

## **A CALENDER OF LACEMAKERS CELEBRATIONS.**

Main Sources: Wright Romance of the Lace Pillow and Jones and Deer. Cattern Cakes and Lace. A Calendar of Feasts.

### **INTRODUCTION.**

The life of a lace maker over the years had its ups and downs. There were times when business was good and times when it was very poor. But whatever the state of the lace trade the workers still had to put in long hours for comparatively little pay. They had to work in the cold dull winter's days and the dark winters mornings and evenings. They had to work in the mild but oft-times hot English summer, and at all times there working conditions were nothing like we enjoy today.

For these reasons alone there is little doubt that the lacemakers enjoyed their public holidays and the festivals of the year. They clearly had fun and celebrated with gusto as well as (often times) a new bobbin on the special occasions.

### **JANUARY.**

It does not appear the lacemakers did anything special on New Years Day. Undoubtedly they joined in with whatever their local community did on such a day. Jones and Deer record the ancient custom of apple gifting, where the children would carry an adorned apple from house to house offering New Years Blessings. In return they would be given small gifts. (p29)

Again, whilst not a specific lace celebration, it is nice to imagine the young lace makers celebrating St Agnes Eve, when girls are supposed to dream of their future partners. The ritual they had to follow was; make a wish, pick a pin from the pincushion and pin it to your sleeve. Go to bed lying on your back with your hands behind your head. If you do this you will dream of a kiss during the night (Jones and Deer p35)

### **FEBRUARY.**

## CANDLEMAS February 2nd.

This was a holiday for the lacemakers at Hanslope (Bucks). The learners put the candlestools away at half-past four, "and they'd be lissom to do it." At North Marston (Beds) the mistress of the household when evening drew near used to call out, "Candlemas, candleless." As you can tell, this was the date when they stopped using candles to make their lace by in these areas.

At Cranfield it is recorded that they used February the 14th as their day when they stopped using candles.

## VALENTINES DAY FEBRUARY 14

Jones and Deer records that; "Legend popularly has it (though there is no real evidence to substantiate this) that St. Valentine's Day originated in the Roman feasts of Luper-calia, which occurred at this time of year, and the martyrdom of a certain Saint Valentine. In fact there were two Saint Valentines martyred in Rome in 269-270 AD, about the same time as the Luper-calian festival, who have generally become confused - one was the Bishop of Terni, the other a priest or physician who is also often invoked by sufferers of epilepsy.

The 14<sup>th</sup> February was probably also chosen for St. Valentine's Day because, in folk-lore, it is the day on which birds choose their mates. The two bluebirds, which figure on so many Valentine cards therefore, represent two lovers bound together in spirit from this day on - a pretty conceit.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, lovers in the Lyme Regis would have their initials entwined and worked together into a piece of lace. Lyme Regis lace was very fine quality and would have been quite a lot of work. How many romances were finished before the lace was, I wonder?"

In Devonshire it was the custom for the young lads to whittle bobbins for their sweethearts who were lace makers. If their gist was less than 1 dozen they were either considered very mean or their affections were possibly measured less than desirable!

There are many inscriptions of love and devotion on bobbins that could have been given to a lace maker by a young man, though it has to be said that most of the love and romance inscriptions appear to have originated from the girls. We are not told if they were specifically given on St Valentines Day, however it would certainly be an appropriate day to offer such a gift

## SHROVE TUESDAY

Lacemakers would work together around a candle stool during the dark, winter days. To economise on candles there was a candle stool that comprised a single candle surrounded by a number of water filled flasks. The function of these flasks was to magnify the light of the single candle to those gathered around it. A function that it does well as I have made a number of lace maker's lamps over that past few years. (We even used one during an electrical back out a few months ago. I could just about read by its light from across the length of the room.)

