

STEPHEN MILLER

“THE KISSING BUSH”

Kissing Bush

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"It is surprising how many people notice it," said Mr R. C. Collister, "and how much happiness it gives to the old folk who come year after year to see if it is still there." The bush has been put up every Christmas since the firm was established over a hundred years ago. It is regularly taken down on Shrove Tuesday, when the apples are usually still fresh, but the oranges are withered and green.

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INTRODUCTION



At the Kirk Maughold Dorcas Tea Festival held in 1860, the decorations for the occasion ended on a highnote, “[a]s a set off to the whole, two (shall we call them) kissing bushes were suspended from the couples, one each side of the fire-place, with a chandelier hanging from each.” [1] A Manx emigrant to Kansas in the United States in a letter dated “Christmas Day, 1860” looked back to Christmas in the Island with its “tantalsing social and festive remembrances of mirth and jollity, and unalloyed happiness, flavoured and spiced, with romping under kissing bushes, and other delicious exercises.” [2]

In 1863, the *Manx Sun* reported from Ramsey that “[t]here was a singular absence of those essential adjuncts to Christmas ornamentation, viz., the renowned evergreens—ivy, fir, and holly. There being absolutely none exposed for sale at the market as in former years.” It went to add that “no orthodox Manx matron would consider her decorations complete without the evergreens, and to the maidens the kissing bush is indispensable.” [3]

William Callister, the proprietor of the Plough Inn in Ramsey, was fined in 1875 for having visitors after hours on his premises and William Lord deposed that “[o]n the night previously Wm. Callister (the defendant) invited James Kneale and I to spend the night, and make up the kissing bush for them.—James Kneale’s evidence was similar to the former witness.” [4]

The Lambfell Sunday School Tea Meeting took place on New Year’s Day in 1895, and “[t]ea was served in Mr Christian’s barn, which was most beautifully decorated for the occasion, evergreens and immense kissing bushes were suspended from the ceiling in all directions, and had a very pleasing effect.” [5] In Peel, the following year of 1896, “Mr E. Richmond, fruiterer, of Peel has his ceiling of his shop literally covered with mistletoe, and no one need be short of a ‘kissing bush.’” [6]

In *The Captain of the Parish* (published in 1897), written by the Rev. John Quine, “[t]he domestics in Arrosey kitchen made a kissing-bush after the pattern of the country, a circle large as a cartwheel, inwoven with evergreens, the holly berries scarlet, the ivy berries powdered white, decorated with ribbons and rosettes of coloured tissue, studded inside and outside with oranges and the rosiest of apples, and finally suspended from a beam in the middle of the kitchen.” [7]

George Quarrie looking back in 1921, remembered seeing in the farmhouse kitchen “a large Christmas kissing bush, about a yard in diameter, gaily decked in country fashion with ribbons, rosettes, apples, oranges, etc.” [8] The entry for “Kissin-Bunch” in *A Vocabulary of the Anglo-Manx Dialect* (1924) recalls the fun involved, “Catchin the gels undher the kissin-bunch. We’d a lawvly kissin-bunch, made of hollan and hibbin and misseltitoe (*mistletoe*).” [9] This point made as well

INTRODUCTION

by W.W. Gill in *A Third Manx Scrapbook* [1933], “[t]he Kissing Bush or *Bunch* was a great hoop of holly, ornamented with apples, oranges, paper roses and streamers, hung at Christmas from the ceiling for the purpose implied in its name.” [10]

In 1952, the *Isle of Man Weekly Times* reported that “[a]n old Manx custom is still carried out at Collister’s Garage, St George’s Street, where a ‘kissing bush’ is suspended from the roof, consisting of a framework of hoops wreathed with ‘hibbin’ or ivy, and decorated with streamers and silver paper, with apples and oranges hanging from it.” And it went on to add, “It is surprising how many people notice it,’ said Mr R.C. Collister, ‘and now much happiness it gives to the old folk who come year after year to see if it is still there.” It remained hanging until Shrove Tuesday, the day when the Christmas holly and ivy were traditionally put on the fire, and “the apples are usually still fresh, but the oranges are withered and green.” [11]. A final mention of the “Kissing Bush” here comes from 1955 when at a meeting of the Marown WI in December, “Mr Haigh kindly presented a kissing bush, which was raffled, the winner being Mrs Quaye.” [12]

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018



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1. “KIRK MAUGHOLD DORCAS TEA FESTIVAL.” *MONA’S HERALD* (5 DECEMBER 1860)

As a set off to the whole, two (shall we call them) kissing bushes were suspended from the couples, one each side of the fire-place, with a chandelier hanging from each.

