

## The Sexton's Wheel & the Lady Fast.

COMMUNICATED BY

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THE design of this paper is to explain the use of an object found in Long Stratton Church, Norfolk, and of a similar one in Yaxley Church, Suffolk—the only examples known. The opinions of some esteemed antiquaries respecting the object will first be quoted. Its ascertained name will then be given, and its use described, viz., to decide upon the Lady Fast, which many people formerly were in the habit of keeping voluntarily. Authorities from the fifteenth century onwards will next be brought forward with regard to the rise of the Lady Fast. The six Lady Days of the year will be specified; one of which days was selected for the Lady Fast by the use of this object, the Sexton's Wheel; so named by Naegeorgus in his *Regnum Papisticum*, and by Googe, his English translator. The wheel was usually kept hung up by its handle in the vestry. I shall conclude by showing the manner in which it was employed.

At the meeting of the Archæological Institute at Bury St. Edmund's, in July, 1869, a full-sized representation of an unknown wheel-like object, found in the Church of St. Mary, Long Stratton, was exhibited; together with a pair of similar wheels from St. Mary's Church, Yaxley.

The Yaxley wheels, which are shown together (Plate i.), were found separate; but those in Stratton were found together (as shown in Plate ii.), united by a handle terminating in a ring. Both examples were objects of interest to antiquaries attending the evening conversazione, from the fact that in the year 1867 (August 17th), the attention of readers of *Notes and Queries* (p. 128) had been particularly directed to them. The two wheels as shown, Plate i. (the Yaxley example), and Plate ii. (that from Long Stratton), are cut out of sheet iron, variously ornamented; each pair consisting of two exactly similar circles fastened together at the centre ambo. The Yaxley wheels measure 2 ft. 6 in. in diameter, have three small holes through which a lace or string could be passed in three of the radii in each wheel, and weigh 13 lbs. avoirdupois. The Long Stratton wheels measure 2 ft. 8 in. in diameter, and 4 ft. 2 in. from the ring in the handle to the circumference opposite, A to B (Plate ii. fig. 1), have three small holes (fig. 1, *h. h. h.*) similar to the above, not however in the radii, but in the circumference of each wheel, and weigh from 15 lbs. to 16 lbs.

### Suppositions as to their Name and Use.

By the time that the wheels were introduced to public notice at Bury St. Edmund's, two theories had been advanced as to their use, a door theory and a bell theory. The door theory was held by Mr. E. L. Blackburne, architect, who supposed the two wheels, found separated at Yaxley, to be the hinge-plates or hinge-fronts of one of the church doors.



PLATE I

SEXTON'S WHEEL AT YAXLEY CHURCH, SUFFOLK.

Plate II. SEXTON'S WHEEL AT ST. MARY'S CHURCH, LONG STRATTON.

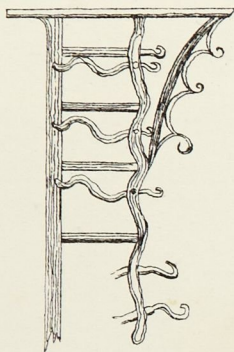


FIG 3.

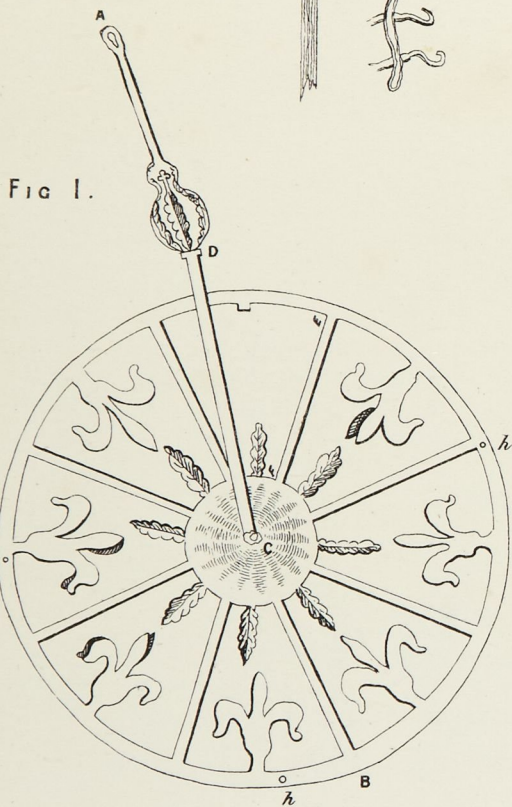


FIG 1.