Insert a picture of a candle stool and my lace makers lamp

The most experienced lacemakers would have a position of privilege closest to the light, whereas the younger girls, with better eyesight and less skill, would be positioned at the back. The use of candles was strictly regulated, as the cost would have to come from the girls' hard-earned wages. On Shrove Tuesday (whether it fell early or late) their candles were always blown out, not to be lit again 1 until 3<sup>rd</sup> September, Nutting Day.(Wright p )

the church tower the women, who had been waiting for it, ran, helter-skelter, out of their cottages to the belfry, each carrying a pancake and endeavouring to be the first to offer it to the clerk. (Wright p

## MARCH.

## PALM SUNDAY

Palm Sunday celebrates Christ's entry on a donkey into Jerusalem, when people strew his path with palm branches to honour him. Crosses made of palm are still

blessed and distributed in many churches today, and carried around the church during the service. This custom has been practised in England since at least the 5th century, and although it was banned during the Reformation as idolatrous, has never died out entirely. (Jones and Deer p)

A custom which is apparently peculiar to Laceland is that of eating figs on Palm or, as it is here more usually called, Fig Sunday. Tons of figs are sold at Olney and the surrounding villages on the preceding Saturday. (Wright p 202)

## **APRIL**

April includes the “Fools Day” and also St George’s Day. It does not appear that the lacemakers did anything other than the local customs at these times.

## **MAY**

### **MAY DAY MAY 1ST.**

May Day would have been enjoyed by the lacemakers and whose to say that from time to time a lacemaker may well have been voted “Queen of the May”

Whitsun also falls in May and is a popular time for fairs and fetes. No doubt a “fairing bobbin” or two would have been bought and gifted to a loved one.

Fairing bobbins are described as being rather gaudy. They were bought at the travelling fairs and comprised of a bobbin that had a single groove that travelled the length of the shaft. In this groove was placed a strip of silver foil and it was then kept in place with a single binding strand of brass wire.

Here is a picture of one that I have made

## **JUNE**

June has the longest day of the year. By this time the lace makers would have been making their lace outdoors as long as the weather allowed. It is during these months that those pictures of the lace makers outside of their homes along with their lace pillows must have been taken. them to.

## **JULY**

Perhaps St Swithins day would have been of most interest to our lacemakers, for if it rained on that day, the legend says that it would rain for a further 40 days. That would put them back indoors and perhaps make them somewhat less productive than if they were able to make lace outside in the summer sunlight.

## **AUGUST**

St Bartholomew's day. would have been significant to the Huguenot lace makers, whose second exodus to England (the first was 1563 - 1568) was triggered by a massacre on St Bartholomew's day (August 24) in the year. 1572. I have not found any record of its significance to those Huguenot lace makers in England.

## **SEPTEMBER.**

### **HARVETS FESIVALS.**

The time for the harvest festivals. After the hard work of the harvest time, the farmers would put on a sumptuous feast was given by the local farmer for their workers. There was much cider drunk and many dances enjoyed, and a good time was to be had by all. There is little doubt the lacemakers would have joined in, probably because their father, brothers or boyfriends had helped wi9th the harvest.

### **NUTTING DAY. SEPTEMBER 3RD.**

Jones and Deer record the following; "Nutting Day. This is the day on which children would traditionally go out into the local woods to gather hazelnuts. The

nuts are supposed to be perfectly ripe at this time - in fact this is often later, but before the calendar change, Nutting Day would have occurred later in the month. However 21<sup>st</sup> September, St. Matthew's Day, is also known as The Devil's Nutting Day, on which day nuts should not be picked. In some parts of the country it was also thought that you should never gather nuts on a Sunday.

Nutting Day was the day on which lacemakers were allowed to light candles to aid their work. They could use candles during winter from this day until Shrove Tuesday in spring. Old lacemakers, who spent long hours at their pillows, were advised to refresh their tired eyes by bathing them in gin. This apparently stung a little but enabled workers to continue for at least two more hours. Eye strain and poor light must have meant blindness for some women."

#### MICHAELMAS SEPTEMBER 29TH.

"As one of the quarter days, Michaelmas has for many centuries been an important time for payment of rents and generally settling up. It was also a time when people could terminate their service and be hired elsewhere at one of the many Hiring Fairs that took place on this day. These Hiring Fairs were sometimes called Mop Fairs, and workers for hire would carry an emblem of their trade - a mop for a maid, a whip for a carter, a straw for a cowman or a crook for a shepherd. This emblem would be swapped with the new employer for a ribbon and a good-will token of a shilling to be spent at the fair

And when the tenants come to pay their quarter's rent, They bring some fowls at Midsummer, a dish of fish at Lent. At Christmas a capon, at Michaelmas a goose, And somewhat else at New Year's Tide, for fear their lease fly loose!"  
 .( Jones and Deer)

As we have already discovered, the fairs were a time when special bobbins were bought either as gifts or as a memento from the fair. They were gaudy, and often had many colours on them, but the key factor was a spiral groove that has a tinsel inlay kept in place by a wound brass wire. Springett records that the name fairing was originally a generic name for the "glittering china

ornaments, fancy baubles, cheap sparkling jewellery, (which) were all made to attract the unsophisticated boy or girl."

