

Manx Notes 340 (2018)

DANIEL CREGEEN
“OLD MANX CUSTOMS”
(1885)

INTRODUCTION

[8a] Mr Daniel Cregeen recently delivered a lecture in the Theatre Royal, Douglas on the above subject. In the course of his lecture he said that in bringing before their notice the subject he had chosen he asked for their kind forbearance and attention while he recounted many observances and incidents, relating to the habits and customs prevailing throughout Douglas and the rural districts some forty years ago. As several of his audience had arrived at an age enabling them to judge of events which transpired, dating as far back as he, the speaker himself, they would the better be enabled to form an opinion as to whether many of the recent changes in our habits, and as now introduced amongst the people of our Island had improved upon those prevailing some forty or fifty years ago; and had conducted to the happiness, prosperity and general welfare of the inhabitants of *Mannin Beg Ma Chree*.

THE MANX COTTAGE

I will, he said, first dwell upon the character and description of the tenements occupied by farmers, artisans, and labourers at the period named. In the various rural districts most of the labourers' dwellings, or rather huts, were built of turf sods, the walls seldom being more than seven feet high from the ground level to the eaves, with an aperture for a door, in the front side, generally 5 ft by 2 ft, having on each side small aperture 12 inches, by 12 inches supplemented with a couple of panes of glass for the admission of light. The timber of the roof was for the most part composed of lopped branches of trees, the principal of larch trees sawn in two, and which was covered over with what was termed *scaa foaid*, or the thin skimming of old lay land; this again was coated with a thick layer of straw thatch, securely braced with ropes running longitudinally from gable to gable, and then transversely about 2 feet apart across the ridge of roof, fastened under the eaves, to short pegs or stones inserted in the sod or clay walls. The chimney or aperture to allow the smoke to escape consisted of a few boards fixed in the gable ends of the kitchen and living portion of the cottage. The interior being in two divisions, formed by a crude partition coated by mortar composed of the mud scrapings from the roads. The interior of the walls was plastered with the same material finished off with a coat of white limewash. These small cots were very often occupied by an average of about five persons, who, notwithstanding their limited space and remarkably small wages—namely one shilling a day and find themselves and families in food and clothing—were very comfortable. This to the uninitiated at first sight appears incredible; however, I will presently be able to show how comfortably they managed to exist,

clothe themselves and their children, and, in many instances, how they sometimes saved a little of the needful for a rainy day. The sanitary arrangements were very bad. Had it not been for the purity of the surrounding atmosphere and copious inhaling of ozone, the early rising, and course and nutritious, but healthy and plain food, I have no doubt they would scarcely have escaped from the dire effects of disease. Speaking of medical men's services they were seldom resorted to. Some of the parishes, consisting of above 2,300 inhabitants, did not contain more than six or seven slate houses, the slates being taken from South Barrule slate Quarries and being so small, thick, and heavy, that the roof had to have rafters of enormous scantlings to bear the great weight of the slates, and even with all these precautions to ensure strength, after the lapse of a few years the slate houses became saddle backed; and bore a form quite at variance with that of stability.

THE MANX FARMHOUSE

The farmers' houses also were for the most part on the ground door, composed of mud or clay, with a loft or first floor over the kitchen and parlour ends, with the joists and roof devoid of ceiling, a flight of stairs leading direct from the front door in one flight to the bed rooms above. The height of the room on the ground floor to the joists seldom exceeded 7 feet, and oftener not more than 6 feet. A lean-to shed at the back of the main building, was usually utilized as a larder and scullery. I must candidly assert that the interior of some of these farm dwellings was cozy, comfortable, and provisionally ornamental, if not adorned by either costly paintings of the "Babes in the Wood," "Jack Shepherd," "Dick Turpin's ride to York," "Rob Roy and his gallant men," and so on.

FOOD

The kitchen over the fireplace was decorated with an array of hams, flitches of bacon, *fail volt* (cured mutton), *fail vaart* (dried beef), *fail qui* (dried goose), &c., and highly ornamental and also savoury when cooked and laid out on the well scoured deal kitchen table; the essence of which the Manx cooks were proverbial for making savoury broth, *sollaghan*, viz., oatmeal roasted on the frying-pan upon which the liquor from the boiled meats was poured, which formed a most nutritious and substantial fare, one a person could fast after, for a long period. I must, however, hereafter dilate further upon the prevailing dietary of the period.

