# TIGER MISCELLANY

## A Collection of Folklore Items from the Tiger Newsletter

Compiled by

Peter Millington


% 232 College Street, Long Eaton, Nottingham, NG10 4GW

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'TRADITIONS AT THE TIGER'

TIGER

THE TIGER INN · LONG EATON · NOTTS



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# Introduction

The Traditions At The Tiger (T.A.T.T.) folk club in Long Eaton has had a monthly members' newsletter since the club was founded by Roy Harris in 1991. When he left the area to live in Wales, Roy handed over the editorship to my wife Maggie and myself. Roy set a high standard for profiling forthcoming guest performers and for reporting recent club events. This high standard is now continued by our chief contributor, Andy Leith.

In 1993, I started a column entitled *Traditional Titbits*, containing snippets of local folklore. This column fills unused space at the end of the newsletter, so articles vary in size from a single paragraph to more than a side. Long Eaton lies on the Notts./Derby border, and I have selected *Traditional Titbits* from both counties, with occasional forays into general folklore.

This booklet is a cumulation of the *Traditional Titbits* from September 1993 to April 1995, together with some of the correspondence the *Titbits* have provoked. I have taken this opportunity to correct the few typos that slipped into the original articles, and done some other minor rewording. The *Titbits* have also been rearranged so that related items follow each other. My own articles are not signed, but items from other contributors are.

I make a point of trying to quote my material from original sources, although I have sometimes had to abbreviate items to make them fit. Much of it comes from correspondence in old local newspapers, and sometimes it comes from previously unpublished manuscript material. Details of my sources are given with each item. This lets me acknowledge my sources individually, and lets me point readers in the direction of more complete information, should they want it.

In addition to my individual acknowledgements, I would particularly like to thank the staff of the Local Studies Section at Nottingham Central Library. They have been very patient with me over the years in helping me to locate material on Nottinghamshire traditions. I would also like to thank my fellow folklorists and my friends at the Tiger folk club for their help and encouragement.

Lastly, if you would like to receive the *Tiger Newsletter*, send a dozen first class stamps to the address on the title page for a year's supply, or come to the club and get it free.

*Pete Millington*

# Plough Monday in Long Eaton

February 1994

People with aged grandparents raised in the Long Eaton area could well find it interesting to ask them if they remember Plough Monday. This took place on the first Monday after Twelfth Night, and involved going round asking for money - no plough plays around here it seems.

The participants were called Plough Bullocks, and were notorious in the last century for taking retribution if money was not forthcoming. Because by any standards the injury and damage to property was sometimes excessive, the authorities did their best to discourage the custom - successfully as it turns out.

The first Long Eaton titbit comes from a letter sent to the Victorian folklorist Mabel Peacock from a Mr. Bell of Epworth, Lincolnshire;

"...I well remember the mummeries in Nottinghamshire, as they were when I was a lad, but I don't remember any songs that were sung, though I know there was rude singing and dancing, and horse-play in plenty.

My father discouraged the mummers' visits as much as possible, and we children were somewhat afraid of them. They were generally more or less in liquor. They wore masks, and were fantastically dressed, and were usually very rough and mischievous, in some cases even dangerously so. It was customary for them to take a plough round, and I have heard of them ploughing up gardens, doing all the damage they could without horses, when money was refused them. My niece, Mrs. H.N., tells me that she was once when a child stopped by a party of [Plough-Bullocks] when returning from school at **Long Eaton** to her home at **Toton**. They made her give up all the money she had on her - and she adds bitterly that she had eightpence, a most unusually large sum! - under threat of throwing her into the canal if she refused. This would be about twenty years since [i.e. about 1881], I suppose."

Presumably, this incident would have happened near the canal bridge on Derby Road. Since she crossed the county boundary to go to school, Mrs. H.N. must have been attending one of the private "ladies' schools" in Long Eaton at that time. Later, Mr. Bell's letter continues;

"One of the mummers wore a top-hat and frock-coat (the "old lord") and another was dressed as a woman, the rest so far as I remember had no distinctive dress, but were covered with bright-coloured ribbons stitched to their clothes...

My son writing from the neighbourhood of Dale Abbey, tells me... They still go round at **Stapleford**, but only boys now, with whitened faces, and singing a song which ends -

'If you haven't got a penny
a halfpenny will do.
If you haven't got a halfpenny,
God help you.'"

*(Source: T.F.Ordish Collection, Vol.III, pp.146-150*
*Folklore Society Library, London)*

The second description comes from the well written and wonderfully illustrated book "Rites and Riots", published by local lad **Bob Pegg**;

"Gain was also one of the motives for my paternal grandparents when, as children some eighty years ago, they too went around on Plough Monday through the streets of **Long Eaton**, a small town in East Derbyshire. They had no plough, but they did black their faces and turn their jackets inside out, and they carried brooms (though not to sweep with). Sometimes the boys would wear their mother's jackets. They went around the houses singing:

Plough Monday, Shrove Tuesday
when the boys went to plough,
My mother made some pancakes
and she didn't know how.
She buttered them, she sugared them,
she made them turn black
She put some rat poison in
to poison poor Jack.

'After we'd been singing one or two songs, you see, we used to sing that', said my grandmother, 'and then we knocked at the door and of course the people came to the door. When they saw you they asked you in the house and sometimes they'd give you something to eat or they'd give

you ha'pennies and pennies. And of course we'd got a chip shop in the district and we used to go and buy chips and eat them'."

*(Source: Bob Pegg "Rites and Riots : Folk Customs of Britain and Europe", Poole, Blandford Press, 1981)*

If you do find out more about Plough Monday (or indeed any other traditions) in Long Eaton, why not write it down or tape record it before the memory is lost for ever. We could even publish pieces in the T.A.T.T. Newsletter.

## Local Valentine's Day Customs

February 1995

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, the custom was for lovers (or prospective lovers) to write and send each other scraps of anonymous poetry professing undying love. The muse sometimes being a difficult thing to capture, this custom inevitably led to the invention of the Valentine card. And of course now they are big business.

However, Valentine's day used to be more than just a day for exchanging cards and poetry. For a start, there were a number of practices designed to divine the identity of one's future marriage partner. The antiquarian Llewellynn Jewitt, writing in 1853, gave the following Nottinghamshire example;

"Drawing lots or billets, for valentines, is still a custom in the neighbourhood of **Mansfield**, where a few young men and maidens meet together, and having put each their own name on a slip of paper, they are all placed together in a hat or basket, and drawn in regular rotation. Should a young man draw a *girl's* name, and she *his*, it is considered ominous, and not unfrequently ends in real love and a wedding."

*(Source: J.Br.Archaeol.Assoc., 1853, pp.231-232)*

Thos. Ratcliffe, writing in 1916, also gave the following divinations;

"Farm girls in **Derbyshire** were always inventing customs of their own. One of these was to prick pin or needle holes in a piece of paper, put this to the eye, and deduce from what they could glimpse through the tiny apertures a forecast of what their futures held for them.

It was also a popular type of divination for a girl to place a number of short straws of varying lengths in her closed hand and request her fellow servants and friends to each draw one out. The one who drew the longest would either be married first or live the longest, while to the puller of the shortest of the straws there was a prospect of fewer years, or, it might be, the life of an old maid.

One other, and quainter, custom, still not quite obsolete, was for the lads on a farm to get clean brooms - made of broom - and with these brush down all the girls, to take the cobwebs from them and make them tidy as real valentines on St. Valentine's Day. I have seen such a brushing down performed, and my mother, with her sisters and brothers used to take part in the custom, which was then a pretty general one at most of the farmhouses in the district."

