

Manx Notes 485 (2020)

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“ON SOME THINGS MANX, NOW OBSOLETE”

(1895)

[4e] Before we altogether lose touch with the past, it would be worth while, perhaps, just to have a look at the life in our Island some 50 or even less years ago, and to see the vast stride that has been made during the last half century.

FURNITURE

We do not find here richly carved furniture such as is not uncommon in country places in England; probably the people were too poor, probably also there was a lack of skilled workmen; as it is quite an exception to come across any pretence whatever at carving or ornamentation; but we do find much that is rough and simple, also implements and appliances that are well worth observing. A few days ago I was told of an old oak settle, such as was formerly to be seen in the chimney nook, which was bought here for quite a trifling sum, but upon being taken to England it sold for £50; and I know of an old oak chest, perfectly good but plain, for which £5 is asked. Also, I recently saw a very good old high-backed chair, which was bought for 3s. And occasionally one comes across old chairs, the shape of which is quaint; only of carving there is next to none upon any of them.

THE SPINNING-WHEEL AND ITS WORK

But what to my mind seems more interesting, are those rough and primitive articles which were commonly in use here, in houses of the poorer sort. Take, for instance, the spinning wheel. What house was complete without that? What old woman happy? But now the once familiar “whirr” is seldom heard, and the wheel has, within the last five or six years, almost entirely disappeared. Some are thrown away and broken up, others repaired and smartened and sold as curios, and I should be afraid to say the number that has already left the Island. These wheels, when new, would cost about £1 each; and, like most old things, there was a wonderful variety in their shape and make. All Manx wheels had, as far as I know, the “quiggal” (distaff) attached to them, so that the same wheel could be used either for spinning flax or wool. Flax was commonly grown in the Island until some 50 years ago. After the plant had been cut it was left lying in a pond, or some piece of water, in order to moisten the stalk, and then sent to the Tuck Mill (“Myllin Walkee”), to have the skin, or bark, torn off; after which it was combed by a “heckle” (flax comb) into the condition of tow, when it was ready for spinning. A bundle of this would be tied to the top of the “quiggal” and spun upon the wheel. It was very much finer than wool, or “thread,” as the wool when spun was generally called. Sometimes the carding of flax would be done at home, the “heckles” used being exceedingly primitive, and I

have been fortunate in obtaining two of perfectly different shapes. A "swift" was required for winding the balls off into hanks, which then were ready for weaving into linen; and there are still several sheets and tablecloths in the Island which have been thus made. The spinning of wool for stockings or for cloth was somewhat similar, only the "quiggal" was removed from the wheel, the "rolls" being kept on the knee. After the wool from the sheep had been washed and picked, it was carded with carding combs ("theyyden olley"), and then, with a quick turn of the wrist, made into short rolls with the back of the combs, these rolls being very much shorter than those now bought at the mills. When two spools of wool had been spun they were put on the "clowan broachey" (reel bobbin or wheel spools); the spinning wheel then being turned the reverse way, twisted them together into strong "thread," ready for knitting into stockings, or for weaving in the hand loom into cloth or dress material. Formerly most parishes had one or more of these hand-looms, but now they are almost done away with, the mills having taken their place. If the "thread" was required in hanks, as it would be for making cloth, a "crosch lane" (hand cross) would be used; this "crosch lane" was made of wood, the shape being something similar to an anchor. The thread was put round it, and thus formed into hanks. If hanks again were required in balls, there was the "chrown thross" (winding blade) for that purpose; in shape it was somewhat like a windmill, and, fixed in a wooden stand, revolved in something the same manner. There were two kinds, one was rather intricate, and after 60 revolutions it made a little "clie," showing by that that a certain quantity of wool was wound, and then it would start afresh; I have been fortunate in securing one of these.