FOLK MEDICINE

Secondly, I would for a few minutes draw your attention to the prevailing superstitious belief in ghosts, fairies, spirits of the dead appearing and holding converse; in charms for blood stopping, in human beings as well as animals, and by persons who, by their incantations, and the administration of certain impounded

herbs, were capable of curing all the ills that flesh is heir to, when all the skill of the medical faculty proved futile. Such nostrums from these charmers had generally, to prove efficacious, to be procured during the hour of church service. A belief also existed as to witchcraft and evil-eyed people, who had the power to prevent the milk producing a supply of butter; and also that fairies could exchange children by substituting a deformed child, for the once lovely child of the parents. The majority of the public, moreover, placed implicit confidence in the healing properties of several holy wells, such as *Chybyr chairn*, &c., &c., where water had to be taken at the hours of church service on the Sabbath day. I recollect that I myself when a lad was deputed one Sabbath day to proceed to a northern parish, to procure the herbs and other ingredients from one of these well-known seers, but having some seven miles to reach his abode, and having met a social companion when about one mile from my destination, we paid a visit to one of the many roadside public houses then existing, where we imbibed a quantity of *jough* (ale); and the period for the visitation having expired, myself and companion provided ourselves with a number of cabbage leaves borrowed from old Nanny the hostess some lard, with which we impounded the cabbage leaves, carefully folded the same in paper, returning home and furnishing the instruction that the compound was to be boiled in sweet milk, and a tea-cup full to be taken by the patient three times daily. Suffice it to say that this nostrum proved effectual. This was no doubt attributable to the strong faith in the healing powers of the quack herbalist and charmer. And her instance in which my services were called into requisition was from my knowledge of the situation of *Chybyr chairn*, or the Lord's Well, to proceed there one Sabbath morning to procure from this well a bottle of the water to anoint the eyes of a respectable farmer's wife, who was sorely afflicted with inflamed eyes. Feeling a great disinclination to perform such a mountainous journey, 5 miles distance, I proceeded to a small shibbeen at the foot of the mountain, and after resting and liquoring, charged the bottle from the rivulet at hand, and returned with the eye-water, which was applied in due form, and after a few applications the cure proved effectual; but it having afterwards eked out the manner in which I had deceived my friend, I lost all favour forever, and what is a more important loss, an inhibition never more to visit her daughter Margaret, a very amiable young woman, possessed of a good *thockar* (fortune), with whom I had previously been a favoured suitor. So you see that I suffered severely for the deception.

THE ALEHOUSE

I will now shortly describe, the drinking customs then prevailing to a very alarming condition and it needs but little reflection when I inform you that one of our northern parishes alone, contained no fewer than fourteen public houses (licensed) with one unlicensed bearing the following sign: "Ales, Wines, and Spirits sold here by Samuel Veale, Esq., a Bailiff and Rum," a well-known character throughout the

Island, noted for his *black game* and musical finger manipulation upon a series of empty glasses. There were in full working force no fewer than three breweries in the same parish; and it was truly amazing what immense quantities of *Manx jough*, then sold at five quarts for a shilling, were consumed, and many estates were squandered through the drinking customs then prevailing. Although the drinking of the ales, or *jough*, then manufactured did not bewilder the mind and prostrate the physical powers of the participators so rapidly as the indulgence of ardent spirits, still it was surprising what changes it effected in the character and disposition of the imbibers—some it made amorous, some rich, some poor, opening the purse strings of others, and affecting others with religious feelings.

