

Manx Notes 25 (2004)

“THEY WOULD FIDDLE AND DANCE TO A LATE HOUR”

THOMAS CRELLIN LOOKS BACK

At the Peel Church Young Men’s Club recently, Mr Thomas Crellin delighted a large audience with glimpses of Peel life as it was in his younger days. The Rev. H. Goulding presided. Mr Crellin said he felt sorry, as they all would, at the death of Her Majesty. He would not very soon forget the occasion of her coronation in 1838. It was his first day of his first season at “the herrings,” and they had a cargo of five mease on board. The wind being at the nor’ard, and there being no shelter in Peel Bay, they were waiting for the tide outside the harbour. Being very sick, he was glad to get his feet on land. On going up to the Market-place, there was a grand demonstration in honour of the Queen. Amongst the participators in the procession of honour were three or four men riding on white horses with swords over their sides—these including the bombardier of the Castle and a brother of Mr John H. Kelly. After the procession, there was a tea-party and a grand turn out, for it was thought she was going to be a very good Queen, and he was glad to say that confidence had not been misplaced. Mr Crellin went on to refer to the changes effected during the Queen’s reign by the many inventions and improvements. At the beginning of the reign candles were used in Peel everywhere, even in the places of worship. As to water it was all obtained from wells, and he had got up as early as four o’clock in the summer time to get there before the other people—water was so scarce. The reaping was all done by women and girls, who also did the sheep-shearing. Threshing was done by hand. It was the usual thing in winter to keep two men to do the threshing by means of flails. The fishing nets were made at home, and boys and girls would not obtain leave to go out at night until a certain amount of work had been accomplished. Sewing was in every instance done by hand—sewing machines not having been invented. The House of Keys were self-elected. If any member died, the members elected another, whether the public liked him or not. He had heard tell of one member who only uttered one sentence in twenty years. A pane of glass got broken in the House of Key’s chamber, and he said, “Men, I think we had better get a pane in that window—there is a great draught.” Every boat sailing to the fishing in those days paid ten shillings a year to the Customs. When he was at the Douglas herring fishery, Sir John Bowring, a Member of Parliament of the reformer type, came to Douglas to see what was done with the ten shillings. Nobody could tell what became of the money. At Douglas, a man ran in front of Sir John Bowring with twenty-four rusty keys shouting “Down with the Keys! Down with the Keys!” Sir John Bowring came to Peel, and a large gathering of people met him in Athol-street, wanting to take his horses out of his carriage to bring him to town, but he refused shouting “No men, I must try and do something for you.” On his way back from the Castle, however, the people chaired him up to the Market-place on their shoulders.

Sir John Bowring advocated a popularly elected House of Keys as the only means of redress for the people's wrongs. The difficulties of "lighting" in early years were next dealt with by Mr Crellin, the difficulty being got over by leaving fires to smoulder all night. The mysteries of tinder, flint, and steel were next described. The first lucifer matches sold in the Island, he said, were dispensed at the rate of three bundles for a penny. Farmers' wages averaged at the beginning of the Queen's reign about one shilling a day for good men, and a man who got nine shillings a week was the talk of the town. When living at Kirk Patrick Church, he was one of three men who were given a job to fix nets in the parlour of the public-house, and they received a tumbler of ale apiece three times a day—nobody would work unless they got ale. The pioneer of teetotalism in the Isle of Man was James Teare, and he had a terribly uphill job at first. At a meeting which he tried to hold at the Peel Court House, the people said he was wrong in the head, and forced him to run. Every man trying to do good got opposition at first. Teare had a meeting at Greeba Wesleyan Chapel, and to frighten him a certain brewer in Peel sent out two half-barrels of ale in a cart with a lot of men, and fixed the two barrels up on the hedge opposite, and the men shouted "Here, boys, come all and drink." Those half-barrels were not long getting emptied. Another teetotal preacher named Lomax was lecturing in the Primitive Chapel, but the Chapel got too full, so he tried to get the Wesleyan Chapel, but one of the stewards would not allow him to preach there. One of the other stewards sent for a cold chisel and opened the door in spite of them. The teetotallers had a lot of trouble establishing themselves, but God would always support the right. Mr Crellin lamented a good old custom that had fallen into disuse. When the fishing-boats used to go to sea, and were in the Bay with their sails set, the skipper would shout, "Now boys are you ready?" and all hands would off with their hats and ask God's blessing while they were at sea. Again, after they had the nets shot, they thanked God. Now when they went to sea, not a word was uttered, and when the nets were shot, the cry was, "Whose is the first watch?" (laughter). Weddings were conducted on a much freer system than now. He (Mr Crellin) remembered thirty or thirty-six weddings, and all the feasting took place in the public house. Generally each person would have to pay for his own dinner—unless it was what was known as a free dinner—unless it was what was as a free dinner. After dinner the fiddler was called in and dancing was indulged in, and the young people could step it out (laughter). In Peel and district there was dancing in one public house or another nearly every night, and they would fiddle and dance to a late hour. The fiddler would take good care to have his pence after each dance. He knew of a fiddler in Peel—he would not mention name—who promised a marriage portion of £30 with his daughter. After the wedding the son-in-law came for his marriage portion and had to carry it away in a cart—it was all in pence and halfpence. The "wakes" on dead persons were institutions that had died out. Sometimes the watchers sat three nights over the dead—and there was always a barrel of ale and pounds of tobacco laid in, so that when the smokers got dry they

could quench their thirst. The Mhellia (harvest home)* also came in for treatment from Mr Crellin, but the festivity, he said, was observed on plain fare—bread and cheese and ale. As to the Post Office sixty years ago, when letters came they were stuck up in the Post Office window until called for. Then there came a woman letter carrier, with a little basket opening at each end—one for newspapers and one for letters. Miss Catherine Garrett, who had died recently, was the first woman who filled this position in Peel.