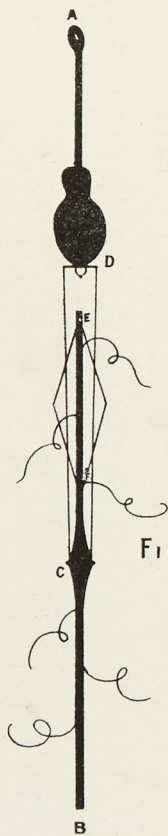
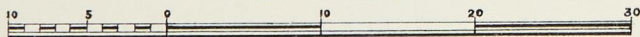


FIG 2.

SECTION FROM A TO B  
*Showing the String  
 attached to each hole (h).*

SCALE OF INCHES



This theory, which in the first instance was open to some objection, received the support of so eminent an ecclesiologist as Dr. F. C. Husenbeth, who considered that they were "merely ornaments attached to a massive ring (called in East Anglia a *ringle*) for raising the latch of a church door."

The bell theory was held by the veteran patron of bells and bellringing, the Rev. H. T. Ellacombe, who gave them the name of "merry-go-rounds"—not so very wide of the mark—and supposed them to be "*Rotæ cum tintinnabulis*," or wheels with bells on them, of various ornamental forms, used in certain parts of a Celebration, as shown by Mr. Street in his work on Spain. The puzzle was submitted also to another keen antiquary, Mr. John Piggot, jun., of Ulting, who objected to the door theory the fact that although the Yaxley wheels were found separated, and so capable of being fastened to a door, those at Stratton were pinned together at the centre of the wheels, and at the extremities of the forked handle, composed of ancient work of an ornamental description. Mr. Piggot therefore inclined to the bell theory, but not without hesitation, remarking that it was certain they could not have been placed upon a door. As, however, the door theory was held by so eminent an antiquary as Dr. Husenbeth, I sent him tracings both of the Yaxley and of the Stratton wheels, and have now his letter before me. He wrote:—

Cossey, September 30th, 1868.

Rev. and dear Sir,

I avail myself of the first leisure I have had since my note to you, to return your interesting tracings, and say what I think of them.

Both those at Yaxley and Long Stratton were evidently intended for the same purpose.

I do not believe that the handle was originally attached to those at L. Stratton.

I totally reject the idea of bells having been attached to either pair, and quite concur in your objections to such a theory.

I adhere firmly to my original explanation, and am persuaded that these were ornaments originally fixed on church doors, and by pins or screws, through the small holes in some of the radii. It was not uncommon to fix such circles (I forget the proper architectural name for them—O! it is *escarbuncles*) on large church doors. Nay, they were even fastened sometimes on folding doors merely for ornament, as in the sketch I subjoin . . . . from the W. front of the Abbey Church of St. Bertius at St. Omer. Here there are six, three on each half of the folding door.

We may very well suppose that these pairs were fixed in the centre of such a door, one on each fold. One might have had the ring and long latch, the other neither, but placed merely to match his fellow.

