

Old Christmas Days in England Some Customs of the Past

"England was merry England when Old Christmas brought his sports again. 'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale. 'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale; A Christmas gambol oft would cheer The poor man's heart through half the year."

While the celebration of Christmas has largely become a stereotyped national holiday at which everybody eats turkey and plum pudding and sends cards with the season's greeting, there still linger in ancient townships and re-

mote hamlets customs which survive from the days when each county had its separate dialect and usages.

Hoary and classic Oxford has preserved in its original form the Boar's Head Feast, an old Christmas custom of the northern counties which is celebrated at Queen's the college founded by Roger de Eglesfield, rector of Brough, in Westmoreland, in 1340, for the benefit of scholars from Cumberland and Westmoreland.

Let us, in imagination, enter the old oak-panelled Hall of Queen's College on Christmas after-land. A huge fire blazes on the

hearth, and casts a cheerful glow over the holly-decked walls and the crowd of townfolk, who, according to established rule, are admitted to see the celebration. All eyes are fixed on the door, and there is a flutter of expectancy when the blast of the trumpet is heard which heralds the approach of the procession. First come the Provost and the Fellows in their black gowns, and then the bearer of the feast follows, holding aloft on a great silver dish the boar's head gaily decked with tiny banners and crowned with garlands of bay and rosemary. The Chaplain and the choir boys follow, chanting the old carol, beginning:

"The boar's head in hand bear I, Bedecked with bays and rosemary;

And I pray you my masters be merry,
Quot estis in convivio
Caput apri defero
Reddens laudes Domino."

On moves the stately procession to the rhythmic sound of the carol, the chorus.

"Caput apri defero
Reddens laudes Domino."

swelling at the end of each verse, until the hightable at the further end of the Hall is reached, where the Boar's head is set down amidst a thrill of admiration. The Provost distributes the decorations amongst the townspeople, who now withdraw, while the Dons and Fellows sit down to dine. Round goes the old wassail bowl, and the wine tankard, with the useful whistle in the handle, and the great Black Jack, and the feast proceeds as it has done these 500 years since it was instituted, and as the legend goes, in honor of a scholar of "Queen's" who killed a wild boar in the woods by thrusting his Aristotle down its throat as he cried "Accipe! Graecum." However, the boar's head was honored long before the advent of this valiant scholar, and is a relic of a Scandinavian rite which took firm root amongst our Saxon forefathers. In the old halls and manor houses of the northern counties was the Boar's Head Feast observed in days of yore, and the custom preserved at Oxford has found followers in modern times in mansions where the owners, like Squire Bracebridge, recall its celebration in the noble old college hall of their youth.

Oxford has also kept alive the ancient carol service. This takes place on Christmas Eve in Mag-

dalen College. At eight o'clock the hall presents a gay and festive appearance, with the burning logs and Christmas decorations. At the Fellows' high table at the one end of the hall supper is laid for the choir boys, who are the chief guests of the evening, and there is a giant Christmas tree, sparkling with gold and silver bells, and lighted with colored tapers. Visitors from the town are admitted to view the scene, and there is always a good gathering in the ladies' gallery. At the appointed hour the President, choir-master, organist, and choristers procession into the hall, and open the ceremony with selections from the "Messiah." Then the boys sit down to supper. Frumety, the time-honored dish of Yorkshire at Christmas time, is passed round in silver tureens, after which the banquet proceeds with more substantial and, it must be admitted, more popular dishes. At the conclusion of supper the tree is illuminated, and the choristers, standing round, sing "Many a Carol, Old and Sainly." The carol singing continues until a little before twelve o'clock, when the Adeste Fidelis is rendered in Latin and followed by some moments of profound silence. Then the chimes which tell the hour that ushers in the Christmas morn break the stillness as the bells clang out a merry peal from Magdalen Tower. The choristers raise the triumphant notes of the Gloria in Excelsis and as it ceases one hears "A Merry Christmas, Sir," and the President, raising the old silver tankard to his lips, gives the time-honored toast. There is no Master of the Revels or Lord of Misrule among the stately Dons, still, the choir boys have a merry time and depart, bearing gifts from the Christmas tree, while the company, who, in accordance with the old tradition that all comers shall be freely entertained, having partaken of mince pies, sandwiches, and hot negus wend their way through the stately quadrangle back into twentieth century life. This festival was instituted for the choir boys many years ago by a patron of the college who desired to promote the singing of carols.