This finished Mr Crellin’s paper, and in reply to questions from some of the members he said that there was a “ghost” at Gordon in his young days. He believed, however, that ghosts were largely due to “drink.” As to fairies, he believed they existed, and had seen them many a time—one particular occasion being at Glen Cam, on the Kirk Michael road, when he and another saw two damsels attired in bright yellow bedgowns, frisking in the moonlight on the banks of the Glen Cam streamlet. A Peel man passing a thorn hedge at Greeba saw thereon one night a fine “wash” displayed, including a number of little shirts, and having a big family at home took some of the shirts with him. After he was home a pain seized him in the arm which he had used to “annex” the shirts, and a friend advised him to put them back, so as to drive away the pain. After doing so the pain disappeared.

Manx people were full of superstition, and in his early days when going through the “Sound” on a herring boat, for giving a light to a man on another boat he got into a great row with the crew, who declared that all their luck was gone. When on another boat, which had had a lucky season, he saw a neighbouring boat’s crew stealing their ballast so as to get “some of their luck.” One of their crew, a northside man, came to the boat one week stating that in his journey from the north he had met a man he did not half like, and to dodge him he had gone over the hedge until he passed, and then came out of his hiding place and scraped up some of the dust off his feet. Said the man, “We ought to have luck this week” (laughter).

Mr John H. Kelly testified to the goodness of Queen Victoria by telling the following tale:—At the time of the Copper Riots in the Island (1840) his half-brother was wrongly incarcerated in Castle Rushen, and through the influence of the then Lord Bishop, whose brother was Lord Chancellor of England, the matter was brought to the notice of her Majesty, who ordered the imprisoned man’s release. Governor Hope, who had received no copy of the release, refused to let the man out, but eventually did so upon the arrival of the order.

A hearty vote of thanks was passed to Mr Crellin by the Class.

Source: Anon. “What Mr Thos Crellin Remembers.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 2 March 1901: 3 cols a–b.

* Properly, the harvest supper, the Mhellia being held on the day when the Last Sheaf was taken.



“Thomy the Mate have not got it.” So wrote William Kermode to Deemster J.F. Gill in 1898.¹ “Tommy the Mate” was Thomas Crellin, and what he did not have were the words to “Shannon Rea.” What he did have was a nickname acquired through life at sea as a mariner. He lived in Peel on the west coast of Man, one of the Island’s two principal fishing ports, the other being Port St Mary on the southern coast. The 1891 census enumerated him as living at 3 Christian Street. He was returned as aged 67, born in Peel, and married to Ann, 65, who was born in the adjacent parish of Patrick. They had a domestic servant, Lydia Leece, 14, born in Peel.² In 1881 they were living at 9 Christian Street and Lydia was also present, but enumerated then as a visitor.³

Crellin was a singer who was visited by W.H. Gill and his brother J.F. Gill, the Northern Deemster, in 1895 and 1898 when they were collecting on the Northside of the Island. He was also provided songs and tunes for *Manx Ballads and Music* put together by A.W. Moore and published in 1896.⁴ And he lectured to the Peel Church Young Men’s Club in 1901, a talk that was fortunately printed up in the *Isle of Man Examiner* newspaper. Crellin amongst other details of social life includes the following about musical entertainment in Peel and the surrounding parish of German:

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Crellin was born around 1824, first going to sea in 1838 as a boy cook to “the herrings,” the autumn herring fishery around the Island. He is, of course, reflecting back here, and so this passage must relate to the 1840s, when he would be in his

¹ William Kermode to Deemster J.F. Gill, 25 May 1898, Manx National Heritage Library, ms 09702, Box 2.

² *Census Enumerators’ Book* for Peel, 1891, RG 12/4683, f.7

³ *Census Enumerator’s Book* for Peel, 1881, RG 11/5597, f.6. Her presence later on in 1891 suggests that she is a kin-servant. For this issue see Rosemary Hancock, “In Service or one of the Family?: Kin-servants in Swavesey 1851–81, Ryde 1881, and Stourbridge 1881,” *Family & Community History* 2 (1999).

⁴ His work with both parties of collectors will be dealt with in a separate piece.

twenties. The public house is the focus of a music scene, one not just restricted to the town itself but also taking place in the surrounding rural areas. Sessions are regular, in fact nightly, and dancing is also taking place. Detail of musical sessions even at this sparse level of description in passing are few and far between. While we would wish that “Mr Thos Crellin” had remembered more, fortunately he did remember a little.

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VIENNA, 2004

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