I remain, Rev. and dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

F. C. HUSENBETH.

I was glad to be able to agree to some extent with the advocates of these two opposite theories. I agreed with Mr. Piggot in rejecting the door theory, because the Long Stratton wheels, when discovered, were fastened together at the centre (Plate ii. fig. 1, A. D. C.) with ornamental iron-work, evidently original. I agreed also with Dr. Husenbeth in totally rejecting the idea that bells had ever been attached to either pair; and I was glad of so good an authority as the Doctor accepting my view that the Yaxley and Long Stratton wheels were evidently intended for the same purpose. From the wheels themselves it was not easy to infer very much. Judging from the handle terminating in a ring, I supposed that the object was intended either to be held up or hung up. Judging from the pome of ornamental and intricate construction (Plate ii. fig. 1, D.), and from the fact that *fleurs-de-lis* were lavished upon each wheel, it was intended for some pious employment, probably in connexion with the cultus of the Blessed Virgin, where the principle of carefulness or costliness would be likely to find place;

and judging by the wheel moving on two axes, one in the handle outside the circumference (Fig. 2, *d*), and another at the centre (Fig. 1, *c*), it was evidently intended, when suspended in space, freely to revolve from right to left, and also from head to foot.

Several years had passed, when I was so fortunate as to have in my keeping a black-letter book, containing an English poem published in Queen Elizabeth's reign—to be described hereafter—from which, for the first time, I ascertained that the curiosity which had puzzled antiquaries so long was a Sexton's Wheel, and accordingly on 17th April, 1880, I answered my own inquiry in *Notes and Queries*, and stated that the unknown object was a Sexton's Wheel, which in former times was occasionally used to determine the day for keeping the Lady Fast.

### What was the Lady Fast?

There were two kinds of fasts observed in honour of the Blessed Virgin; one moveable, the other immoveable. The immoveable fast, which was one also of precept, was that kept on the Saturday of every week, having an Office proper to the day. Pope Urban II., A.D. 1086, ordained, says Thomas Becon,<sup>1</sup> that priests should say, every day, our Lady's Mattens openly in the church; and that upon the Saturday the whole service should be of her. Frequently in the thirteenth century a vow was voluntarily made, in honour of the Blessed Virgin,<sup>2</sup> to take but one meal, and to drink only water on a Saturday.

In the next, the fourteenth century, we meet with, I suppose, the earliest reference known to what I have termed the "Moveable" Lady Fast. This was a variable fast, voluntarily observed; and came to be thought of as and

<sup>1</sup> *Reliques*, ed. 1563, fol. 29a.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. T. E. Bridgett, *Our Lady's Dowry*, p. 242.

termed *par excellence* the Lady Fast, as the *more popular* one of the two kinds.

The following account of it is found in the *Scotichronicon* of Fordun. To Joannes de Fordun, or rather to his continuator, Walter Bower, we are indebted for the elucidation of the subject. Bower was born in the year 1385, and became abbot of the monastery of Inchcolm, situated upon an island in the Forth, and after completing his *Continuation* in 1447, died in the year 1449.<sup>3</sup>

## ORIGINAL.

De incuriâ non sunt modice prelati redarguendi, qui plebeos in tantum patiuntur decipere, ut ad velle suum omni anno varient de die ad jejunandum Mariæ, cum, ut prædicatur, ipsa invariabiliter Sabbato Apostolis hæsitantibus stetit in fide; et ideo, unâ cum aliis causis præmissis, Sabbatum sibi ad jejunandum dedicatur.

Nunc videbis tam mares quam feminas Sabbatis lautius cænare et ova manducare, qui in diebus Martis vel Jovis non gustarent panis paxillum, ne frangerent jejunium Dominiæ pro talento.

Statuta jejunia ab Ecclesia, sive quatuor temporum Quadragesimæ, vel vigiliis Apostolorum, sine metu transgrediuntur, et jejunium quod voluntarie in diebus carniæ assumunt, nec pro Deo vel homine

## TRANSLATION.

In regard of carelessness Prelates are no little deserving of blame, who suffer the deception of common people to such an extent, as all the year through after their own will to vary from the day to be fasted in honour of Mary; when, as has been observed, she abode unshakenly in the Faith on the Saturday [*i.e.*, the first Easter Eve] when the Apostles doubted; and therefore, for that reason, with other causes aforesaid, the Saturday is dedicated to her as a fast.