*(Source: Notts. Guardian, 4th March 1916)*

Perhaps not unnaturally, Valentine's Day tended to be a day for girls' customs, as briefly indicated in two essays submitted in 1960 to a competition run by the Notts. Local History Council. They probably relate to the 1890s, and they both follow on from descriptions of the Plough Monday customs.

Miss Jane Barnes (born in 1880) wrote about the customs at **Kinoulton**, Notts.;

"On 'Plough Monday', boys wearing coloured paper hats used to come knocking on the doors saying, 'Please to remember the Plough Boys.' On 'Valentine's Day' the girls went round singing

'Good morning, Valentine,
some comes at eight O'clock,
some comes at nine'"

*(Source: Notts. Archives, Ref.DD121/1/39)*

Oswald P. Scott was the winner of the competition. Having described the well-known Plough Monday play performed by the lads from **Cropwell Butler**, Notts., he then went on to write;

"Valentine's day was the girl's turn, and though I have no idea what they did, I expect it was similar. However, it was the only day we left them alone."

*(Source: Notts. Countryside, Winter 1960/61, pp.20-23)*

The Plough Monday customs at both Kinoulton and Cropwell both involved boys collecting money from door to door. The fact that the girls' Valentine's Day customs are spoken of almost in the same breath as Plough Monday suggests that the girls also went from door to door. This appears to be confirmed by S.O.Addy in his *Household Tales* (1895), where he says the young men and women at **Ompton** used to go round begging for pennies on St. Valentine's Day, and that men servants had a half-day holiday.

## Old Notts. Wedding Customs

June 1994

"In some parts of this county a custom exists at weddings to throw corn and say: 'Bread for life, and pudding for ever.' Amongst country people it is usual to make plum preserve tarts for the young people to eat on these festive occasions. Particular notice is taken whilst these tarts are being disposed of to ascertain the number of stones found in the first tart. It is stated that so many years will elapse before the young person enters the matrimonial state as there are stones found in the tart."

*(From the Notts. Guardian, 15th May 1937)*

## Notts. Harvest Customs

September 1993

Notts is not renowned for its native folk songs, but it is possible to find them if you look hard. I have come across several descriptions of 19th Century Notts harvest home customs, which included a traditional song. No tunes of course, but then the Worksop folklorist Thos. Ratcliffe said they were sung to "no particular tune". To fill up the page, here are two typical accounts condensed from local newspapers. These only have one verse, but I have seen up to three verses.

Some years ago an old townsman wrote as follows : "I may say that when a boy I have frequently ridden on the last load of corn, brought from the fields - 'the harvest load' - belonging to the late Benjamin Morley, Esq., of **Sneinton Manor**... The following ditty, having been rehearsed in the harvest field, would be shouted by the boys from the top of the load, at intervals during the journey to the stackyard:-

Mr. Morley's got his corn,
Well sheared and well shorn ;
Never turned over, nor yet set fast,
The harvest load's come home at last.
Hurrah!

Mr. Morley met the load at the stackyard, and gave each boy sixpence."

*(from Nottinghamshire Guardian, 5th Sept.1903)*

"... It was the general custom, when I was a boy at home at **East Bridgford**, Notts., no further back than 1883, for all the lads to shout the harvest cart home, sometimes as many as a dozen on the load... The waggoner would trim his team with ribbons, bells, flowers, and evergreens, and also there was stuck in the load, at the top, large ash branches, until the load looked almost like a moving tree. The verse we sang was quite similar to the one mentioned in the paper *[above]*... :-

Mr ----'s got all his corn,
Well mown, well shorn ;
Never holl'd* over, never stuck fast,
The harvest cart's come home at last.
Hurrah! [* hurled]

It was the general custom also, when the load reached the village, for the people to drench the lads with water, and many a wet shirt I have had. The last load was generally rakings, so that the farmers had no objection, in fact, they very often prepared quite a deluge, by having a place close to a stack where they could pour water down on the harvest-home lads... Afterwards the men were given beer, cake, and cheese, *ad lib*."

*(from A.W. Daft, Nottinghamshire Guardian, 12th Sept. 1903)*

## Corn Dollies

March 1994

Corn Dollies may be more associated with harvest time for obvious reasons but this time of year is quite appropriate too. Valentine's Day when "birds begin to prate" (to quote the lovely Copper song, "Dame Durden") is a traditional time of year for love tokens so the giving of a sweetheart (a heart shaped corn dolly) to a loved one is a desirable gift, as is indeed a traditional lover's knot. Oftimes known as a Harvest Knot (worn at Hiring Fairs, Sheep Mops etc. to show the labourer is available for hire) or the Staffordshire Knot (named after a Hangman in Staffs who reputedly invented the knot to hang up 3 villains at once!) the Lover's Knot is a token of true love.

In many areas of the British Isles the custom of giving a plaited knot out of corn, grass, oats etc. was common. In some areas (parts of Ireland, Norfolk for example) a knot was plaited and given to a loved one and depending on what the recipient did with the gift the course of true love would be rocky or smooth. For instance if the recipient wore the knot it would signify he or she fancied the person who presented it to them. If not worn - bad 'cess - your luck's out! Particularly in Ireland apparently, if a young lad at harvest time picked a couple of stalks of ripe corn and plaited a love knot for his sweetheart, she would take it home to show her parents. They would enquire from where she received it and if they approved of the lad's character she would be allowed to wear it to show that the "courtship was in favour"!

Another point of interest with lover's knots.. if a boy makes one for a girl he'll leave the ears of corn on, BUT if a girl makes one for a boy she'll chop them off. The significance of this goes back to the very origins of corn dolly making when the Ancient Egyptians retained the last sheaf of corn at harvest time as an offering to Mother Earth (Isis). The seed (in the ear of corn) symbolises the female (Goddess/Corn Spirit) hence the female wears her lover's knot with the ears on while the boy (being barren!) wears his chopped off.

There are exceptions to this rule. For example, at Harvest Time I wear my corn dolly with ears proudly displayed as it is a festive occasion - a celebration of the Corn Spirit. And what better time than now - the early spring - when the green shoots begin to show in the farmer's fields.

"In Spring we'll plough it
in soil so brown
And her children so green
will spring up from the ground."

*Steve Plowright*

## No more Pennies for the Guy?

November 1994

Around this time of year, when I was young, it was common to see kids in the streets standing next to a stuffed human effigy asking for a "Penny for the Guy". The money they collected was ostensibly for fireworks, and the Guy was destined for burning on their bonfire on Bonfire Night (November 5th). Occasionally though, one heard of a real boy pretending to be the Guy, wearing a mask and sitting slumped in a pushchair. Nowadays, street Guys seem to be much less common - almost rare. Why so?

I remember that "Penny for the Guy" was always looked down on by some people as a form of begging. However, real begging was virtually unknown in the fifties and sixties (at least in the Eastwood area), and none of the kids I knew could understand this point of view. Having fun was an important part of the proceedings, blended with a certain amount of pride in one's handiwork. Any money usually did go towards fireworks - especially penny bangers and jumping jacks.

The Police were always rumoured to be cracking down on Guys, and probably they did. Carol singing got the same treatment. Now that real begging has returned to our cities, people once more understand the strong feelings it generates. Parents are even more loath to have their children equated with such "undesirables", and some kids may think so themselves.