THE RISE OF THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

It was during this period that the reverend clergyman, the Rev. Hugh Stowell, rector of Ballaugh, and father of the Rev. Canon Stowell, deploring the wide spread and direful consequence which the drinking customs occasioned, was the first to organize the temperance society on the moderation system, the members pleading themselves to abstain from ardent spirits, unless ordered by a medical man, but were permitted to participate moderately of ale, wine, or cider. If found inebriated, those transgressing were suspended for a period of three months before again eligible for membership. I remember a ludicrous incident that occurred one moon light night to a neighbouring farmer, whom I will designate as Billy, who, when under the influence of John Barleycorn, often evinced amorous proclivities; he was returning from the village after having been a few weeks previously admitted as a member of the Temperance Society of which the worthy rector was president; Billy's vision being rather hazy, saw approaching him, as he imagined, a female with whom he was acquainted habited in a spacious cloak, whom he rudely seized and to his honor heard his minister exclaim. "Oh! William, Oh! William, what is the matter?" On discovering the unenviable position his conduct had led him into, he scampered off the scene at a rate of speed he seldom attained, and, for fear of confronting the rector for months afterward he took a circuitous route, rather than pass the rectory. Many are the incidents, amusing and of a serious nature, I could recount if time afforded, but let me candidly aver that although the moderation system received then a fair trial, it radically failed to accomplish the purposes for which it was instituted. At this period the veteran champion of teetotalism the late Mr James Teare, from Bolton, a pioneer of the teetotal system, along with the late veteran, Mr Joseph Livesey, of Preston, and others, visited his native Island, and delivered animated and eloquent addresses in various parishes, and great good was rendered to the cause, of sobriety by his [8b] powerful advocacy.

FUNERALS AND WAKES

A very objectionable custom then, prevailed in connection with wakes and funerals, and many were the unseemly and detestable orgies occurring in such occasions. It was customary for the relations and friends of a deceased to sit up all night, some in the room wherein the corpse lay, and others throughout other portions of the house, participating freely of ale, wine, or spirits, and smoking tobacco ad libitum, the conversation being too frequently of a nature, far from what the solemnity of the occasion warranted and might have expected that their own thoughts, in the presence of the dead, might have diverted their minds to:—

The awful hour when ye shall die
 Angels themselves cannot declare;
 Perhaps 'tis that now gliding by.
 Mortals for death prepare.

It was usual also, before the funeral, and on gathering around the house, to form the cortege, for jugs and cans, filled with ale, to be carried round and distributed amongst those assembled, in pint earthenware measures and basins to those who chose to participate; whereas the nearer relations and those coming from a distance were regulated inside the house. Happily such reprehensible customs have ceased to prevail, and many salutary changes have been introduced in the conduct of funereal observances of a highly meritorious nature.

FAIRS

While having occupied your attention for a time on the drinking customs, allow me for a few moments to remind you how fairs, then so very numerous and frequent, were the scenes of much drinking. I have myself been an eye-witness to no fewer than half-a dozen fights going on at various parts of the fairfield simultaneously, the majority of which were caused by the rivalry of the young men for the favour of escorting the lasses to their homes and becoming their chosen sweethearts. I remember what a great demand there was for what were termed *fairins*; and old Mother Kelly, one of the moat extensive vendors of gingerbread, toffee, &c, sang out—

Gingerbread! gingerbread! here of the best.
 Come, buy all I have, and I'll give you the rest.

And capacious were the handkerchiefs of the young women supplemented with *fairins* presented by their male admirers, and proud was the lass so fortunate as to procure the largest and choicest supply.

COURTING

The method of courtship was generally, nay, almost universally, by nightly visitations to see their sweethearts and lovers; and, where *thockars*, or fortunes, were known to exist, great was the demand to obtain in marriage the fortunate damsel; and, should a young woman known to be an heiress of some importance pay a friendly visit to

some acquaintance, friend, or relative's house, and remain for a time as a guest, great was the gathering of the surrounding youths to solicit the favour of paying their nocturnal visitations and paining the admiration and approbation of the heiress, depicting in glowing and impressive terms his highly eligible qualifications and monetary anticipations, interlarded with promises of constant love and devotion should he be honoured with the fair damsel's choice. It was, however, remarkable how very coy and distant these nightly sweethearts demeaned themselves one towards the other if happening to meet in company of others during the day. They would assume an appearance as of distant acquaintances, even when it was known that arrangements for marriage had been considered. I have known the marriages of artizans and labourers to consist of upwards of 20 couples, who had the wedding dinner provided at a public-house, where each lad invited and selected his female companion. It was also customary at weddings of the well-to-do, to repair to church in the high backed gigs then in general use, and not unfrequently a cavalcade of a score or more could be witnessed in such processions. Sometimes they proceeded on horseback, and on returning to the domicile of the bride's parents, from church, the mettle and speed of their steeds were well tested in a general race as to who would first arrive to have the honour of throwing broadcast the wedding cake over the heads of the guests on their approach.

