

Manx Notes 545 (2021)

LESLIE QUIRK
“OLD DAYS IN THE ISLE OF MAN”
(1953)

From a conversation in Gaelic between Leslie Quirk, of Peel, and an old lady in the North of the Island, Mrs Kneale of Ballagarrett, Kirk Bride, a short time before she died.

I heard this story from my grandfather, and he got it from his father, that in the year 1800 times were very hard for the bulk of the Manx peasants; there was very little money going, and men were working hard for six pence a day. Their food was poor and consisted chiefly of potatoes, herrings and peas, with milk and a little butter from the one cow which every household kept, along with a sheep or two which provided wool from which they spun and wove their own clothing. Shoes were a luxury, and the children usually went bare-legged and bare-footed to school. There was plenty of fish, cod and skate, and the surplus was split, salted and dried for winter use. Sometimes a sheep was killed and the carcass salted and pickled in a tub.

Coal was almost unknown, and the people cut gorse, heather, and ling to use as fuel, and of course they went to the mountains to cut peat, dried it in the summer months, then brought home for winter fuel, as is done in Ireland today.

Baking was done at home on the griddle and cooking in the pot hole hung on the *slouree*. They would gather rushes, dry them and peel them and the peeled rushes placed in oil in a scallop shell had to serve as a light for the poorest people, though those who could afford it used the pith of a rush and the fat of a goat, sheep, or pig to make their own candles.

Harvesting was done with the sickle and a little later, with the scythe, which were sharpened or wetted with oil and sand on a *striggyl* or hardwood stick. Those women who could find the time eked out the meagre income by doing sewing at home, and were paid for boys shirts, six pence to ten pence each, and a shilling for a man's. For shirts for special occasions, weddings, etc., they earned one and six.

Leslie Quirk, “Old Days in the Isle of Man.” *Irisleabhar ceilteach* 2.1 (1953): 22.

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Leslie Quirk (1914–2004) was at time a collector for the Manx Folk Life Survey and this short piece here comes out of that work.

STEPHEN MILLER RBV

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