However, I think the changes are more fundamental. Firstly, people do not travel on foot as much as they used to, so there is less of a stream of potential donors passing by. An especially important time for collecting was the evening, as people walked out to the pub or cinema. But now we elude the Guys by staying in to watch television, or we go out by car and whiz past them at speed.

Secondly, with more and more emphasis being placed on firework safety, fewer families hold their own bonfire parties. Increasingly then opt instead for the big organised spectaculars, such as the council bonfire held on West Park. This trend deprives the Guys of their *raison d'etre*, so adding to their decline.

But maybe tradition does not die as easily as would appear. At the same time as we have seen a decline in the number of kids collecting with Guys, we have experienced the growth of a new phenomenon - "Trick or Treating".

We may complain that this Halloween custom is an undesirable American import (although in fact we originally exported it to America in the first place), but it has overcome the main difficulty experienced by the Guys. If people will insist on staying in to watch the box, rather than go out to pass within range of your collecting tin, what more natural solution could there be than to collect from door to door. Now why didn't we think of that?

Let me know if you see any kids collecting with Guys in the run up to this year's Bonfire Night. If I see any, I will certainly be helping to keep the tradition alive by making a donation.

## More on Guys

December 1994

Someone thought my piece last month was about Gays - which would have made it the most surreal titbit yet. However, it was in fact about **Guys**, and it prompted the following letter from Pete Elliott;

"With regard to Halloween and Bonfire Night, the kids up here must be more enterprising than down your way for we get cadgers coming to the door for both. I have a strict policy of rewarding according to the quality of guise or guys.

In my young days (60 years ago), Halloween was known as "Gowky Apple Night" and the entertainment consisted of trying to eat a suspended apple with your hands behind your back or similar with an apple in a dish of water on a chair.

*Pete Elliott, Washington, Tyne & Wear*

## Thomasing

January 1994

St. Thomas's Day used to be an important day for the poor of the East Midlands in the run up to Christmas. On this day, custom allowed them to visit farms and larger houses to collect food or money with which to buy it. There were several names for the custom; "Thomasing", "Goodying", more contemptuously "Going a'Mumping", or simply "a'Begging". Here are a couple of examples.

**Codnor.** "In mid-Victorian days, it was customary around Codnor for aged folk to visit the larger farmhouses on St. Thomas's Day (December 21st) to receive a pint of wheat apiece to make 'furmety' with, and as an old custom it was always honoured."

*(Source: Nottingham Guardian, 21st Dec. 1946)*

**Mansfield.** "Mr. Hollington used to give away oat meal to any body who fetched it on Saint Thomas' day at Hollington's Mill (Kings Mill) on Sutton Road.

Because people were poor, they used to go round early in the morning banging loudly on the doors of all the houses to rouse people up. As they went they shouted.

Hip-Hip hurray,
Saint Thomas' Day
Fetch a bit,
And leave a bit,
Hip-Hip hurray."

*(Source: Essay by Mrs. E.A. Booth, 1962, Notts. Archives Office, Ref.DD 121/2)*

## Mummers of the World

January 1995

Where do you think the Mumming tradition is flourishing most? Surprisingly, it is not in the British Isles. The two most vibrant Mumming traditions are in Newfoundland and in the Caribbean islands of St.Kitts-Nevis.

The **St.Kitts**' "Mummies" are just one group of performers who participate in the island's "Christmas Sports". They perform just the sort of play you would expect to see in England, but with all the British patron saints as heroes, and therefore with several fights. After some debate as to how the play got to the island, I recently discovered that their text came from a version put together from traditional sources by the Victorian children's author Juliana Ewing. The Tiger's Guysers used a St.Kitts-Nevis Mummies' text for their play in 1993.

Kittitians have a large repertoire of other folk plays, with titles such as "Cowboys and Indians", "The Bull Play", "Highback" and even a traditionalised version of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar". The plays were collected extensively by the American folklorist Roger Abrahams in the 1960s. More recently, *Musical Traditions* reprinted a 1901 article on the Island's traditions by Dorothy Harding, and updated it to 1991 with some interesting eyewitness reports from Peter Bearon & Alison Whitaker.

Whilst the **Newfoundland** Mummers used to perform folk plays very similar to those from Devon, they now concentrate more on visiting each other's houses in disguise. The Mummers are particularly strong in the remoter "outports" (in fact they were banned by law in the capital St.Johns from 1861). Their aim is to disguise themselves and distort their voices so completely that they cannot be recognised. They generally behave strangely - if not riotously - and scare the children. The neighbours have to try and guess who they are by asking questions and generally groping. As the sexes commonly cross-dress for the occasion, the latter method is a popular and effective means of investigation. Once identified, the mummers are duty-bound to reveal themselves, and they are typically rewarded with food and drink.

Mummers are so much a part of Newfoundland life that a song about them called "The Mummers' Song" recently reached the top of the local hit parade. This in turn spawned a successful children's picture book based on the words of the song. David Blackwood, one of Canada's foremost artists has also painted a series of portraits of Mummers in costume. These etherial pictures show people in long flowing robes, wearing broad-brimmed hats, covered by veils that hang down to the waist and obscure ghostlike faces.

*(For St.Kitts-Nevis, see: R.Abrahams in Folklore, 1968, pp.176-201, and 1970, pp.241-265. See also Musical Traditions, Summer 1994, pp.30-35.*

*For Newfoundland see: H.Halpert & G.M.Story "Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland", University of Toronto, 1969)*

## Conkers from America

November 1994

*[Inspired by the Tiger's Grand Conkers Competition, Johnny Walker sent us a copy of an A-graded essay he wrote in 1966 describing the rules of conkers in the East Riding of Yorkshire about 1935.]*

"...Swinging and holding the conkers were alternated until one of the conkers disintegrated. The surviving conker then inherited the 'life' of the vanquished.

The 'life' of the conker was expressed in 'years' and these were accumulative - i.e. if two virgin conkers enjoined in battle the survivor was said to be one year old. If a conker destroyed another one which had previously destroyed (say) two others then the winner would add three years to its age (i.e. two inherited plus one). In this way by the end of the season champion conkers were several hundred and in some cases thousands of years old.

The conventional type of swing was about 45 degrees to the horizontal and with a flicking motion. The rules demanded that nut should strike nut, for if the string of the striker wrapped around the string of target nut, this caused an unfair slicing effect. It was usual to establish this rule before every contest with the utterance of the call 'no strings'.

It would be a very 'green' player who played a 'green' nut, and very short the life of the conker. All kinds of treatment were applied to nuts before playing, many of them closely guarded secrets, such as soaking for two nights in vinegar followed by slow dehydration. The services of a good conker baker was much in demand and he could command high fees for his services. Such treatments produced dark and withered carcasses of nuts, but they were hard and tough, and with them a game could last over many journeys to and from school..."

*Johnny Walker, San Diego, California*

## ...and from the North East

December 1994

With regard to 'stringing' conkers, there was no need to shout 'no strings', for it was avoided like the plague because of the scorn that would be heaped on you by your peers.

We didn't tot up ages, but the victorious nut would become a twoser, elevenser, thirtyer, etc. Anyone claiming a thousander would be greeted with a certain amount of healthy scepticism! My grandbairns still carry on the same practice."