THE MHELLIA

The *Mellas*, or harvest homes, were kept up with festive rejoicing. A female reaper was selected to cut the last handful of grain; the straw about a handful being tied together, and adorned with ribbons, standing for the purpose, and conveyed to the farm house by the female who was deputed to cut the same. She was styled the harvest queen, and brought shoulder high to the banquet, prepared for the reapers and others employed during the harvest operations. At night the barn was prepared for dancing, the parish fiddler's services being called into requisition, and then supplemented for the occasion was an unlimited supply of *jough*, the fiddling and jigging continued without interruption in one giddy maze until the break of day, at which time it often occurred that the strains of music had ceased, and fiddler, violin, and bow would be observed prostrated on a heap of straw improvised in a corner of the barn for the repose of this important functionary, and any other whose potations had tended to drop them quietly ensconced in the arms of Morpheus.

THE COST OF LIVING

I am of opinion that in no part of her Majesty's dominions has more rapid strides taken place in the tillage of the soil, introduction of improved mechanical agricultural implements, and in the breed of cattle, horses, sheep, fowl, &c, within my recollection than in this Island. And, moreover, the price of commodities and produce of the farm, even forms, a most striking advance in the value thereof. Take,

for instance, good conditioned sheep, which would weigh some 10 lbs a quarter, could readily be purchased at 7s or 8s per head, including hide and wool; suckling pigs, 3s 6d each; a good milking cow, £5 to £7; a horse (though small), say 14½ hands, fit for all farm work, for a few pounds; fowls from 6d to 8d each. Fresh butter 6d to 8d per lb. Eggs, four a penny. Beef, per quarter, at the rate of 3d per lb; and potatoes at 4s to 5s per boll of 32 stones, or 443 lbs. Labourers' wages were 1s per day, and they had to find their own food, or 8d per day with their employers providing them with their meals. Women and young people while engaged digging potatoes, weeding, turnip pulling and trimming, and other various torn and outdoor work, such as threshing with flails (then for the most part used), the spreading of farmyard manure in potatoe and turnip ridges, hay making, &c, &c, generally were paid at the rate of 9d per day. Joiners, masons, tailors and shoemakers, 2s 6d per day, or 1s 6d and their food, all of which tradesmen engaged themselves to perform the work, by the day, at the residences of those employing them, several men capable of ploughing, sowing, reaping, mowing, stack making—in fact, all necessary fair work, received a maximum of £10 per annum.

THE COTTAGE ECONOMY

Notwithstanding the smallness of the wages, the tradesmen and working men were able to live comfortably, and provide themselves with warm and substantial clothing, and, moreover, put to one side trifle, as they termed it, for a rainy day. The commons were then free, and the majority were possessors of a few mountain sheep, which were kept in the mountain pasture during the summer and autumn months, and the farmer for the harvest services of some days' labour furnished the winter's grazing. No butchers' meat was needed, as upon one neighbour killing a sheep, portions of the same were weighed and distributed amongst the surrounding residents of the labouring class, who in return paid back in kind, equal quantities. The wool of the sheep with what they purchased was carefully washed and carded by the female inmates, spun and sent to the local weavers, of whom I have known as many as fifteen to be in one parish. The webb, when returned from the weaver, was bleached as flannel garments; other portions being woven of a better texture was forwarded to the dyer, and converted into blue cloth, forming comfortable coats and jackets for Sunday wear for the head of the family and the lads. The labourers generally held on a mere nominal rental a small field or more, whereof the produce consisted of potatoes, a small plot of barley, and pasture sufficient to provide grazing to keep a small cow. A bed of flax was frequently produced, which, when steeped and dried, was heckled and cleaned by travelling hecklers. This, the finest quality of the flax, was spun generally of an evening by the mistress of the house, and the other female inmates; and also woven, bleached, and converted into towels, sheets, and so on. The stockings were all home manufactured, of what was called *loghtan* thread; this is, a mixture of the black or dark wool in equal proportion with the white, of

which mixture very good and serviceable clothing was provided for general wear. The women, also, by their domestic industry, frequently provided a goodly web of blue lindsay cloth, which formed neat, serviceable, and durable petticoats; and proud they were to have themselves dressed by their own industry. The durability, neatness, and warmth of the female as well as the male attire of the period was highly commendable, and economical.