One may mention, in passing, the ancient candle socket preserved in the buttery of St. John's College, Oxford, which was formerly used to burn the Christmas candle on the high table during the twelve nights of the festival, and was also used at the College Sealings. It is of stone, carved

and painted and ornamented with the figure of the Holy Lamb. It is about twelve inches high and will hold a large two-inch candle. This is a relic of the times when each householder lighted his candles from the great church candle. In many country places the custom of Christmas candles is still observed along with the burning of the yule log. At the ancient village of Barley, in Hertfordshire, there is a tract of land called "Plough Sandles," the rent of which went to furnish the candles which were kept burning before the high altar in pre-Reformation times, from Christmas Eve until Twelfth Day. After that came Plough Monday when the rustics returned to work.

A modern revival of the Mummers, or old Christmas play, formerly general throughout the country, takes place in Warwickshire, where the spell of "Will of Stratford" keeps the play-acting spirit alive. Rugby, and the neighboring village of Newbold, are the scenes of the revived Mummers' plays, in which the time-honored fight between St. George and the Turkish Knight takes place, with the attendant drolleries of Dr. Brown, and other characters. Mysterious minstrels, I am told, also parade the town of Rugby at Christmas and give much pleasure to the people. In many parts of Warwickshire, especially in the houses of the gentry, the ancient mumming has been revived of late and exhibitions of masks and mummers are still occasionally seen in the farm kitchens.

Indeed, Shakespeare's "Greenwood" is rich in old-time customs. The festivities begin on December 21st, St. Thomas's Day, when the children go a-Thomasing round the hamlets and villages begging gifts for Christmas, and often furthering their claims by singing old carols, such as

"Little cock-robin sat on a wall—
We wish you a merry Christmas
And a great snow ball."

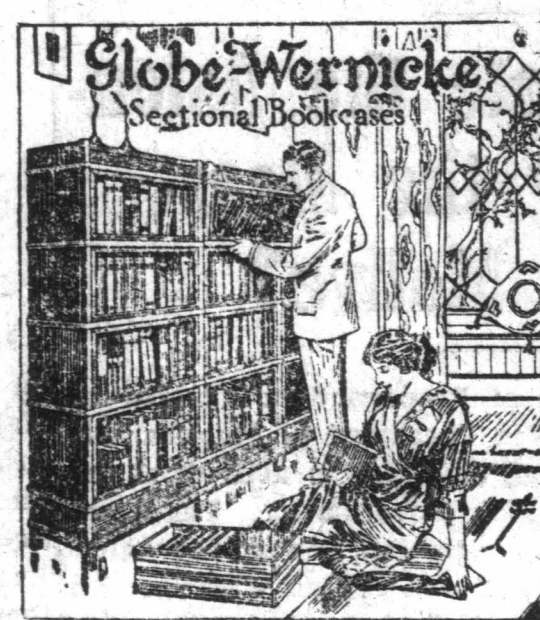
The yule-log is still dragged in procession from the woods to stand in the inglenook until the auspicious eve, and the great melon or marrow decked with ribbons hangs from the rafters of the farm house parlor ripening ready for the festival. On Christmas Eve it is prepared and stuffed ready for the table. The stuffed chine of pork is another dish which the Warwickshire housewife prepares for the season, as also the stewed crab apples, which live

in Shakespeare's verse:

"When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl."

The old people set great store by this dish and offer it to their friends in the winter evenings when Christmas approaches and on Christmas morning elder wine is drunk in the rustic households with unfailing regularity, a custom which Squire Cass observed in "Silas Marner."

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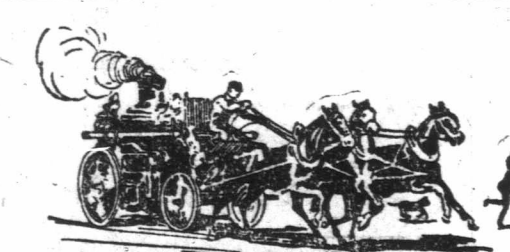
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