*Pete Elliott, Washington, Tyne & Wear*

## A Notts. Children's Game

April 1994

Jerry Epstein sang the song "Stepping o'er the green grass" when he visited us with fellow Americans Jeff Warner and Jeff Davies. I thought it seemed familiar, and sure enough I have managed to locate a version from north Notts collected a hundred years ago by Thos. Ratcliffe. I've still not worked out the point of the game!

"The children divide into two parties - boys and girls. The girls seat themselves on "the green grass" in a row; the boys stand in front, also in a row, with hands joined. Over the girls presides one who is called "the mother," and her duty is the giving away of her girls to their suitors - she sits in the centre of the row of girls. When all is ready, the boys (with hands joined) begin to pace three or four paces forward and backward, with suitable rhythm, to these words, which are said:-

Stepping o'er the green grass,
Thus, and thus, and thus
(with suitable action),
Please will you let one of your playmates
(?daughters)
Come out and play with us?

To this request "the mother" says "no." The boys (all the while keeping up the rhythmical motion) reply to this refusal -

We will give you pots and pans,
And we will give you brass,
And we will give you anything,
All for a pretty lass!

To this "the mother" again says "no," and the boys continue -

We will give you gold and silver,
We will give you pearl,
And we will give you anything,
All for a pretty girl!

"The mother" cannot now refuse, so her answer is "yes." A boy now chooses his girl. Then all join hands and gallop round in a circle, singing-

She shall gallop and she shall trot,
She shall carry the mustard pot
All around the chimney pot.
With a hi! ho! hum!

When they have danced enough they begin again, and so until all have gone through the game."

*(Source: Notts & Derbys Notes & Queries, Sept.1894)*

## A Children's Game from the 1890s

September 1994

When Cecil Sharp and others of his ilk collected folk songs at the turn of the century, if they wanted to record a tune, they had to be able to write it down in musical notation. Not the quickest of tasks. Later collectors such as Percy Grainger were able to make sound recordings on wax cylinders, although they were cumbersome to use, and the sound quality left something to be desired. Post-War collectors such as the

Kennedies and Lomaxes were able to use better quality disc recording devices and, later, reel-to-reel tape. These gave better results, but the singers still held them in awe, and their nervousness sometimes showed through. With the advent of mass-produced audio tapes - and particularly audio cassettes - informants are usually relaxed about sound recording. Nowadays, collectors can sometimes find their informants giving **them** technical advice on how to use the tape recorder. Such is progress.

Throughout the history of folk song research, traditional singers have often written out the words of their songs for collectors. Today, they may even provide collectors with cassettes they recorded earlier. However, it is very exceptional for informants to furnish the musical notation, as in this month's Titbit. But when your informant comes from an old coal-owning family, with its own pipe organ built into the country pile, maybe it is not so surprising after all.

This month's Titbit is another children's game, similar to "Stepping o'er the Green Grass", which I gave in April's Newsletter. That is, it gave the girls an excuse to terrorise the boys by grabbing them and kissing them. It was written out by T.P.Barber of Lamb Close, Eastwood, and appears to have been sent to Maurice Barley in response to an article he published in October 1951.

*(Source: Manuscript in the Local Studies Section, Nottingham Central Library, Ref.qL39. With acknowledgements to Mrs. D. Barley, and to the Local Studies Librarian)*

"Dear Mr. Barley,

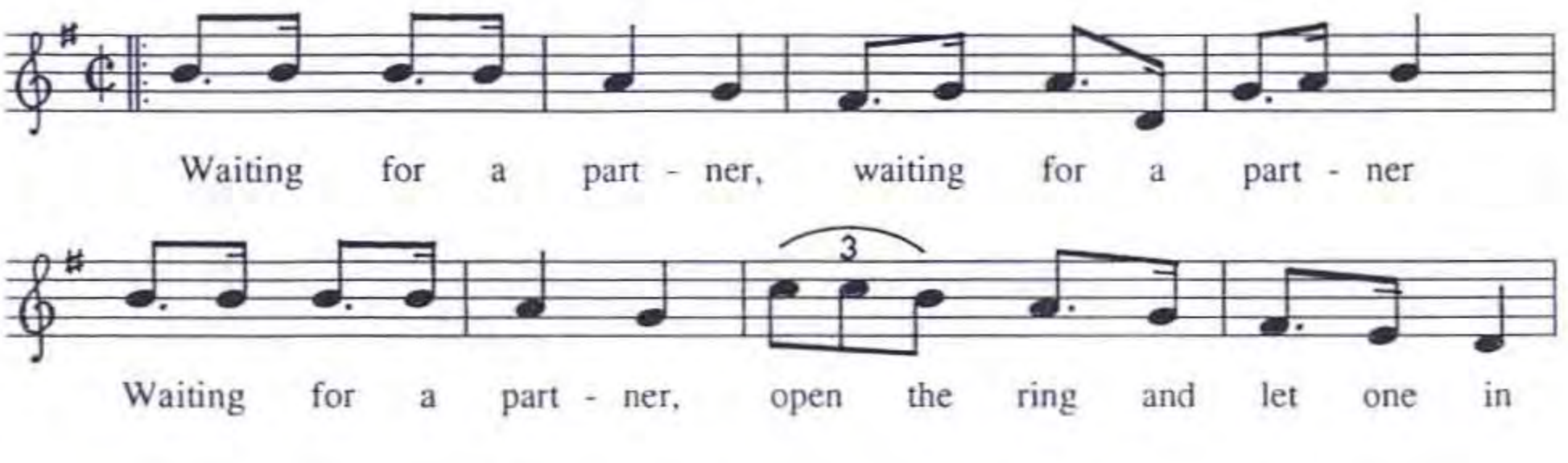
Your article, in the 'Nottinghamshire Country-side' prompts me to give my reminiscences of days when I was very young, (the late 1890s) when I was unwillingly dragged by an elder sister, who was a keen Sunday School teacher, to the local 'School Treats' at Eastwood and Brinsley in the incumbencies of the Revds Plumtre and Rege respectively.

I am sorry to say, I hated the game of 'Kiss in the Ring', chiefly remembered by the taste of Sherbet and 'Lemon Kali', which all and sundry consumed.

But the tune was quite good, & I am giving it as near as my memory serves.

The girls formed a ring and the boys hung about outside till they were captured and 'married'.

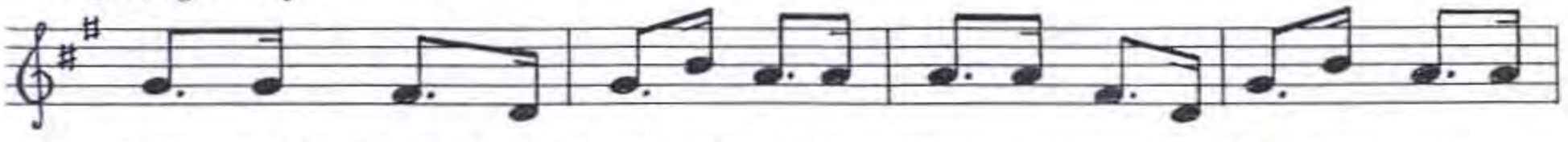
The game starts with one girl in the ring. The rest sing :-



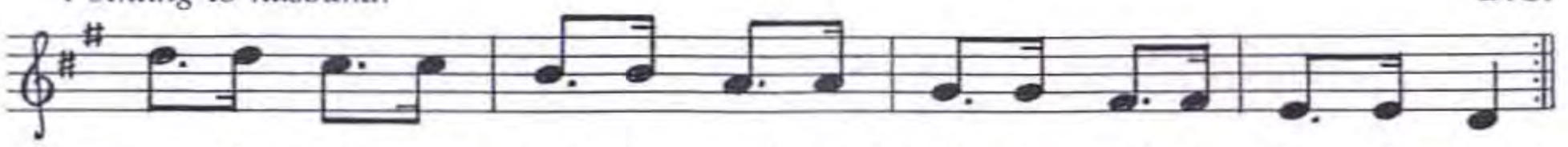

The unwilling swain is pushed into the ring. The girl seizes his hand, & they kiss.