HOSPITALITY AND BEGGARS

Hospitality at this period was very universally and bountifully adopted, to such an extent that any person, friend or stranger, who might happen to visit the houses of the inhabitants during meal-time, were invariably pressed (nay, almost forced) to participate. For the poor of the parish (which of natives were few) liberal provision was made, partly from the interest from bequests, left specially for such purpose, augmented by the generosity of their neighbours either in money or provisions. A certain class of itinerant professional beggars made periodical tours throughout the parochial districts, many of the farmers having beds specially prepared for their night's lodging; and the tramps were also provided liberally with supper und breakfast prior to resuming their peregrinations on the following morning. Those beggars consisted of two classes: one the pedestrian, and the other the "aristocratic," who were provided with ponies, the riders and ponies being both amply provided for. From these beggars the local news from one locality to the other was imparted to many of the listeners who generally assembled at night to glean the latest intelligence, at times highly embellished, from some of these itinerants, who, from long experience and desire to gratify their hearers, could highly garnish (especially in the Manx language) the subjects of their conversation. These men were at times very independent, especially the "aristocratic" beggar, an instance of which I was informed of by a farmer's wife, who stated that Tom Q—n, a well-known one at that times, payed her house a visit after dinner hour, when she informed him that such was the case, Tom naively replied. "Nevermind, Mrs S—, I am not particular—a little piece of ham and eggs will do." I assure you that begging in those days was so remunerative that I know myself several who had managed to accumulate money and property of considerable value, besides providing their children with respectable [8e] trades.

THE PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS

The education given in the parochial schools was by no mean of a low standard, in fact some of the pedagogues were very proficient in literary lore, and from the difficulties they encountered by parents failing to supply their children with proper class-books,—stationery, &c., they were notwithstanding, often very successful in teaching, and the knowledge thus instilled; was of a nature adapted to the future business intended to be pursued by their pupils, and that was in my opinion a more

useful and beneficial than that of the cramming system now adopted of subjects of little benefit to the learners, or for their future advancement in life.

RELIGION AND THE SABBATH

A pleasing feature of the time was their strict observance of the Sabbath religious devotions, and regularity of attendance at places of worship. On Saturday night every thing necessary for the morning was prepared. Scotia's bard's lines aptly describe the frequent farm house observances:—

The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face
 They round the ingle, form a circle wide;
 The sire turns o'er, with patriarchal grace
 The big ha' Bible, ance his father's pride;
 His bonnet reverently is laid aside,
 His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;
 Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide
 He wales a portion with judicious care,
 And 'Let us worship God,' he says with solemn air.

It was cheerful so observe old and young gathering from the most remote parts to attend the morning service at the parish church, those most distant being the first to assemble, and happily little religious intolerance then prevailed, for old and young who attended church would attend the Wesley Methodist or Primitive Methodist when the service did not occur at the church hours, devoutly imploring His [?] guide and direct their duties during the forthcoming week, and relying upon it that "they never sought in vain who sought the Lord aright."

TITHES AND THE TITHE COMMUTATION ACT

Forty years was the period when the abominable system of selling the tithes by auction was in operation, when the industrious farmer had to suffer for his industry whilst the idle and negligent neighbour escaped with a trifling payment as a solatium for his indolence. Happily the Tithe Commutation Act was promulgated; [the t the] imposed by a careful land valuation regulated by the last five years' average price of corn as published at Mark Lane; thus the improvident farmer was compelled to pay tithes whether he chose to till his soil or not. In those days the Nonconformist ministers went, the round of their circuit throughout the several parishes on foot, being hospitably entertained by the neighbours during their visitations, and a great was the good resulting from the pious and zealous ministrations by these new powerful and important connexions.—The lecturer, in conclusion, promised on a future occasion to deliver a lecture on "Sanitation, Past and Present, in the Island."

The Chairman moved a vote of thanks to Mr Cregeen for his interesting lecture, and called upon Mr R. Archer (draper) to second the motion.

Mr Archer, in doing so, said he was glad to have heard Mr Cregeen, and could endorse the accuracy of many of the incidents so truthfully narrated. He trusted Mr Cregeen would soon again favour them with another lecture.

The motion was heartily responded to.

“Old Manx Customs.” *Mona's Herald* 3 January 1885: 8c–e.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018