CANDLESTICKS

Other very interesting, and indeed somewhat artistic, articles are the old iron-wrought candlesticks, such as the "kainleye shuin" or rush candlestick, in the execution of which considerable taste and skill were shown, and so far I have not seen two of a similar pattern. Some of these candlesticks were intended for holding a rush light only, some were for both rush and dip, while others again were meant only for the dip, and I have some of all kinds. Sometimes they would be fixed in a block of roughly cut wood, and sometimes they were suspended by a long iron rod from the ceiling, or "latts," of a room; of this latter sort I have so far not even seen, much less been able to obtain, a single specimen, though I am told that they were common enough not long ago. But the fact is that, with most of these old things, when they ceased to be used they ceased to be cared for, so were thrown aside, and, finding their way into old iron heaps, have been destroyed. I also have one curious old spiral iron candlestick, a description and account of which was given by me last year in "Some Antiquarian Notes in the Parish of Michael," and I am inclined to agree with Mr H.S. Cowper, F.S.A., in his exceedingly interesting paper on "The Domestic Candlesticks of Iron," that this kind was probably in use in the better sort of houses,

while the “hainleyr,” which I have just described, was in use in the poorer. It is not so many years since the rush-light was burnt in the Island; certainly I have myself seen it within 40 years, and I well remember that on that occasion it was stuck in a glass bottle, apparently there being no better candlestick, the light it gave being about equal to that of a modern wax match. There also was what was called the “slut candle.” This consisted of a long piece of twisted rag, dipped in grease, which, being placed between the nippers of the rush candlestick, slowly burned away, and thus, no doubt, earned its name. It must have been somewhat troublesome, as one had to be continually pulling up the rag until the whole was consumed. The tinder box certainly was used here, but now they are very hard to get, and I have only seen one of them, and cannot yet hear of another.

JOUGH

A home-brewed beer of herbs, called “jough,” was formerly made in many of the farm houses, it was said to be an excellent and, doubtless, a perfectly harmless drink. The ingredients were put into a deep, narrow earthenware crock, or “crockan,” a large wooden plug filled up the top, and the beer was drawn off by a smaller one near the bottom, called the “thahhane pluggane.” These “crockans” differed very much in shape and in size, but they all were tall and narrow, not at all like the “bithag” or buttermilk crock, and they would hold some two or three gallons. It is worth noticing, in passing, how this drink has died out; and also how the breweries in the villages, which seem at one time to have been very common, have now ceased to exist. I cannot help thinking that it is a great deal due to the cheap introduction of tea; and I should doubt whether there is any place in the British Isles where such a quantity of tea is consumed by the working man and his family as is done in the Isle of Man. I believe they frequently take it, with their meals, three times a day.

BUTTER BOXES

The round wooden butter box which the fishermen used to take with them to “the herrings” (as going out fishing for that fish was called) is interesting. It would hold a pound of butter, and the owner’s initials were often roughly cut on the top of the lid with a knife. This and some “cake” (flat cakes, baked on the “griddle,” and made of flour or meal) was all they would take with them, just wrapped up together in a red pocket-handkerchief, the rest of their fare consisting of the herrings which they caught.

SPOONS

The spoons which were used, and still are in some of the very old-fashioned houses, are curious; these are made of lead, of the old English fiddle shape pattern, and exceedingly heavy and durable. I have seen, and should much like to procure, the

bronze mould in which these spoons are made, or “run,” as the term here is. The man who now owns it makes a charge of a halfpenny a spoon for “running” them. The old spoon being melted down in a cresset, the molten lead was poured into the mould at a hole in the end; when cool, the mould was opened down the centre, and out came the new spoon, looking as bright and smart almost as silver. Previous to pouring in the lead, and to prevent its adhering, the inside of the mould was smoked in the wick of a tallow candle, one smoking being sufficient for six spoons. I have only seen these spoons in one size, what is known as the dessert spoon size; probably this was most useful for porridge and Manx broth, true staple dishes; tea being comparatively a modern institution. Bone spoons do not seem to have been popular in the Island, which is curious, and I have not seen any old ones such as are common in Scotland for eating porridge.

MEASUREMENTS

Those must have been good old days when the Manx yard contained $37\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the Manx shilling 13 pence, but now we no longer revel in such abundance. Some of the old wooden yard measures still exist, chiefly among the country weavers, but I expect that the majority had the superfluous $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches cut off when it was no longer necessary. In some of the little country shops no measure at all was used, and I can well remember buying a yard of elastic, and the woman who sold it to me measuring it off on her hand, eight finger lengths making a yard. All work done at that time, and even later, was marked down by “tally,” a notch being cut in a piece of stick for each day’s work, and these in the end added up. I believe in a Ramsey brewery it was a common thing to use a “tally” until some seven or eight years ago.