The marriage is apparently complete, and the 'ring' proceed to give good advice.

*Pointing to wife*



*Pointing to husband.* **D.C.**



must be kind, you must be good, and help the wife to chop the wood.

I would be interested to know if you have heard this ditty, & if it is only a local one.

Yours sincerely

T P Barber"

## Celtic Counting Out

July 1994

"Eeny meeny macaraca aireye dominaca
clickeracka allawacka om pom push"

Do you remember the counting out rhymes you used to pick people for your childhood games? I suspect we all remember "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo" and "One potato, two potato, three potato, four", but there are plenty of other peculiar rhymes around. According to a handwritten note in the Local Studies Library, Nottingham, the above rhyme was current in the Forest Fields area of the city about 1948. The librarian wrote it next to a clipping from the *Evening Post* dated 16 Aug.1954, which gives another four rhymes from various parts of the city.

| No. | Old Derbyshire Counting | | Modern Welsh Numbers | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ain | Eyn | Un | | |
| 2 | Tain | Teyn | Dau | *or* | Dwy |
| 3 | Tethera | Teddera | Tri | *or* | Tair |
| 4 | Feathera | Peddera | Pedwar | *or* | Pedair |
| 5 | Fim | Fim | Pump | *or* | Pum |
| 6 | Zachara | Sacera | Chwech | | |
| 7 | Lachara | Lacera | Saith | | |
| 8 | Coe | Coo | Wyth | | |
| 9 | Dain | Deyne | Naw | | |
| 10 | Dick | Dick | Deg | | |
| 11 | Ain-dick | Eyn-dick | Un-ar-ddeg | | |
| 12 | Tain-dick | Teyn-dick | Deuddeg | | |
| 13 | Tethera-dick | Teddera-dick | Tri-ar-ddeg | | |
| 14 | Feathera-dick | Peddera-dick | Pedwar-ar-ddeg | | |
| 15 | Bumpy | Bumfy | Pymtheg | | |
| 16 | Ain-bumpy | Eyn-bumfy | Un-ar-bymtheg | | |
| 17 | Tain-bumpy | Teyn-bumfy | Dau-ar-bymtheg | | |
| 18 | Tethera-bumpy | Teddera-bumfy | Tri-ar-bymtheg | *or* | Deunaw |
| 19 | Feathera-bumpy | Peddera-bumfy | Pedwar-ar-bymtheg | | |
| 20 | Kicky | Kicky | Ugain | | |

*(adapted from notes by "Alfreton" in Notts. & Derbys. Notes & Queries, Aug.1894)*

Things were even stranger in the last century. Many of the countings out came from systems of scoring formerly used by hill farmers and shepherds to count their flocks. The count went from one to twenty. After twenty, a mark would be scored on a stick (hence "a score") and then they would start from one again. The curious thing is that these Derbyshire countings out seem to have a lot in common with Welsh and other Celtic numbers. You can see this in the table I have put together above. A few words do not match, but the similarity is particularly noticeable above fifteen, where both systems effectively count "one-and-fifteen, two-and-fifteen, etc."

## More on Celtic Counting Out

August 1994

I received comments from several people on last month's Titbit, including the following letter;

"Pete's piece in Newsletter No.38 'Celtic Counting Out' is misleading. Certainly the numbers he gives in the first column show the features that one would expect to find in a language that at an early date went through the sound shift that the Germanic group of languages (including English) did and marks them out from other Indo-European languages - of which Welsh (and the other Celtic languages) are a part. In this sound shift, Indo-European '*D' became primitive Germanic '*T', and Indo-European '*P' became primitive Germanic '*F'. And this is what we find in the example given by Pete i.e. Tain, Teyn/Dau; Fim,Fim/Pump. From the other end of the geographical spread of Indo-European languages you may compare the above with, for example, Punjabi for 'Two' - 'Do', and for 'Five' - 'Panch'.

With the structure of counting in teens, or above fifteen, there is probably less in Pete's example than meets the eye! It's true that in placenames an indirect Celtic influence can be seen in reverse formations such as Kirk Hallam which is due to the Irish influence on Danish settlers who subsequently moved to England. Much more research however would be required to establish whether or not such formations as 'one and fifteen' owe anything to a Celtic connection or whether it is simply an archaism such as can still occasionally be heard when someone says 'five and twenty' past or to the hour.

A final note of caution should be raised - namely the accuracy of the original source for the Derbyshire Counting. Now I may be doing 'Alfreton' an injustice, but in general nineteenth century 'antiquarians' were notoriously inaccurate in their recording of words and sounds of dialect speech which may account for the 'similarities' that Pete detects."

*Laurence Platt*

## Pete Millington Replies

August 1994

I am familiar with the linguistic theory of sound shifts that Laurence mentions, but I think it is a red herring in this case. There can be no doubt that the Derbyshire people who used the counting system spoke a Germanic language - recently English, and before that Anglo-Saxon and/or Viking Danish.

However, Germanic counting systems of all periods are well documented, and this is not one of them. My view is that sometime in the past, Pennine farmers borrowed this specialist flock counting system from Celtic speakers. Borrowing technical terms from foreign languages is something English still does today. If the sound shifts took place as Laurence suggests, does this mean the numbers do not have a Celtic origin, or does it mean that the numbers were borrowed from Celtic before the sound shifts took place?

There is **more** to the counting above fifteen than meets the eye. The Welsh "pymtheg" (15) comes from a combination of "pump" (5) and "deg" (10). In Welsh, as with all Celtic languages, the first letter of a word may be modified to agree grammatically with preceding words. Thus in the numbers 16 to 19, "pymtheg" becomes "bymtheg", of which the Derbyshire equivalent is "bumpy" or "bumfy". In Derbyshire however, some standardisation took place, and only the "b" form was used.

Regarding the reversed placenames, I think Laurence is on dodgy ground. These probably owe far more to Latin and Norman French than Celtic. As they were still in use as official languages until after the Civil War, they are far more likely to have influenced placenames than Celtic, especially as the second element usually refers to a former landowner (e.g. Watnall Chaworth).

Where did Derbyshire find its Celtic speakers? One theory is that pockets of "Welsh" speakers may have persisted in the remote Pennines until the Middle Ages, having survived the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Another view, suggested by John Chapman, is that incoming Cornish-speaking miners could have introduced the system.

## Celtic Controversy

September 1994

Mr. Platt has opened a can of worms (well he doesn't open his wallet very often!!). Laurence fired a normally placid Mr. Millington into a whirl of frenzy and much gnashing of teeth due to the outrageous questioning of our noble editor's research. I know that this kind and intelligent man locks himself away from humanity for months on end in order to research through many dusty and antiquated archives to bring you, the reader, his regular and much lauded column, '**Traditional Titbits**'.

Now, one letter has reduced this once formidable and confident man to a rubble of uncertainty. Any more findings on this highly interesting, yet controversial subject will be gratefully received through this medium!