“Kirk Maughold Dorcas Tea Festival.” *Mona’s Herald* 5 December 1860: [3]b–c.

2. “LETTER FROM KANSAS, U.S.” *MONA’S HERALD* (23 JANUARY 1861)

[1c] DEAR * * * *—What pleasant reminiscences does the name of Christmas day conjure up—delightful family recollections, of a group of happy faces around the table, which groaned under luxuries peculiar to the season—tantalising social and festive remembrances of mirth and jollity, and unalloyed happiness, flavoured and spiced, with romping under kissing bushes, and other delicious exercises. Then there was the *Eilwerry* at Malew Church, where droll old coons sang queer old songs called “carvels” as mile long, exhausting the patience of good old Parson Gill, though vastly amusing to the unsanctified rabble. Cease memory! cease evoking the ghosts of departed joys—“departed never to return,” and let me clutch thee, my little brown jug; let me kiss thy cold lips, the only one accessible to the old man in the wilderness. Your health, * * *; you must excuse me from passing the bottle, but I require a little old Bourbon to stiffen my lip when I attempt to look backward.

I am passionately fond of music. Believe me, I would walk the five or six miles between here and Atchison, through the foot deep of snow which now [1d] mantles the ground, to hear Miss Caley sing the anthems usually got up at this season.

T.W. C——, “Letter from Kansas, U.S.” *Mona’s Herald* 23 January 1861: [Supplement] [1]c–d. Letter dated “Christmas Day, 1860.”

3. “[RAMSEY AND DISTRICT] OUR MARKET WAS” *MANX SUN* (26 DECEMBER 1863)

Our market was this morning well supplied with every requisite for the table; but the number of vendors present was much less than on Saturday last. There was a singular absence of those essential adjuncts to Christmas ornamentation, viz., the renowned evergreens—ivy, fir, and holly. There being absolutely none exposed for sale at the market as in former years. Yet there seemed to be no material deficiency, for even several of the vessels in the harbour had their masts adorned with these emblems of the season, while housekeepers have been tolerably well supplied also and rightly so

too, for no orthodox Manx matron would consider her decorations complete without the evergreens, and to the maidens the kissing bush is indispensable.

[Ramsey and District] Our market was” *Manx Sun* 26 December 1863: 4e.

4. “MAGISTRATES’ COURT, RAMSEY. SATURDAY, JANUARY 9TH, 1875. SAME PLAINTIFF V. WM. CALLISTER.” *MONA’S HERALD* (14 JANUARY 1875)

SAME PLAINTIFF *v.* WM. CALLISTER, Plough Inn.—Suit brought on the same ground as the former.—W. Boyd, C.C. sworn, said that at 10 mins. past one o’clock on the morning of Christmas Day last, I visited the Plough Inn, accompanied by P.C. Martin. We knocked at the door, and after waiting a short time we were admitted, when we found James Creer and John Collister in the kitchen, and Wm. Lord and Jas. Kneale in a small back room.—P.C. Martin corroborated the evidence of C.C. Boyd in all particulars.—Mr Cruickshank for the defence, called Wm. Lord, who was sworn, said: On the night previously Wm. Callister (the defendant) invited James Kneale and I to spend the night, and make up the kissing bush for them.—James Kneale’s evidence was similar to the former witness.—Wm. Creer, sworn, said: I put my horse up at the Plough Inn on the night before, and I came and took it away between one and two o’clock in the morning of Christmas Day. Cross-examined by Mr LaMothe: I saw no police; I was not there at the time, but my brother James was. I got home about two o’clock.—Mr Cruickshank argued at great length that the two invited parties were *bona fide* lodgers, as they were to lodge there for the night; and as for the Greer’s, they were really travellers, and as such there was no case so far as they were concerned.—But their Worships held otherwise, and fined defendant £5 and costs, or 14 days’ imprisonment.—The fines in both cases were paid in court.

“Magistrates’ Court, Ramsey. Saturday, January 9th, 1875. Same Plaintiff *v.* Wm. Callister.” *Mona’s Herald* 14 January 1875: 5f. [Same Plaintiff = Committee of Highways.]

