

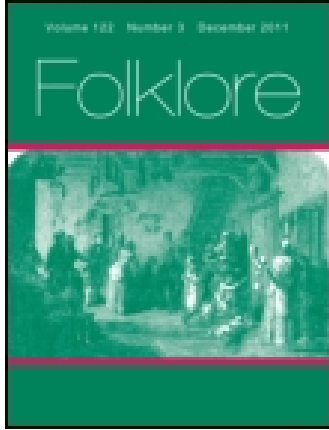
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Folk-Lore in Wills

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FOLK-LORE IN WILLS.

NOTES FROM WEST KENT.

THOSE members of this Society who may have occasion to consult the wills at Somerset House or in the various District Probate Registries will doubtless have observed how full of local allusion many of these documents are ; not only bequests to every saint's light in the church, but sometimes each field the testator owned is duly bequeathed by name. I take this opportunity of suggesting that, when opportunity offers, special note should be made of any reference to local customs. The harvest will not be a very full one, but such notes, when they do occur, will always be of interest, and may be of considerable value in tracing the continuity of a custom in a given district. I have lately been paying some attention to the wills of persons formerly resident in West Kent, and proved in the Consistory Court of Rochester, the records of which begin in 1440. The earlier wills are, of course, in Latin, but about 1480 English is more general, and the wills are not always in a stiff, legal mold, but frequently bear evidence of having been set down from the actual words used by the testators.

From them I have noted the following bequests for the keeping up of Ales :—

Stephen Jacobe, of St. Wereburge in Hoo, in his will, dated 18th August 1480 [Book III, fo. 265], says :

“ Also I will that myne heirs shall haue v yerdis of land lieing in longefeld and v yerdis of land in pettefild upon this condicon folowyng that thes shall make or doo make yerly a yefale on Trinite Eve and on the Trinite Sondaye and beryng chargis yerly v buschell of wethe and 1 seue of malt and xij*℥*. in chese too

distribut at my place in the worship of the Trinite, and on euery Trinite Sondaie yerly myne heris to offer j masse peny in the worship of the Trinite. And in case be that myne heirs refuse to make that said yefale and the chargis aforesaid then the for said yefale is to be sold by my feffors and with the money therof resceyvid be disposid to the reparacon of the Trinite Yle by the discrecon of my feffors."

They were apparently rich in Yeuales, or Giveales, in Hoo, for in 1528 Thomas Bedell has the following bequest in his will [Book VIII, fo. 193^b]:

"Also Crystyan my wiff to haue the howse callid the Yevall howse at Grenhill w^t all the lands thereto belonging, suffereng the wardaynes and bredryen of the Yevall off Saynt Warborows to haue y^e liberte there in w^t frey goyng and fre comyng to occupye in the said howse xiiij days a fore Seynt Warborow day [either 3rd Feb. or 21st June] and xiiij days after, to holde there in y^e yevall as hit haith been used and customed in tymes past, w^t owt any interrupcion, and after the decess off y^e said Crystian the said howse called y^e yevall house w^t y^e londez holye remayne vnto Jone my doughter and to suffer the wardaynes and bredren a fore-seid to haue fre liberte in y^e same as a for is rehersed, and if she dye w^t owt heyres then my feoffes to infeoffe certayn persones of y^e seid parishe in y^e same howse and londs to y^t use, that is to say, y^t y^e wardanes and bredryn off Seynt Warborow affore said shall haue y^e lettyng oughte of y^e said tenement and londes callid ye yevall house for their yevall as afore is rehershede and to kepe an obitt for me, and Crystian, and all crysten soulls in my seid pariche church in y^e day of Ashe Wedynesday."

Katherine Tutor of Stoke, widow, in 1491 [Book v, fo. 176^b], left "a quarter of whete and a quarter of malt to make w^t an ale."

In the will of Thomasyn Sheby, wydow, of East Grene-wych, dated 1506 [Book VI, fo. 191^b], is the following bequest:

"I bequeth to the church of Seynt Alphe a standyng cuppe, syluer and gylte w^t a keueryng, weyyng xxiiij on^{es}, vnder this con-dicion that euery bryde that shalbe mareid in the church of Seynt

Alphe a forseyyde shal haue the seyde cuppe to be boryn a fore them att the mariage yff they come to the church wardens and dezier itt."

I should be glad to know whether any other such bequests are on record, and also what special significance the bearing of a cup before the bride could have had.