I cannot fully let the matter close, but I'll leave you with this little bit from Jim Dunn, once of Leatholm, North Yorks.

"Yan, tan tethera - tethera, pethera, pimp
Yon owld yowe's far welted
And this one's got a limp.
Sethera, methera, hovera, and covera up to dik
Aye, and we can deal em
And where's me crook and stick"

This chorus and the rest of the words are still sung among the sheep farmers of that region - so I'm told.

*Andy Leith*

.....

September 1994

Thanks to Andy's moral-boosting comments, I have tentatively crawled out of my dust-filled archives and can now just about manage to lead a "normal" life. Thanks Andy.

Laurence Platt has indeed sent another long riposte about the "Celtic Counting", and says that he remains unconvinced about the Derbyshire counting system having been borrowed from the Welsh. It's a point of view, but I think we should break for other topics.

We will revisit this subject sometime in the future. Meanwhile, I'll be happy to debate the subject with Laurence and interested members in the bar next time he visits the club.

.....

December 1994

R.A.Chambers of Sittingbourne has published a familiar counting rhyme in the latest Folklore Society newsletter;

"Yan, tan, tethery, methery, pimp
Setherer, letherer, hoverer, coverer, dik
... etc."

The editor, Jacqueline Simpson, gives some useful references and comments on possible origins. However, as she notes similarities with Germanic, Welsh and indeed Latin numerals, she doesn't resolve our 'Celtic Counting' debate. When I get a chance, I'll seek out some of her references and report back.

*(See: FLS News, Nov.1994, No.20, pp.10)*

## Contemporary Legends

October 1993

What do all these things have in common? Pet alligators that bred in the sewers, having been flushed down the toilet. The man at a Chinese restaurant who choked on a bone which turned out to come from a rat. The man lured from a disco by a fabulous blonde, who later woke up

to find a neat scar where one of his kidneys had been surgically removed.

These are all "contemporary legends" or "urban myths" - modern stories that range from the humorous to the gruesome. The story tellers know they are true because they happened to a friend of a friend, or because they mention local places and people by name. They are always plausible, and some are actually based on real life - such as the alligators in the sewers - but part of their charm is that you can never be quite sure which are true and which are not.

There are now several books available containing collections of urban myths. *The Guardian* also runs a regular weekly column in its Saturday issue, and of course you can come and exchange stories at the Tiger.

Normally the stories are harmless, but they can have serious consequences. From time to time, the "Rat bone" story causes a sudden drop in business for ethnic restaurants, and they have been known to publish rebuttals in local newspapers. I understand that the Black Orchid nightclub in Nottingham had a similar problem with the "Missing kidney" story, and had to publicly scotch the rumour.

Anyway, I know the following story is true, because it was told to me by a colleague who used to work at the place in question, and knew the person involved.

This story relates to about 1970, when Nottingham Central Library was in a Victorian building, now part of Nottingham Trent University, on South Sherwood Street. One key member of staff was the caretaker. He had to open the place up first thing in the morning, and lock everything up in the evening, ending with the massive pair of wrought iron gates - which still stand today.

He had done this for years, but one day he lost his concentration, and when he slammed shut the wrought iron gates, he caught his thumb between them, and it was cut right off. There was no one around to help, so he wrapped up the stump tight in a hanky and ran to the General Hospital where it was stitched up and dressed. (This was in the days before microsurgery).

The episode was naturally a bit of a shock, but the injury did not incapacitate him for work. He turned up as usual the next morning to unlock the library, and there to greet him was his thumb, still gripped tight between the gates!

## Xeroxlore

May 1994

Looking at the past few "Traditional Titbits", you could be forgiven for thinking that we folklorists are only interested in traditions that existed in the mythical golden age before the Great War. Not a bit of it!

What I want to introduce you to this month could not be more up to date. We call it "Xeroxlore", although no book has yet been published under that title, because of threats of legal action from the Xerox Corporation. Perhaps they have good reason to be sensitive about their corporate image. Let's see.

Visit any office or factory, and here and there you are sure to find stuck to the wall some photocopied pearl of wisdom, perhaps a cartoon, maybe even the odd spoof letter or internal memorandum. Others are passed around surreptitiously because they are too risky - or indeed risqué.

**RULES OF THE OFFICE**

Rule 1

The Boss is always right.

Rule 2

In the event of the Boss being wrong, Rule 1 applies.

The subject matter of this underground literature is very wide. Most relate to the tribulations of office life such as an over-demanding boss, lazy colleagues, or trying to keep up with the workload. Others have political, "philosophical" or sexual motifs.

Most sexual sheets are amusing and harmless, some are crude - but still amusing, and a few are

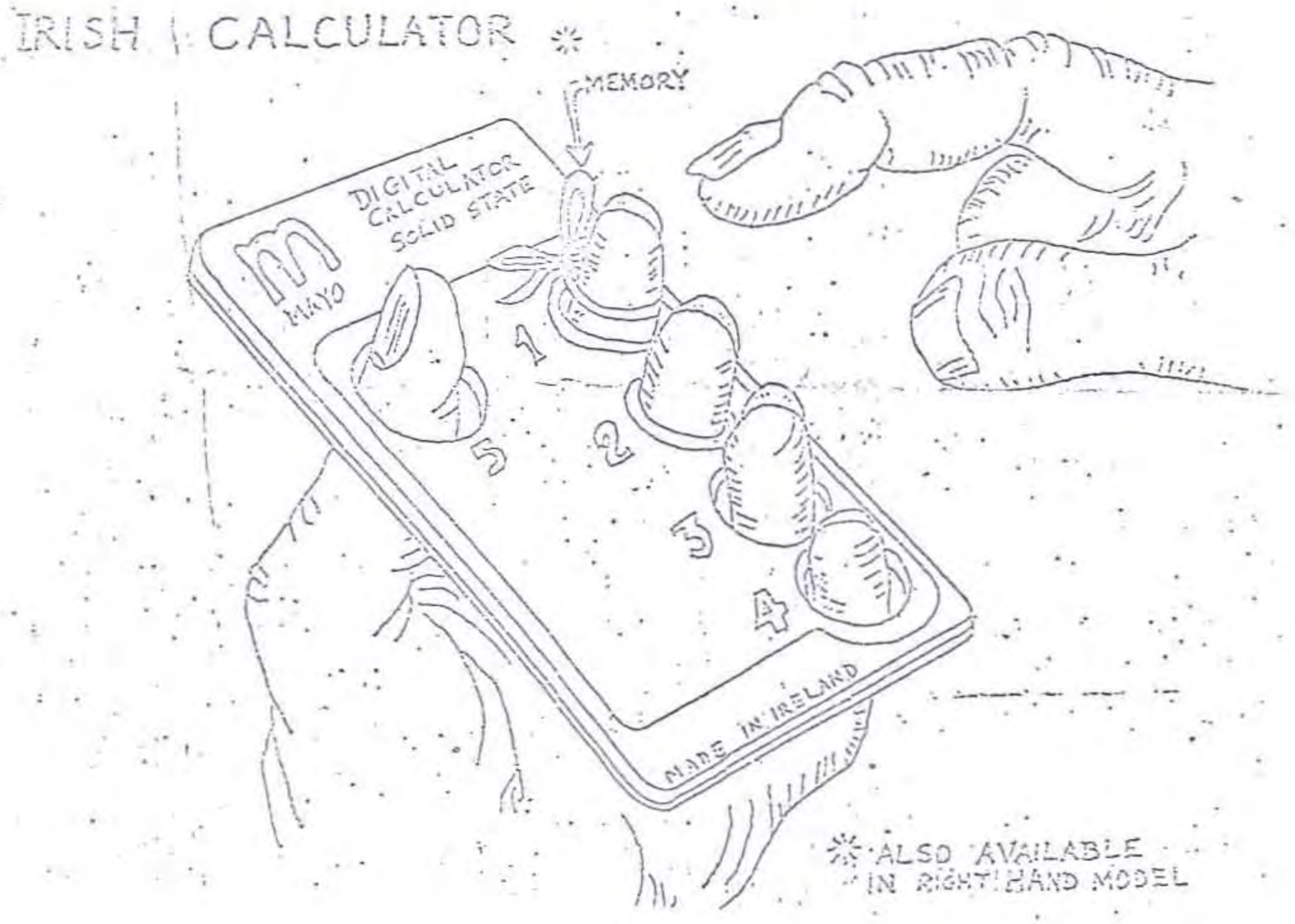
downright pornographic. There are also sheets of a racial nature which right-thinking people should find offensive.