Now you will see both men and women on a Saturday make good dinners, and eating eggs, who on a Tuesday or Thursday would not touch a morsel of bread, lest they should break the Lady Fast kept after their fancy.

The fasts appointed by the Church, whether the Ember Days of the four seasons or the Vigils of Apostles, they transgress without fear; while they pretend that neither for God nor man would

<sup>3</sup> Johannis de Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed. W. F. Skene (Preface).



effringere se velle confingunt.

they violate a fast, which of their own accord they observe on days when meat is allowed.

O voluntas propria subjecti subversiva, animæ inimica, Deo contraria, Diabolo consentanea; cur niteris in vetitum, acceleras ad interitum?—*Joannis de Fordun, Scotichronicon cum . . . continuatione Walteri Boweri, cura W. Goodall, ed. 1759, fol. vol. 1., p. 431. (Lib. vii. c. xlix.)*

O, self-will, the ruin of subordination, the enemy of the soul, opposed to God, consenting to the devil; why dost thou strive for the forbidden thing? why hastenest thou to destruction?

It was of course only out of reverence for the profound mystery of our Saviour's Holy Incarnation that the Blessed Virgin became the object of this devout respect. From the year 1455 never a day passed but people were reminded at noontime of their redemption.<sup>4</sup>

We meet with another reference to this Lady Fast in the writings of the reformer Tyndale, who suffered for his opinions A.D. 1536. Tyndale wrote:—

“And last of all what shall I say of the open idolatry of innumerable fasts; of St. Brandon's fast, St. Patrick's fast, of four holy Fridays, of St. Anthony's between St. Mary's days, of our *Lady Fast* either seven year the same day that her day falleth on in March, and then begin, or one year with bread and water” . . .—Tyndale's *Exposition of St. Matthew v. vi. vii.* Parker Society, ed. 1849, p. 98.

To the preceding passage the editor (Rev. Henry Walter) appends this note, “The Lady Fast here described seems to have been a species of penance, whether voluntary or enjoined, in which the penitent had the choice of either fasting once a week for seven years on that day of the week on which Lady Day happened to fall, beginning his course

<sup>4</sup> “In that year Pope Calixtus III. ordayned that the great bell should be tolled every day, at twelve of the clock, and that people should say an Ave Maria.”—Thomas Becon, *Reliques*, ed. 1563, fol. 115.

from that day ; or of finishing his penance sooner by taking as many fasting days together, which would obviously amount to one whole year."

It is clear, therefore, from both Bower and Tyndale, that besides the stated weekly fast in honour of the Blessed Virgin, observed every Saturday, fasts were kept which lasted as many as seven years, on any week-day, even on such day as was a non-fasting day, like Tuesday or Thursday. From Tyndale we also learn that the day observed as the Lady Fast was begun on that day of the week on which the particular Lady Day happened to fall, as in March ; and the same day in every week was voluntarily fasted for seven years following ; or a person fasted instead three hundred and sixty-four (*i.e.*, fifty-two multiplied by seven) days right off, or one year on bread and water.

### The Six Lady Days of the Year.

It has to be borne in mind that in the pre-Reformation Church of England there were as many as six Lady Days in the year popularly kept, all of which, indeed, are indicated in every English almanack or calendar published by the Stationers' Company up to the last, the eighteenth, century. Taking them in the order of the months they are—

1. February 2, Candlemas, or the Purification.
2. March 25, "Lady Day," or the Annunciation.
3. July 2, Visitation of B. V. M.
4. August 15, Assumption of B. V. M.
5. September 8, Nativity of B. V. M.
6. December 8, Conception of B. V. M.

It must, therefore, from the rise of this singular devotion, have been a common difficulty to decide on which of these

six Lady Days one should keep the Lady Fast. If a person vowed to fast the three hundred and sixty-four successive days on bread and water, there was then the difficulty of knowing on which day to begin. Two methods were accordingly devised for solving the difficulty. One was, to have recourse to the casting of lots, the other was to try the Sexton's Wheel.