5. “LAMBPELL SUNDAY SCHOOL TEA MEETING.” *PEEL CITY GUARDIAN* (5 JANUARY 1895)

This popular tea meeting took place, as usual, on New Year’s Day, and was very successful in every way. Tea was served in Mr Christian’s barn, which was most beautifully decorated for the occasion, evergreens and immense kissing bushes were suspended from the ceiling in all directions, and had a very pleasing effect.

“Lambfell Sunday School Tea Meeting.” *Peel City Guardian* 5 January 1895: 7f.

6. “CHRISTMASTIDE: A PEEP AT THE SHOPS.” RAMSEY COURIER (24 DECEMBER 1896)

Mr E. Richmond, fruiterer, of Peel has his ceiling of his shop literally covered with mistletoe, and no one need be short of a “kissing bush.”

“Christmastide: A Peep at the Shops.” *Ramsey Courier* 24 December 1896: 6a–b.

7. REV. JOHN QUINE, THE CAPTAIN OF THE PARISH (1897)

The Christmas at Arrosey was such as had not been for many and many a long year. On Christmas Eve Molroy and Molvurra were in Narradale glen like two schoolboys cutting evergreens-ivy, and holly, and silver fir. The domestics in Arrosey kitchen made a kissing-bush after the pattern of the country, a circle large as a cartwheel, inwoven with evergreens, the holly berries scarlet, the ivy berries powdered white, decorated with ribbons and rosettes of coloured tissue, studded inside and outside with oranges and the rosiest of apples, and finally suspended from a beam in the middle of the kitchen—unmistakable symbol and pledge of “some life about the place” and of open house. The news of the return and of the new ways and manners went round the country-side. As the spring brings the inevitable bird, so the new order and atmosphere brought the neighbours to Arrosey, already with some knowledge of Miss Milvartin’s rule, but still solemn and shy to the “ones from America,” consenting, however, as it was “Christmas times,” to be regaled with whatever was going.

Rev. John Quine, *The Captain of the Parish* (London: William Heinemann, 1897).

8. GEORGE QUARRIE, “TITTLEWHACK.” ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (21 MAY 1921)

In the north of the Isle of Man, where the land is dry and peculiarly adapted to the growth of potatoes, the long winter evenings, ones upon a time, used to be occasionally whiled away by tittlewhack sprees. A case is point occurs to mind, where a large, stone-flagged kitchen was the scene, its ceiling almost entirely hidden by hams, shoulders and flitches of bacon, among which, about the centre, high up and not too much in evidence, was a large Christmas kissing bush, about a yard in diameter, gaily decked in country fashion with ribbons, rosettes, apples, oranges, *etc.*

George Quarrie, “Tittlewhack.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 21 May 1921: 6e.

9. A VOCABULARY OF THE ANGLO-MANX DIALECT (1924)

KISSIN-BUNCH kissing-bush.

Catchin the gels undher the kissin-bunch. We’d a lawvly kissin-bunch, made of hollan and hibbin and misseltitoe (*mistletoe*).

A.W. Moore, Sophia Morrison, and Edmund Goodwin, eds. *A Vocabulary of the Anglo-Manx Dialect* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

10. **W.W. GILL, A THIRD MANX SCRAPBOOK [1933]**

[277] The Kissing Bush or *Bunch* was a great hoop of holly, ornamented with apples, oranges, paper roses and streamers, hung at Christmas from the ceiling for the purpose implied in its name.

W.W. Gill, *A Third Manx Scrapbook*. Douglas: Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, 1963 [from 1933].

11. **“[AT RANDOM] KISSING BUSH.” ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (5 JANUARY 1952)**

An old Manx custom is still carried out at Collister’s Garage, St George’s Street, where a “kissing bush” is suspended from the roof, consisting of a framework of hoops wreathed with “hibbin” or ivy, and decorated with streamers and silver paper, with apples and oranges hanging from it.

“It is surprising how many people notice it,” said Mr R.C. Collister, “and now much happiness it gives to the old folk who come year after year to see if it is still there.” The bush has been put up every Christmas since the firm was established over a hundred years ago. It is regularly taken down on Shrove Tuesday, when the apples are usually still fresh, but the oranges are withered and green.

Pseud [signed “Islander”]. “[At Random] Kissing Bush.” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 5 January 1952: 4c.

12. **“MAROWN W.I.” ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (23 DECEMBER 1955)**

Mr Haigh kindly presented a kissing bush, which was raffled, the winner being Mrs Quaye.

“Marown W.I.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 23 December 1955: 8f.

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