Xeroxlore sheets are as traditional as any folk song. Someone must draw them or write them, but who? They are transmitted around the world in a similar way to folk songs too. You visit someone in their office, see a sheet you like, and ask if you can take a copy. Someone else does the same when they visit you, and so on. Photocopier engineers can also be a good source of xeroxlore. They often have their own little private collection tucked in their tool case.

You can usually assess the popularity of a sheet by the quality of the copy. As a sheet "travels", it picks up more and more spots and marks. It may also grow fainter and start to disappear off the edge of the paper. It follows therefore that every now and then someone decides to re-draw a picture or re-type a spoof letter, perhaps adding their own enhancements, or substituting the names of their workplace and workmates. So, like a folk song, the joke slowly mutates.

# PLAN AHEAD

The "Digital Calculator", which I reproduce below, although an unjustifiable slur against the Irish nation, nicely illustrates my point. This sheet has evolved through at least three versions. The first version did not have the memory function, and was not available as a right hand model. The model in my example, with both these improvements, has now been superseded. The newer design also includes a clear memory function, consisting of a razor blade on the end of a piece of string.



Some sheets are so popular they have been taken up by commercial publishers of postcards and posters, or even included in advertising. I first came across the now famous "Round Tuit" in xeroxed and hand cut form, but I also have it now on the back of a beer mat distributed by a supplier of laboratory chemicals.

On balance, xeroxlore is good for you. It's a way of getting your own back on your boss or having a laugh, and it generally lets you get things off your chest. In short, it helps to make life bearable.

What have you got stuck up on your wall? It's always good to see new examples, so why not bring your favourite sheets along to the next club night. We'll pin up some of the less contentious ones at the back along with a selection from my collection. When space allows, we could even sometimes include sheets in the Tiger Newsletter.

## Chain Letters to *Nature*

October 1994

*Nature* is the country's foremost academic science journal. Top scientists from all over the world vie with each other to publish their latest research findings in its weekly "Letters to Nature" columns. You will often see it quoted in the national press. Not the most promising place to find folklore you might think. Wrong!

A recent bit of "Scientific Correspondence" from Oliver Goodenough and Richard Dawkins is all about chain letters. Its title - "The 'St Jude mind virus" - refers to a long chain letter which is normally signed "St Jude". (St. Jude by the way is the patron saint of lost causes.)

Their proposition is that chain letters are "postal parasites" which are equivalent in many ways to biological and computer viruses - hence their term "mind virus". Infection is transmitted via the post, and the instructions in the letters parallel the self-duplicating instructions of a computer virus program or the DNA in a biological virus. Victims are manipulated by a mixture of guilt, fear, greed and piety to replicate the letters and thus continue the epidemic.

Whether or not a particular recipient chooses to pass on the letter, they may suffer mental distress that is as real as the symptoms of any biological virus such as the common cold. However, like viruses, a certain amount of immunity can be built up. If you feel you have

*Dear Friend,*

*This chain letter was started by a woman like yourself in hopes of bringing relief to tired, discontented women.*

*Unlike most chain letters, this one does not cost anything. Just send a copy of this letter to five of your friends who are equally tired. Then bundle up your husband and send him to the woman whose name is on top of the list.*

*When your name comes to the top of the list, you will receive 15,625 men - at least one of which ought to be better than your old man.*

*Have faith! Do not break the chain! One woman broke the chain and got her own husband back for life.*

*Sincerely,*

*P.S. At the time of writing a friend of mine has received 183 men. They buried her yesterday but it took three undertakers 36 hours to take the smile off her face.*

*(Source: Paul Smith "The complete book of office mis-practice", London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984)*

been duped by your first chain letter, you are less amenable to being duped by subsequent letters. Put another way, once bitten twice shy.

The St.Jude chain letter asks recipients to make and distribute twenty copies. If this was 100% successful, every man, woman and child in the world would receive an average of 4.5 copies of the letter after only eight links of the chain. That this has not happened shows that it is not a very potent "mind virus".

On the other hand, chain letters are very long-lived. The St.Jude letter claims to be at least as old as 1903. Although that has to be taken with a pinch of salt, postal services confirm that it has been around as long as anyone can remember. They are also very difficult to eradicate. Nationwide television, radio and press appeals have failed to halt a torrent of mail being sent to Craig Shergold of Surrey, after someone started a chain FAX on his behalf in 1989.

You can safeguard against viruses through vaccination, but curiously Goodenough and Dawkins have not extended their theory to cover chain letter "vaccines". I think they do exist.

A vaccine is a benign form of a virus that stimulates the body to produce antibodies against the virulent form. For "mind viruses", the vaccine comes in the form of a spoof chain letter. The xeroxlore sheet given opposite is an example. Once you have read a spoof chain letter I think you are more likely to be immune to a real one.

Of course, viruses are always mutating to form new strains, and so it is with "mind viruses". The Craig Shergold chain FAX, well-chronicled by Steve Roud of the Folklore Society, started out as an appeal for get well cards. Somewhere along the line, that changed into postcards, and more recently still, business cards have been flooding in at the rate of 3,000 packages a day.

Goodenough and Dawkins claim to have been immune to the St.Jude chain letter. However, by publishing the letter in full in *Nature*, they have in reality sent copies to several thousand scientists - far in excess of the specified twenty!

Chain letters often threaten bad luck if the chain is broken. However, I have it on good authority that all the bad luck can be exorcised by sending just one copy to a folklorist for the archives.

*(Sources: Nature, 1 Sep.1994, Vol.371, pp.23-24 & S.Roud, various items in; FLS News, 1990-93)*

## Should this Ballad Carry a Health Warning?

April 1995

The ballad of "Sir Hugh of Lincoln" or "The Jew's Daughter" is one of the "Child Ballads" (No.155), and has been found throughout the English-speaking world.

In summary, the ballad tells the story of little Sir Hugh, playing ball with the boys of Lincoln. During the game, he kicks the ball through the Jew's window, and in trying to retrieve it, the Jew's daughter entices him inside. Once inside, the daughter lays him out and in gory detail kills him "like a swine", wraps him in lead and throws him down a well. When he doesn't return, Hugh's mother sets out to find him. At the Jew's house, his ghost speaks to her from the well requesting a pious Christian burial. She recovers the body and the burial takes place, accompanied by a supernatural mass and bellringing.