One of the ancient revenues of the king was the lathe-silver, collected by lathes from each hundred of the county, the lathe for this purpose being sometimes farmed out by the sheriff. Its origin has, I believe, not been settled, and although it was a very small burden, it was—like most other taxes—considered a grievance. John Passey of Eltham, in his will, dated 5th July 1509 [Book VI, fo. 252*b*], consequently thought to do his friends a good turn, and so bequeaths

"after the death of Agnes my wife xiijs. iiij*z*. to the borowsolder of Eltham for the tyme beyng for thuse of our souerayne lord the kynge toward the discharge yerly of the seruants, inhabitants of Eltham, for euer, of and for a certen some of money callid hedesiluer other wise callid the coman fyne, payable yerly at Mihilmass lawdaye in Eltham, which usually is and in tymes passd hath be lovyed by the borowsolder ther yerly of the said inhabitants."

This lathe-silver has ceased to be paid in Kent for about a century.

In the will of William Colt of Sent Warborough, Hoo, dated 1516 [Book VII, fo. 83*a*], is a bequest for distributing cakes. He desires that

"On accar of land lyng in Northefeld, callyd Longland, shall remayn to John my son and to his heyrys on thys condycon, that he, hys heyrys, &c., euery Goode Fryday for euermore, do bake or cause to be bakyn, a bushell of goode whete in Wastell breede, and euery Wastell in valor of a ob., and so to be delyuered to poure people where ned ys most or shalbe in the chyrche of Hoo."

It was, I conclude, some such bequest as this which led

to the celebrated cakes at Biddenden, in this same county, on Easter Sunday.

I have only found one reference to fairs, viz., in the will of John Wadman of Milton next Gravesend, dated 2nd March 1549 [Book XI, fo. 51*b*]. He leaves to Johan his daughter

“furty pounds to be payed vnto the said Johan, xx*li*. at the feast of Saynt Edward called Gravisende Faire nexte comyng and at mydsomer than nexte following other xx*li*.”

Gravesend Fair is (according to Whitaker) now held on 24th October, whereas the Feast of the Translation of Saint Edward is 13th October.

Edward Nevyll, in 1514 [Book VII, fo. 29*a*], had left a banner with Our Lady on one side and St. Edward on the other, to the church of Gravesend, but I cannot find any other connection of that Saint with the town. The parish church was, in mediæval times, dedicated to St. Mary, and there was a chapel in the town dedicated to St. George, which is now the parish church.

We now come to the will of Roger Leche of Eltham, dated 14th June 1517 [Book VII, 87*b*], which contains perhaps the most interesting of any of these bequests :

“Also I will Rauff Letham shall kepe or cause to be kept yerly the Wedynsday in the crosse weke at the crose before his dur, when the procession cumyth in brede and ale v*jd*.; and vpon Saint Thomas nyght after the fest of Seint John Baptyst atthe bonefyre in bred and ale v*jd*.”

Eltham Church is dedicated to St. John Baptist, and 24th June was doubtless observed with full honours by the good folk of that parish, who would not have forgotten the “bonefyre”; but there was apparently another lighted on “Seint Thomas nyght”, *i.e.*, 7th July. Do any other instances of this occur?

Besides the ordinary Church seasons I have not found many references to days by local names. Robert Dan of Brenchley, in 1511, says: “Item lego pro torche at hok

tyme xij*d*." Hock Monday was the second Monday after Easter, and certain dues were then paid to the churchwardens, as appears by the Accounts of St. Dunstan's, Canterbury, printed in *Archæologia Cantiana*; but whether the torch was for use in church, or at some revel, is not certain.

Richard Longeman of Halstow, in his will, dated 1493 [Book v, fo. 224*a*], mentions Shere Thursday. The will is curious as showing the custom of proclaiming, or posting up, secular matters in church :

"I will the curates in eueri church of the saide hundrede [Hoo] shewe in their churches that yff ther be any yoman any yomans felow or womens son in the saide hundrede that wilbye all the londes and tenements sumtyme Richarde Longeman of Halgesto, and geve for them as they be worth and sonest paye and content their for, shall haue them wyth the folde table, chayre and fourme in the hall ; a ladder, the queern stones w^t the bed-dyng and a cawdron in a fourneys to be w^t the sale of the saide londes and tenements, and eueri curate to haue for the proclamyng of y^t same iij*d*., and I will my obyte be kepte yerely on Shere Thursdaye w^t prestes and clarkes syngyng, redyng and prayeyng, and at after noone that same day at the washeyng of the auters there to haue bred and ale."

Into the religious side of all the above (and they all had a religious significance in the minds of the testators) I do not wish to enter, but I should like to direct the attention of members to the field that is open to them, especially in the District Probate Registries, which contain for the most part the wills of yeomen, small farmers, and persons of the labouring classes, and therefore all the more likely to refer to such matters as I have brought before you.

LELAND L. DUNCAN.