

Manx Notes 486 (2020)

“MANX ‘PUBS’ IN THE OLD DAYS”

(1898)

The general impression prevails in the Isle of Man, and is eagerly cultivated by the more enthusiastic followers of the cold water religion, that there has been a tremendous increase of licences in these latter days, that we are a decadent race teetotally, and that we have fallen from the state of innocence in which our forefathers luxuriated. These notions, it is to be feared, have little foundation in fact. As far as we can learn from the tales of old inhabitants, we are “not in it” with our forbears: their little finger was thicker than the modern Manxman’s waist. In those days, glasses were a rarity, pints the rule, and good, honest “jough” was the drink of the people.

To aliens, it may be necessary to explain that “jough” was beer, brewed from malt and hops; not clear, sparkling beer like we drink now, if we can get it, but a liquid of a generous muddiness, which was food as well as drink, yet pleasant and palatable withal. This “jough” was sold, not only at the “pubs,” but was brewed on the large farms, and was one of the elements that went to build up the sturdy frame of yeoman and labourer. The writer has never tried the potation in sufficient quantity to test its alcoholic strength; but is assured that, while it was as strong really as our present beer—it was less “heady”—it was innocent of harmful chemicals, and a man could rise in the morning after his libations as fresh as a daisy.

A word or two about the “pubs” of the old days may be interesting. The population was more evenly scattered then than now. There were fewer people in the towns, which were rather depressing in their social tone, and to see life one had to go to the country. There being no trains, all the traffic of men and horses went by road. The way-side “pub,” instead of being a “quantite negligeeable,” loomed largely in the humble lives of the peasantry. Instead of being deserted, the unpretentious little “pub,” bright with whitewash without, deeply shady within, was the scene of gossip and laughter hour by hour, and day by day. The long pilgrimage—it may be from Kirk “Miggall” to Douglas—was cheered by a passing call at one or other of these hostelryes—and, as we shall presently see, there was no dearth of them. “Jough” was the great drink, and, if any spirit was taken, it was “rum.” Until a very recent period the sale of whiskey was forbidden, but you could get it for all that—“mountain dew” in the fullest sense of the word, generally distilled clandestinely in some remote gully in the hills. At Montpellier, in Druidale; on Clay Head; and at the back of Park View, on the Castletown Road, there have been illicit stills, as well as at other places in fair Mona’s Isle. But “jough,” as we have said, was the Manxman’s drink, which he chose in preference to others nine times out of ten. The price was a penny farthing a pint. Farthings were in use then, but if you had no farthing, you drank two pints for 2½d, either solus or with the assistance of a friend.

On all the high roads, between 40 and 50 years ago, the public-houses were legion. Let us take a walk along the road to Castletown and investigate. First of all you come to the “Ivy Cottage,” which was just beyond the top gates to the Nunnery. There was another “pub” at Kewaugue, of course, and a third on Richmond Hill. There was a fourth at the Clanagh, the other side of Mount Murray, and the next was the “Brown Cow,” called in the old days the Half-way House. The sixth hostelry (Corlett the Buffalo’s) occurred where the first railway crossing now is, and the seventh was the “Sunny Arbour,” where the wayfarer would sun himself just before reaching Ballasalla. In this old-fashioned village there was a public-house where the White Stone Inn now stands, and two more in the old market place in the centre of the village. Going down towards Castletown, there was “Harry the Cadger’s,” a few doors this side of the Creggans; and how many in Castletown itself one hesitates to say. Following the Malew road from Ballasalla, there was an inn at the Cross-four-ways; a public-house stood at this end of Ballabeg and another at the further end: still another at King Orry, to the south of Arbory Church, and, again, another at the Level. There was Turnbull’s at the Four Roads, and in Port St Mary—then the principal place in Rushen—there were three or four licensed houses, and in Port Erin two. Coming from Castletown by the Shore road, there was a “pub” at the Red Gap, and there was the Shore Hotel at Strand Hall. So it will be seen that if a man travelled the south road, and was thirsty, he had no one to blame but himself.

The Peel Road was almost as liberally supplied. Commencing at Douglas, we had, in a quick kaleidoscopic series, the Brown Bobby, at the top of Lazy Hill; the Blue Dogs, near Belle Vue; and the Quarter Bridge Inn. Then there was Lawson’s at Kirk Braddan, and two houses at the Union Mills. At Glenvine there was Kay’s public-house: the old Half-way House, where the coach to Peel used to stop for an elastic ten minutes; and Kay the Highlander’s. The next oasis was the Thorn Bush, after which came Ballacraigne Hotel, two “pubs” at St John’s (the Tynwald Inn and another on the hither side of it), and another inn was convenient to the pin-pound, so that a man, on finding his horse in the pin-pound, could celebrate the occasion fittingly. There was also one, the writer believes, at the brickworks, and then there were no more till you got to Peel, where they were as thick as mushrooms.

It would be tedious, perhaps, to any but enthusiasts, to go through the list of public-houses on the other roads of the Island. The annals of some of these houses would fill a newspaper with stirring incidents, but most of them are forgotten. Most of the wayside houses were conducted in a very decent fashion, but a few were not. There was one place where certainly on more than one occasion the honest “jough” had been drugged, and the customer had not only his internal machinery deranged, but his pockets picked. Two young man-servants went into a certain public-house, now defunct, which stood not a hundred miles from Douglas, and, after drinking a pint each, they were so “moithered” that when they got outside, they did not know whether they were going home or towards the town. Another pint of mixture would

probably have rendered it impossible for them to proceed in either direction. As it was, they lay in a stupor on a hedgeside, until the dawn began to break. In those days, horse and sheep stealing-especially the latter-were in great vogue in the Island, and poaching was a very active industry. At the present time, when there are only 13 males in the Isle of Man Gaol and not a single female, despite the increased population, we may congratulate ourselves that the reign of innocence, instead of closing, is just beginning in the fair land of Mona.

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A piece found as ever by chance and which contains fascinating detail.

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