The Shrew Ash in Richmond Park

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THE SHREW ASH IN RICHMOND PARK.

BY MARGARET C. FFENNELL.

[The photographs, of which the following paper is an explanation, were (with some others referred to in the footnote) presented to the Society by Miss Ffennell, and exhibited on her behalf at the meeting of February 20th, 1895. As it seemed desirable to preserve a record of the facts relating to the Richmond ash, so far as they are known, she has added to the Society's debt to her by acceding to the Editor's request to set them down here.]

IN offering the following note to accompany the three illustrations of this interesting relic of folk-belief, I would like to start by saying that the Shrew Ash in Richmond Park is not a "mere sucker" springing from the old roots, but a living fragment of the ancient tree itself. The "Sheen Tree," as it is sometimes called, does not only mark the spot where once the famous ash grew, but preserves to this day a still growing portion of the actual part of the trunk where the ritual was performed while the ash remained entire.¹ I wish to emphasise this, as it has been denied once at a meeting of our Society and frequently elsewhere. The identity of the present fragment will, I think, be clearly demonstrated to anyone who compares the old illustrations of 1856 and the sketch of 1860, referred to in the note at foot of the page, either with the tree itself, the most satisfactory mode of comparison, or with the illustrations of 1891. A glance at the latter will show how unmistakably the form of the lower branches in their modern condition agrees with

¹ See Plate IV., on left-hand side, the "witch-bar" as it appeared in 1856, and Plates V. and VI. (taken 1891), on left-hand side, showing where one end of the bar was attached to the tree now standing; the place of attachment is indicated by the rounded projection something less than half-way up the old trunk. The complete series of illustrations, including one giving a full view of the tree, with top branches and "witch-bar," taken from a sketch of an engraving made in 1859 or 1860, and four other views of the tree in 1891, may be seen in the Society's Museum collection of various photographs connected with folklore subjects.

PLATE IV.

THE SHREW ASH IN 1856.

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the photograph of 1856 and the sketch of 1860. The late Sir Richard Owen, who was my informant about all that concerns the folklore connected with the Richmond tree, at once perceived this, and pointed it out to me when I showed him the series of photographs of the tree from six different points of view. These photographs, two of which are given in Plates V. and VI., were taken by me in September, 1891, for the purpose of exhibiting some of them at the Folklore Congress of that year. The learned Professor told me it had more than once been said to him that the tree was a sucker or offshoot from the roots and not a part of the original ash. He could not, he said, be dogmatic upon the subject himself, as he was ignorant about vegetable growth, so had to bow to superior knowledge; but the tree—"my dear old tree," as he always called it—had certainly never been from under his eyes since 1852, when he came into residence at Sheen Lodge. At first, and for many years after, it was entire, supporting a few good branches on a noble base. The larger part of it fell or was blown down in 1875, leaving what still remains, which to his personal knowledge had stood there ever since. These are, as nearly as I can recall them from memory, Sir Richard Owen's own words. How completely he had the tree under his daily observation will be seen by Plate V., which gives the ash in front and Sheen Lodge in the background.

A few days before writing these notes I called on Mr. Sawyer, the superintendent of Richmond Park, who has always lived in the park, his father having held the post he now holds. Naturally Mr. Sawyer knows a great deal about the trees under his care. He remembers the Shrew Ash when it was entire as in Plate IV., and has a lively recollection of one occasion when a cow somehow thrust her head into the fissure, and in her struggles to remove it caught her horns over the bar, and by it was firmly held until he happened to come up and with some difficulty released her. Mr. Sawyer confirms all that has been said

above with regard to the identity of the tree still living, as undoubtedly no mere offshoot or sucker, but a part of the trunk of the old ash.

The ash has benefited physically by the storm that destroyed the largest part of it, and is now in a condition of comparative rejuvenescence. By a natural process known to every student of tree-life and to anyone conversant with practical forestry, the removal of the greater part—in this case more than two-thirds of its bulk—causes a greater amount of food to be available, frequently resulting in the throwing up of many suckers, which, clustering round the parent stem, more or less swiftly tend to hasten its decay. Happily in this instance the tree has utilised the larger store of nutriment, not for the growth of the more commonplace suckers, but for its own preservation. The trunk having drawn up into it the greater abundance of annually rising sap, has employed that sap by circulating it through the reduced number of branches to be fed; thus arresting decay and enabling the sturdy old fragment to support the graceful crown of leafage displayed in Plate V. In Plate VI. may be seen how this piece of vegetable economy has been accomplished. At the right-hand side is shown the conduit, or stem-like root, built up and developed by the ash out of its own tissues since 1875, and now acting as chief channel for the augmented flow of sap through the tree. Commencing at the top of the trunk where the main bough slopes off, the work while under construction by slow stages of growth, as is usual in vegetable engineering, was probably hidden away under cover; but the cover has been thrown off for years, and in its robust and forceful expansion the conduit has torn away a strip of bark from the trunk and stands out in the middle of its course, to disappear again into the body of the tree lower down. In fine, the Shrew Ash as shown in the plates presents a twofold study of remarkable interest. On the right hand, or, as I shall call it, the natural history side, it

PLATE V.

THE SHREW ASH IN 1891, WITH SHEEN LODGE IN THE DISTANCE.