The Springetts also tell us that the tinsel used was a thin strip of tin. Huetson tells us that they were made of bone. Perhaps he is correct in that his collection contained only bone fairings. I find it hard to accept that bobbins that were, "gaudy and cheap" were made only from bone, which would have to have been more expensive. It has raised another question that you might well be able to answer for me. Do any of you have any "wooden" antique fairing bobbins in your collection? Please email on this matter if you can contribute to it.

## **OCTOBER**

### **ST AUDREYS DAY. OCTOBER 17TH.**

The Feast of St. Audrey is celebrated on October 17 this day. In Ely, a fair was once held in St Audreys Chapel. "At the various stall's it was usual for a cheap variety of bobbin lace to be sold. This was of such poor quality: that. any, poor lace was eventually as St. Audrey's. This in time became shortened to "tawdry" and this is, apparently, where the term, which refers to anything that is cheap and poor." Jones and Deer.

## **NOVEMBER.**

### **GUY FAWKES DAY. NOVEMBER 5TH.**

I include this for two reasons. I personally had the greatest fun of the year on Guy Fawkes Day as a young boy and lad. I have many tales to tell about the fun of preparing for, and then enjoying, this great English festival. Most of you will be aware that its origins date back to the attempt in 1605, of a certain Guido (Guy) Fawkes and his cohorts, to blow up the Houses of Parliament. We celebrated it with, large bonfires (and I mean large) and as many fireworks as we could afford after the WW2. Of course we did not celebrate it during that war. The second reason is that a special festivity is practiced at one of the lace centres

of Honiton lace making, Ottery St Mary in Devon. In another article I told you that I once lived in that area and am aware of the tradition in that town (though have never seen it) They carry and roll barrels of burning tar through the streets of the town "at breakneck speed" Jones and Deer. At dawn they let off home made cannons to wake up the population. So our Honiton lacemakers would have enjoyed themselves in Ottery St Mary each year on Guy Fawkes Day.

### CUTTING OFF DAY. NOVEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>.

Eve of St. Catherine's seems an appropriate 'Cutting Off Day'. For lacemakers, Cutting Off Day was when they "cut off" and sold the lace they had made. Originally, lacemakers would produce only one pattern, with which they had become conversant. This would have been worked in one continuous piece, corners being a relatively modern innovation (corners were formed by easing and gathering the lace to fit the garment) and, on Cutting Off Day the lace dealer would take the lace from each pillow and pay according to the length produced. In many areas fine lace would be paid for by the shilling, the lace would be covered with one shilling pieces and the lacemaker was paid the amount thus arrived at. This was only one of the cutting off days during the year.

The other thing that they did on the Eve of St Catherine's Day was to prepare a Catherine Bowl. This comprised of apples roasted until their pulp would fall into a bowl of cider which was spiced with cinnamon and sugar. It was then strained and offered to the guests.

With this a background, think what fun the well-known game of jumping over the candlesticks would be! Wee told that the lace makers had to jump over the lighted candlestick, without extinguishing the flame on pain of bad luck all the year around. This custom is said to be the origin of the Nursery Rhyme,

Jack be Nimble, Jack be quick,  
Jack jump over the candle-stick.

### ST CATHERINES DAY NOVEMBER 25TH. (CATTERNS)



[The two great holidays of the lace-makers was Tanders (St. Andrew's Day, Nov. 30th), and Catterns Day (St. Catherine's Day, Nov. 25<sup>th</sup>) Catterns was observed chiefly in north Northants and Beds; but in the greater part of the East Midlands the principal holiday was Tanders.]

St. Catharine was the patron saint of the spinners, to whom the lacemakers considered themselves related. As time went on, Catharine the Saint became confused with Katharine the Queen, that is to say, Katharine of Aragon (wife of Henry the Eighth) of Kat Stitch fame, who was born on Dec. 6<sup>th</sup>, old St. Catharine's Day. Wright gives a couple of pages of description of these festivities, but I summarise a few here.