CARRANES

The “carranes” or shoes worn by the Manx people, must not be overlooked. They were in use as recently as 50 odd years ago, and most difficult they were to walk in (so I am told) on a wet or slippery day, there being no heel or thick sole to give a grip. There were two kinds of “carranes,” these made of tanned leather, and those, which were more primitive, made of undressed hide. The hide of a heifer would make about four pairs. The smooth side was worn next the foot. They were turned up all round and laced at the back of the heel with a piece of hide. It is almost impossible now to obtain an old pair of these “carranes.” Clogs never appear to have been popular with the Manx people; almost the only person I can remember to have seen wearing them was a beggar man, and he went by the name of “Tommy the Clogs.”

PEAT

When peat was commonly burnt as fuel, there was a peculiarly long and narrow spade used for digging it into the shape most convenient for burning; now that it is rarely dug, a common spade serves the purpose, the sod of peat being afterwards made into shape with the hands. Mountain peat was always considered superior to curragh peat, being less full of sulphur, and the smell of it when burning less strong; at the same time, there is very good peat to be had in the Sulby curraghs. Judging by an article in the Nineteenth Century for December last, there is a good time coming for peat, it being now very successfully used as fuel both in steamboats and railway engines, and is preferred to coal, being freer from cinders and smoke. Peat moss is also in great request for bedding for animals, and peat is a good antiseptic.

FARM IMPLEMENTS

Of farm implements [4f] there seems not much to be said, but there is one which has gone entirely out of use, and that is the push-plough, of which a specimen may be seen in the museum in Castle Rushen, the only existing one that I know of in the Island. This plough was used for breaking up hard ground, preparatory to ploughing it under, much in the same way as the grubber does at the present time, but of course the latter does a great deal more work in a given time, and is altogether an improvement on the old push-plough. With the flail many of us will be well familiar, as it was commonly used some 10 or 12 years ago in country districts, and the “thud,” “thud,” no doubt we can some of us recall. The flail was not so easy an implement to use, as we perhaps might imagine, and many a hard knock has a man given himself when swinging it backwards and forwards. It was usual for two men, or women, to work together, each with a flail, standing opposite each other, and having a sheaf of corn spread out before them on the floor; the floor in that spot was made particularly strong and thick, as can still be seen in some old barns to this day. They alternately hit the stalk of the corn, thus loosening the grain, which fell out upon the floor. Winnowing was done in a neat primitive manner with a “dollan-bennalt.” Being filled with grain, gathered from the floor, it was carried, either to an open door, if there was draught enough, or out into a field, a sack, or some such thing, being spread beneath. The dollan was gently moved back wards and forwards, so that the draught or wind might blow the chaff away, and leave only the grain behind. I have not so far been able to learn that the “dollan” ever was used in England, but of course it may have been, as is most other things there seems to have been a similarity.

THE FARMHOUSE

There was also the “peick,” which was very much like the “dollan,” but smaller and deeper; it was used for holding “bonnag,” or “cakes,” or meal, and was generally kept upon the “latts,” in the kitchen. One of the great features in a Manx cottage was the

“dresser,” containing, as it did, all the household crockery, and very well it looked; unfortunately now it is not in much favour with the rising generation, so is very fast disappearing. In themselves the “dressers” were only common deal, either plain or painted. I have never seen anything better here; but amongst the crockery there were occasionally good things to be found, and I have had some queer old jugs given me, especially one, which is a perfect spode, without flaw or crack. The number of basins was quite extraordinary, they generally were the kind with large red roses. A very old and curious one was given to me, more curious than beautiful perhaps, the flowers upon it being distinctly painted with the point of the finger. There are any amount of genuine old willow pattern plates and dishes to be found in these “dressers,” and a variety of curious old earthenware mugs, cups, &c., which naturally the old people value a good deal. I must not forget to allude to the “chiss,” or “press” (large wooden chest) which was such an important feature in the old houses; as a rule, they are made of common deal, but occasionally, as I said at the beginning of this paper, a plain or slightly ornamented oak one is to be found, and I believe there is one in Andreas of the 16th century.

As far as I know, I have now touched upon the chief and principle obsolete articles; of course, there was the “quern,” but that is, I think, going further back.

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