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tells us how this patriarch among Richmond trees, with a traditional history going back more than 300 years,¹ has found it possible to renew its life by its own natural well-directed effort; while on the left hand, or folklore side, that renewed life has preserved that most interesting part of the trunk where the all-but-forgotten ritual is known to have been performed in the last half of the present century. The interest, I think, is much enhanced by the fact that the tree grows within an afternoon's walk from London. In such a position we are not likely to find another such relic of the past.

The young or sapling ash is the tree usually known as the one employed in folk-belief for the cure of infantine ailments, the shrew ash being potent for the cure of cattle, horses, sheep, &c. Possibly, if we knew more about them, there were as many modifications, or shall I say sects, among English Christian believers in the power of the ash as there are among Burmese Buddhist believers in the power of the nats. However that may be, the mothers who brought their children to the Richmond tree appear to have recognised curative powers in the combination of animal, vegetable, and sun-worship, more or less widely connected with ash-trees in general, and here evoked through the mediation of a "shrew-mother," "priestess," or "witch." The general question I am not discussing. I shall leave that to those more competent to deal with the subject.

That any definite remembrance of the old ritual contained in these notes has been preserved we owe, so far as I am aware, to the circumstance that Professor Owen, then in the zenith of his fame, took up his residence at Sheen Lodge in 1852. The Shrew Ash directly opposite his windows soon became an object of interest to him. Added to this, the Pro-

¹ "The keepers' tradition [is] that Good Queen Bess had lurked under its shade to shoot the deer as they were driven past." (Letter from Sir Richard Owen, June, 1888.)

fessor was a very early riser, often wandering out over the park before sunrise. I wrote to him about the tree in 1888. In his reply, and in subsequent conversations, he told me that either the year he came to live in the park or the year after, he could not say which, he first encountered early in the morning a young mother with a sick child accompanied by "an old dame," "a shrew-mother," or, as he generally called her, a "witch-mother." They were going straight for the tree; but when they saw him, they turned off in quite another direction till they supposed he was out of sight. He, however, struck by their sudden avoidance of him, watched them from a distance, saw them return to the tree, where they remained some little time, as if busily engaged with it; then they went away. He was too far off to hear anything said, but heard the sound of voices in unison on other occasions. He heard afterwards from the keeper of Sheen Gate named Stacey (long since dead) that mothers with "bewitched" infants, or with young children afflicted with whooping cough, decline, and other ailments, often came, sometimes from long distances, to this tree. It was necessary that they should arrive before sunrise. There is a right of way across the park from Sheen Gate to Kingston Gate; the park, therefore, was open at all hours. On some occasions on their way to the tree doggerel verses would be sung or muttered by one or both women according to the shrew-mother's directions. One line has been preserved in Sir Richard Owen's letter of 1888:

"The babe passed nine times round that bar will never be bewitched."

The bar, generally called by Sir Richard Owen the "witch-bar," has been alluded to already. The important part of the ritual was performed at the tree. The "shrew-mother" took the child from its mother, and giving directions to the parent according to the malady under treatment, passed the child slowly under and over the bar nine times, muttering charms or singing verses as the case

PLATE VI.

THE SHREW ASH IN 1891, SHOWING THE CONDUIT.

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might require. On one occasion Sir Richard Owen, who said he had learned it from the keeper, who knew them all, repeated two or three lines of doggerel used when rotating the child over the bar, but I did not write them down, and cannot remember either sense or words. The passing of the child round the bar used to be timed to meet the rising sun. Whether only one or both women uttered the charm does not appear, but the failure to use the proper word at the exact moment when the first ray of sunrise broke over the horizon was given as the cause whenever the ash, with the intervention of the "shrew-mother," did not effect a cure. Many children were said to be cured at the tree. The greatest secrecy was always observed when visiting it. This was respected by Sir Richard Owen, who, whenever he saw a group advancing towards it, moved away, and was always anxious they should not be disturbed. He could not tell me in what year he last saw a group approach the tree to seek its aid. He could only say he had seen them often, and thought they continued to come for many years.¹

LIST OF PLATES.

PLATE IV.—The Shrew Ash, Richmond Park, from a photograph taken in 1856 by Dr. Arthur Farr, Physician to the Princess of Wales. The original photograph was lent by Sir Richard Owen, K.C.B., F.R.S., for exhibition at the Folklore Congress of 1891.

PLATE V.—Fragment of the Shrew Ash left by the Storm of 1875, from a photograph taken in September, 1891, and exhibited at the Folklore Congress

¹ A writer in the *Mid Surrey Times* for 1874 says the ash in Richmond Park was at that time "still used and believed in." See *History and Antiquities of Richmond, Petersham, Ham, &c.*, by E. Beresford Chancellor (1894). Mrs. S. C. Hall, in *The Book of the Thames* (1859), gives in her well-known decorated manner an account of the Shrew Ash, having apparently obtained her main facts with regard to the Richmond tree from Sir Richard Owen.

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of that year. Sheen Lodge is seen in the distance. Although not taken from exactly the same standing point as Plate IV., the identity of the lower projecting elbow-like bough, after thirty-five years of growth, with the left-hand side bough of the tree in 1856, is pretty well shown by this view.

PLATE VI.—The Shrew Ash, from a photograph taken in September, 1891, and exhibited at the Folklore Congress of that year. This view gives prominence to the rounded projection on the left-hand side, where one end of the "witch-bar" was attached to the tree, and also displays on the right-hand side the contrivance or conduit set up by the ash in its old age for conveyance of sap, which has preserved the vitality of the tree to the present day.