It is easy to suppose that as the six faces of a die corresponded with the six Lady Days in the year, a simple plan of numbering them, as above indicated, would enable a person to decide on which day to begin his fast, *i.e.*, the ace would indicate Feb. 2 as the day for commencing the Lady Fast; the deuce, March 25; the tray, July 2; and so on. But sometimes recourse was had instead to the Sexton's Wheel, as we know from Naogeorgus and Googe.

### Naogeorgus and Googe.

Extracts are so often met with from Googe's translation of Naogeorgus in that valuable handbook, Sir Henry Ellis' edition of Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, that a few particulars will probably be of interest concerning Naogeorgus and Googe.

Thomas Naogeorgus is a *nom de plume* assumed by a German writer, whose real name was Thomas Kirchmeyer, born in Bavaria A.D. 1511, died 1578. The work by which he is best known is *Regnum Papisticum*. T. Naogeorgo [*i.e.*, T. K.] autore. *Adjecta sunt et alia quædam*. Ex officina Oporini, Basileæ, 1559, 8vo. The *Regnum Papisticum* is a Latin hexameter poem. No copy exists in the British Museum of the English translation of this poem, so often quoted by Brand, and but one perfect copy (in the library of the University of Cambridge) is at present known, of which the following is the title: THE POPISH KINGDOME or Reigne of Antichrist, written in Latine by Thomas

Naogeorgus and englyshed by Barnabe Googe. 2 Tim. iii. Like as Jannes and Jambres, &c. Imprinted at London by Henrie Denham for Richard Watkins, Anno 1570, sm. 4to. Black-letter, nine pages, eighty-eight folios, paged only on one side of the page. It has lately been reprinted for subscribers.

Barnaby Googe, whose surname is variously spelt Goche, Goghe, Gouche,<sup>5</sup> the translator of Kirchmeyer, was the son of Robert Googe, Recorder of Lincoln, and of his wife Margaret, daughter of Sir John Mantell. He was grandson of Lady Hales, was born in or about 1540, and entered Christ's College, Cambridge, but left the University without taking a degree, and proceeded to travel through France and Spain. In 1562 he returned to England and became a retainer of Sir William Cecil, to whom he was related, and to whom he dedicated (among several other poems and translations) his *Popish Kingdom*, and by his interest in 1563 was made one of the Queen's Gentlemen Pensioners.

It is in these author's poems, with which I became acquainted not long ago, that a description is found of the use of the Sexton's Wheel.

### What, then, is the Sexton's Wheel?

I have already briefly described the object as a pair of wheels formed of sheet iron, made to revolve backwards and forwards when held up or hung up by a handle, which keeps the two wheels together. From its peculiar shape (Plate ii. fig. 1) it would be most conveniently kept hung up, when not in use, in the vestry of a church, precisely where I found the Long Stratton example, when our Society visited the fabric in September, 1866.

<sup>5</sup> Mr. Arber, who has prefixed to his reprint of Googe's *Eglogs* ten closely-printed pages of interesting biography.

The accompanying illustration,<sup>6</sup> in Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, Basle, 1497, folio 136, includes what is probably meant to represent a sexton's wheel, similarly hung up by a handle on the wall.



I cannot therefore consider that there is any reason to doubt, with Dr. Husenbeth, whether the handle of the Long Stratton example be original. It seems to me unquestionably

<sup>6</sup> From a cast of the wood block; by permission of Mr. W. Paterson, Publisher, Edinburgh.

original. The wheel was a church ornament, and seems to have been specially put in the keeping of the sexton, whence it was known as the Sexton's Wheel.