Of course we are all aware of the custom of baking Cattern Cakes on this day. The origin of this was the concern of Catherine of Aragon, who when hearing the plight of the lace makers of Bedfordshire, burnt all her lace and commissioned new lace, thus keeping the lace makers employed. There after the lace makers contributed to a fund that provided tea and cakes on this day. I will not repeat a recipe here as Jones and Deer has one and most lace magazines carry a recipe regularly for Cattern Cakes.

Here are some other things from Wright.

In some of the towns and villages the bellman used to go round before daybreak ringing his bell and calling out:

Rise, maids, rise! Make your Cattern pies.

Bake enough, and bake no waste, and let the bellman have a taste.

At Kettering, Ampthill and other places, Cattern cakes, made of dough and caraway seeds, were sent about, and the evening was given up to singing, dancing and feasting; the principal dish being stuffed boiled rabbit "smothered with onion sauce." At Podington (North. Beds) they kept Cattern on old St. Catherine's Day "by wetting the candle-block," that is, taking tea together and eating Cattern cakes. After dancing to the music of a fiddle they crowned their diversions by supping on a great apple pie.

Here is his description of the Candlestick custom.

The girl or boy mentioned turned so that he or she faced outward from the ring, and they continued to dance till all had turned, when the difficult feat of jumping the candlestick, lighted candle and all, was attempted. In other places, including West Suffolk, which was formerly a lace-making centre, the song was,

Jack, be nimble I Jack, be quick!

Jack, jump over the candlestick,

The name of any boy or girl was inserted in both the rhymes. The object it seems was to clear both the candlestick and candle without extinguishing the light. If the light was extinguished' ill luck was supposed to follow during the subsequent twelve months. One of these candlesticks, two feet two inches high, is preserved in the Museum at Aylesbury but the height of the candle added to that would give at least another three inches. The feat of leaping it was, at any rate for a girl, not an easy one. The festivities finished by letting off Catharine wheels, but all these customs have died out.

And again he records;

The people of Wendover (Bucks) called Catterns "Candle Day," it being the first day on which they commenced to make lace by candlelight, and they celebrated it by eating "wigs," -round, spongy gingerbread-like cakes, flavoured with caraway seed, which obtained their name from their thick rim which resembled the curl of a Georgian wig; and drank "hot-pot," a liquor compounded of warm beer spiced with rum and thickened with beaten eggs. At the lace schools the girls and boys danced in a ring round the great lace-maker's candlestick, singing:

Wallflowers, wallflowers, growing up so high,  
All young maidens surely have to die;  
Excepting Emma Caudrey, she's the best of all.  
She can dance and she can skip,  
And she can jump the candlestick.  
Turn, turn, turn your face to the wall again.

ST. ANDREWS DAY NOVEMBER 30 (TANDERS)

"St Andrew is the fisherman apostle and is, of course, the patron saint of

Scotland. There are many tales surrounding his life (and how his relics came to Scotland) and a great number of miraculous and heroic deeds were attributed posthumously to him. It is thought that a monk brought some relics to Fife in the north of Scotland, where he built (at an angel's instruction) a church in what is now the city of St. Andrew's.

When the Picts, then converted to Christianity, won a battle against the English due to 'the appearance of St. Andrew's cross in the heavens' they took the Saint as their patron. The Saint's day became a Scottish national holiday, and there is great feasting on this day." Jones and Deer.

At Tanders, the Olney people congregated in one another's houses. No candy was made, but frumenty or, as it was generally called, 'thrumety' eaten and rich metheglin (made hot), with toast floating at the top, was drunk.

There was clearly a lot of alcohol drunk as one landlord is recorded as taking out a three-day licence! The games enjoyed were bob apple, where the apple and a piece of candle was alternately offered. When blindfolded the results might not be too nice on some occasions.

Tanders cake is 3 1/2 lbs of dough, (? that is what it says!) 6 ozs lard, 6 ozs sugar, 1 oz caraway seed. (You are reminded by Wright to use Brewers Yeast.)

At Stoke Goldington they made sweets called "black Buttons"

I think you should get hold of Wright and enjoy not only his description of these holidays but the whole book!! J

## **DECEMBER**

**ST THOMAS' DAY DECEMBER 21ST.**

"Thomasmass, falls on the 21<sup>st</sup> December, very near the true solstice the turning point of the year, with the longest night and the shortest day. Its importance in the Christian calendar stems from ancient rituals surrounding the solstice, as of course do many Christmas celebrations.



