

The House of Aske

The voice of the father of the present Earl of Zetland has often been heard in Richmond advocating the most advanced politics of the day and with a clarity of logical reasoning which was irresistible. He was far in advance of many of his Whig compatriots. He advocated the five points of the Charter in constitutional manner. Had all the Chartist advocates acted in that same reasoned manner they would have carried greater weight and would probably have met with greater success. People like the Earl laid the foundations for progressive reforms, many of which have now happily been implemented.

And more will follow despite the detection of those who have combined to frustrate the benevolent schemes of the greatest statesman * of this or any other age in England's history. Their puny efforts will be as powerless to halt the stream of progress as were those of the king who bid the sea stay its restless course.

As far as Richmond was concerned the so-called political "corruption" of those days consisted only in partaking of an excellent dinner and wine ad lib. at "our new member's" expense. Those dinners were red-letter days to the recipients. Neither Primrose Leagues nor any other such tom-fool political japes were then known. If they had been they would have been scorned by the splendid yeomen of the north: men who were not jellyfish but men of moral rectitude and sturdy independence. The members always went round the various inns where the dinners were given and at each place were received with sincere and enthusiastic ovations. The electors, upstanding and uncovered, drank long life, health and happiness to their representatives. Occasionally an interjection was thrown in by some budding, turbulent radical, either to get the Corn Laws repealed, the Game Laws done away with, the Malt Tax abolished, the Window Duty and Paper Duty knocked on the head or some other passing reform. All these were received with the utmost good humour and a kindly and well-meant smile. After a word or two of good wishes the newly elected members departed and were rarely seen or heard of again in the borough until the next election. After such a day of conviviality is it surprising that there were not a few who did not care how soon another election took place?

Those dinners had a wonderfully softening effect for a time on some of the more demonstrative spirits who were rapidly veering towards radicalism, better known in those days as Chartism. When I reflect on these things and see what a nonentity the borough is today politically, and when I see "Ichabod" stamped large on the orange flag, I cannot refrain from saying "Alas! how are the mighty fallen!" A great blot stains that grand old flag. Once the symbol of all that was free, noble and liberal, it

* W. F. Gladstone is clearly referred to.

now hangs limp and dull. A breeze of freezing cold from the great House of Aske has blown upon it. A blush of shame suffuses many a cheek as they compare it with what it was in former days. Yet there may be some left, true as steel and of noble hearts, who still remain on deck despite the storm. All honour to them! They stand on a noble vessel, one which has weathered many a gale, one that is unsinkable. From its topmast there shall ere long float again the loyal flag which symbolises the unity of every part of Great Britain and Ireland under equal laws, binding them together in one common band of brotherhood.

Old customs - Wassail Cup

There were many old customs in vogue in the days I write of, especially at Christmas. For the children this was certainly the most exciting season of the year. The first indication of the approach of the festive season was the appearance in the streets of the "vessel cup" singers as they were called, "vessel" being a local corruption of "wassail". These started early in November. They carried a box containing a dressed-up doll to represent the infant Christ and sang some doggerel about "blessing the master of this house, the mistress also and all the little children". Of course mercenary motives were at the bottom of their efforts and they carried the inevitable collecting box.

They were followed soon afterwards by the carol singers, another thinly disguised mode of begging. A fortnight or so before the great day yule logs were distributed by the apprentices of cartwrights and joiners. These were given to customers as well as to the aged and infirm. Many a Richmond house had its brightest and warmest fire over Christmas through the generosity of these workers in wood. Grocers gave their customers two large candles. In some households these were lit on Christmas Eve and burnt all night to usher in Christmas Day, in others they were lit on New Year's Eve to "bring in" the New Year.

"Poor old horse"

The most exciting Christmas custom was that of the poor old horse which perambulated the town from one public house to another. The chief actor, representing the horse, was clothed in a horse's skin, worn and ragged to indicate its age, with a short stump for a tail. The head and neck - of wood - were so arranged that the actor could turn them at will. The jaws opened and closed and the loud snapping of the teeth in chorus at the end of each verse was an essential part of the act. Accompanying the horse was a three-piece band consisting of violin, fife and drum, together with two huntsmen with long whips which they kept cracking

throughout the performance. Each verse was accompanied with appropriate actions from the horse and, at the end it rolled on to its back with its legs feebly waving in the air. The plaintive song went something like this: -

Come gentlemen and sportsmen,
And men of courage bold,
All you that's got a good old horse
Take care of him when old;
Go, put him in your stable,
And keep him there so warm,
Give him good corn and hay, Sir,
I'm sure he'll take no harm.
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

Once I had my clothing
Of Insey-woolsey fine,
My tail and mane of length,
And my body it did shine,
But now I'm growing old, Sir,
And my nature does decay,
My master frowns upon me,
And thus I heard him say:
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

These handsome little shoulders
That once were plump and round
They are decayed and drooped,
I fear they are not sound.
Also these little nimble legs
That oft ran many miles
Over hedges, over ditches
Over valleys, gates and stiles.
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

Once I was young, Sir,
Aye and in my prime,
My master used to ride on me
And thought me very fine.
But now alas! it is not so
I've no such friends at all
I'm forced to nibble the short grass
That grows beneath yon wall.
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

I used to be well tended
All in a stable warm,
To keep my tender body
From any cold or harm;
But now I'm turned adrift, Sir,
In the open fields to go,
To face all kinds of weather
Cold winds, and frost, and snow.
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

My hide unto the huntsmen
So freely I would give,
My body to the hounds, Sir,
For I'd rather die than live;
So take him, whip him, strip him,
To the huntsmen let him go
For he's neither fit to ride upon
Nor in any team to draw.
Poor old horse, poor old horse.

After each performance came the collection and, in general, no old custom was better patronised than the "poor and 'os" as the natives called it. Richmond was a special hunting and racing centre and the sentiments of the jingle had a special appeal for them. The actors were, of course, regaled with ale at every hostelry they visited and the evening's entertainment concluded when they could no longer stand on their feet.

"Poor old tup"

Another similar and indeed rival custom at Christmas time was that of the old ram or "poor and tewp". This custom was kept going by the stable lads from Belleisle and Sylvio House, the two main racing establishments in the town. They were a rowdy, boisterous lot! They started early in December and once or twice a week put on the show in the Market Place, Newbiggin. The Green and in the yards of the larger inns. One of the lads wore a sheep's head with long horns and threw a sheepskin over his back. He acted a part very like that of the old horse, suiting the actions to the words wherever possible. He was accompanied by a crowd of stable lads and a large contingent of the town urchins who joined loudly and raucously in each chorus. The verses ran something like this: -

As I was going to Derby
Upon a market day
I met the finest tup, Sir,
That ever fed on hay.
Ri fol folla da la da la, Baa.
The tup was fed by hind, Sir,
The tup was fed before,
The tup was nine year old, Sir,
I am sure it was no more.
Ri fol folla da la da la, Baa.
The horns that grew upon its head
They grew so crooked long
They sent him up to London
To ring the church bells on.
Ri fol folla da la da la, Baa.