, gave it a smart rotatory impulse, so that, when set free, and suspended by the thread, it whirled, and produced the required twist to the thread, while the left hand supplied the necessary supply of fibres, till enough was spun by one such impulse. The spindle was then taken in the right hand, the thread in the left, and rolled back in the fore part of the spindle. The thread being again placed in the notch, the same process was repeated again and again.

When the spindle was filled with the spun thread it was then transferred to the reel by the following process. The thread being fixed to the cross-head, the reel was held by the middle of the shaft with the left hand, and the right engaged with the thread, the process of "winding off" was proceeded with. As the right hand guided the thread from cross-head to cross-head, the winder began to count in this manner. As the thread passed over the first cross-head, she said, "Thoo's ane," at the next, "Thoo's nane," and as another length was reached, somewhat emphatically, said "Thoo's ane a' oot." Thus it seemed, that one thread was as three lengths of the reel. The reckoning proceeded: "Thoo's twa," "thoo's no twa," and "thoo's twa a' oot," and so on till the threads made a "cut," when these threads were tied together. Then so many cuts make a "hank," and again the thread was thrown round that quantity and fixed. All these manipulations, tiresome to enumerate, were nimbly and gracefully performed.

A congregation of spinners, in the older time, was denominated a "Rocking,"—from rock or distaff. The guidwife of one of a certain range of "farm towns" announced her rocking, and the others followed in turn, at intervals, in a circuit of one or more winters. The guests usually were the up-grown sons and daughters of the farmers with an "antern" stranger; but there were in addition a few professionals, so to speak, *viz.*:—a

singer, a story-teller, and a never-failing adept to prepare the "champet taties"—the feast and chief source of merriment of the night. This important official was a celebrity, and much sought after far and near. Not only did she make the best dish of potatoes ever tasted, but she possessed a "lammer (amber) bead," which, during the last whirls of the "spurtle" in the potato pot, was dropped in the mass and lost to sight. The story, song, and spinning went on without interruption, other than a laugh, or other sign of applause; but at a certain moment the spinning gear was set aside, and the cheering mess, in the pot in which it was prepared, was brought and placed on the floor, around which, sitting or standing or moving about, each, furnished with a wooden or horn spoon, was ready for the onset. The lammer bead was the prize; for whosoever found the famous relic would be first married! A sort of proem was uttered by the gleg, bustling, and pawky owner of the bead—

"Ho! Big spinfus or wee spinfus, tak y'er pleasure,
But eat up a', then try to catch the treasure!"

'And, braw lads and lasses, blessings on the ane that gets the lucky bead.'