### How was the Sexton's Wheel used ?

When a person wanted to know from which of the six days he should begin to keep his Lady Fast, he would pay the sexton a visit at church, and try his wheel in the vestry. The sexton, of course, kept his wheel ready for use, as shown on Plate ii. (fig. 2), with a string fastened to each of the six holes—three on each of the two wheels—assigned by some mark near each hole to the six days respectively sacred to St. Mary. Had the exigencies of metre allowed, the six strings would, no doubt, have been more clearly indicated both in Latin and English; where now the two authors speak only of one string, *i.e.*, attached to each hole. These six strings, then, were to indicate (just as the faces of the die) the six Lady Days, from one of which the Lady Fast was to commence. All being ready, the sexton, hanging up his wheel so that it would revolve freely, or (not being an infirm man) holding it up at arm's length, he perhaps gets someone to set the wheel going by both pulling it and turning it round at the same time; and while it is thus in motion, he bids the person who has come to try *to catch* one string while it revolves. The string caught indicates the Lady Day to be selected for the Lady Fast. It will be observed that the two radii, E to F (Plate ii. fig. 1), being purposely bent, prevented either wheel from making a complete revolution.

The Latin original, by Kirchmeyer, shall now be given. After animadverting upon the cultus of the Blessed Virgin, the author proceeds as follows:—

“ Quin etiam Mariæ festâ jejunia luce  
 Observant, rotula quam versa et jacta dedit sors.  
 Quisque etenim ædituus rotulam suspendit in aede  
 Signatam circum vel sex vel quinque diebus

Addictis Mariæ, totum festisque per annum :  
 A quâque ad captum dependet chordula longa.  
 Si Mariæ ergo venit cultor, lucemque sibi unam  
 Sorte dari cupit, is rotulam convertit in orbem,  
 Cultoremque jubet cursu comprehendere filum.  
 Inde diem discit, stata quo jejunia servet,  
 Plurimaque in Mariæ faciatque et pendat honorem."

Lib. III., ed. 1559, p. 110.

"Moreover," writes Kirchemeyer, "they keep a fast to Mary on a solemn day, which a wheel turned round and a thrown lot indicates. For every sexton hangs up his wheel in church, marked on its circumference with five or six days, and with feasts throughout the whole year sacred to Mary. From each [day] there hangs a long string to catch. If, therefore, a devotee of Mary comes and desires one day [of the six] to be given him by lot, he [the sexton] makes the wheel revolve, and bids the person catch the string as it goes round. Thence he knows the day on which to keep his stated fast, as well as do and accomplish many things in honour of Mary."

Barnabe Googe's metrical translation is the following, which precedes the strictures upon the *Worship of Saintes* :—

" Besides they keepe our Lady's fast at sundrie solemne tymes,  
 Instructed by a turning whele, or as the lot assignes.  
 For every Sexten hath a wheele, that hangeth for the viewe,  
 Marke round about with certaine dayes, unto the Virgin dewe.  
 Which holy through ye yere are kept, from whence hangs down a  
 thred,

Of length sufficient to be toucht, and to be handled.  
 Now when that any Serbant of our Ladges commeth here,  
 And seekes to have some certain day by lotte for to appeere,  
 The Sexten turnes the whele about, and bids the stander by,  
 To hold the thred whereby he doth the time and season try :  
 Wherein he ought to keep his fast, and ebery other thing,  
 That decent is, or longing to our Ladies worshipping."

Book iii. p. 36½.

In order that the wheel may freely revolve, it must, of course, be either hung on a hook or held up by the hand at arm's length, the mode adopted when I caused the Long Stratton wheel to be held out for me by a lad of about fifteen years of age, who kept it up quite long enough for my purpose. It has been supposed that the weight was too much to be so held even by a man; and that a curious object found also in the vestry of Long Stratton Church (and represented Plate ii. fig. 3), was a crane or hook, to hold up the wheel when in use. This I do not suppose to be its intended use, from the smallness and slightness of its make, for it weighs only three-and-a-half pounds. A careful examination of this half-arch in iron work has led me to believe that it was designed to hold up vessels or small lamps; as many as nine in number.