On the face of it, this ballad is no more grisly or ghostly than many others of its ilk. But there is a difference. The ballad makes point of mentioning the Jew's house and the Jew's daughter. There is a tendency nowadays for people (especially "PC" people) to worry about the prominent reference to Jews in stories like this. I think that sometimes they are oversensitive. However, in this case the accusation of antisemitism is valid.

The ballad is based on a real historical event, but it only tells half the story. The missing half is nothing to be proud of.

The real story of Hugh of Lincoln took place in the year 1255. Hugh disappeared in Lincoln at a time when many of the Jews then living in England were gathered in the city for a celebration - probably a marriage. He had been seen playing with the Jewish children immediately before his disappearance. It was suspected that

he had been carried off and killed by the Jews as part of some ritual. Subsequently, his body was recovered from a well, and because a blind woman allegedly regained her sight when she touched the body, it was believed that he had died a martyr's death.

Hugh's mother sought the intervention of the king, and the investigation focused on a particular Jew called Jopin (or Copin). Afraid for his life, Jopin "confessed" to a bizarre series of events, in which he implicated virtually all the Jews in England. As a result of this confession, Jopin and eighteen other prominent Jews were hanged in Lincoln. A further sixty or seventy were committed to the Tower of London for execution, but were fortunately spared. Thereafter followed a train of persecution which eventually led to the expulsion of all Jews from England in 1290. It was four centuries before they were officially allowed to return.

Because of his alleged martyrdom, Hugh's story spread throughout Europe, acquiring many embellishments on the way, and attaining the status of a legend. His tomb became the centre of a cult at Lincoln.

What are we to make of all this? I think we can accept that the boy died and that his body was found in a well. Clearly his mother was inconsolable, and became convinced that the Jews had murdered him. She was abetted in this view by a myth that Jews periodically performed ritual murders of Christian children. Religious hysteria took over and the investigation took on the nature of a witch hunt - with tragic results. We have seen an equivalent situation recently with accusations of Satanic abuse.

Maybe Hugh was murdered, maybe he suffered a fatal accident - we cannot say. We only have the evidence of a very dubious confession to say he was murdered. But even if we were to take this confession at face value (and in reality it is too fanciful to be credible), the execution of nineteen people for the murder was very much an overreaction. The incarceration of the other Jews increased the injustice further.

The pernicious part of this story, which continues to have relevance today, is the myth of ritual murder. The nature of this myth is directly comparable with modern Urban Myths. However, it is unusual for urban myths to have any serious effects, whereas the slander of ritual murder has had deadly consequences for Jews for eight centuries or more. This is despite the efforts of various governments, ecclesiastical authorities and several popes to stress that the myth has absolutely no basis in fact.

Francis Child's introduction to the ballad lists a depressingly long litany of cases similar to that of Hugh. These go right up to the year 1883, which was just before his book was published. I have seen other cases listed elsewhere, and of course I do not need to elaborate on the actions of the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s.

So am I being over-sensitive about the ballad of "Sir Hugh of Lincoln"? I have been embarrassed to hear this ballad sung in the presence of Jewish friends, and I don't like to see the anti-semitic myth perpetuated. I am sure that no T.A.T.T. members would believe these legends for a minute. But as has been mentioned in *Folk On*, there has been an increase in violent action by the British Movement and others in our area, and it needs no further encouragement. If you think these things couldn't happen again here, think of Bosnia.

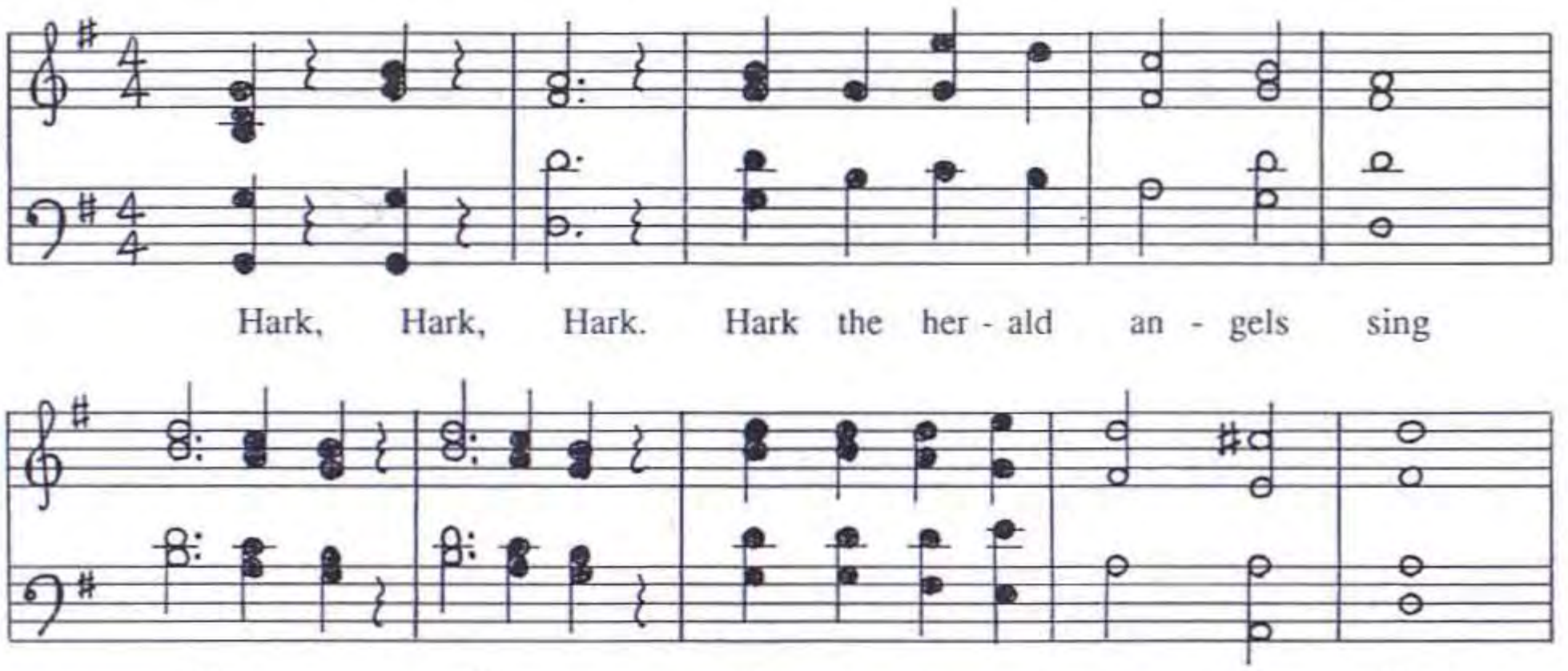
*(Further detail can be found in; F.J.Child "The English and Scottish Ballads : Vol.III", 1st Published 1885, Reprinted by Dover, 1965)*

## Gotham's own Carol

December 1994

I've been saving this titbit specially for Christmas. It's a local version of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing". Hailing from Gotham, an article in the *Nottinghamshire Guardian* (29th Dec.1956) says it may have been brought to the area by Yorkshire stockingers in the 18th Century. Miss Ethel Powdrill, the local Methodist organist, writing in the *Guardian Journal* (5th Dec.1968) said she believed the tune to be over 100 years old, but had never seen it on paper. The score below comes from an unsigned manuscript in Nottingham Central Library *(Ref.L78.4)*. It has a rousing tune.

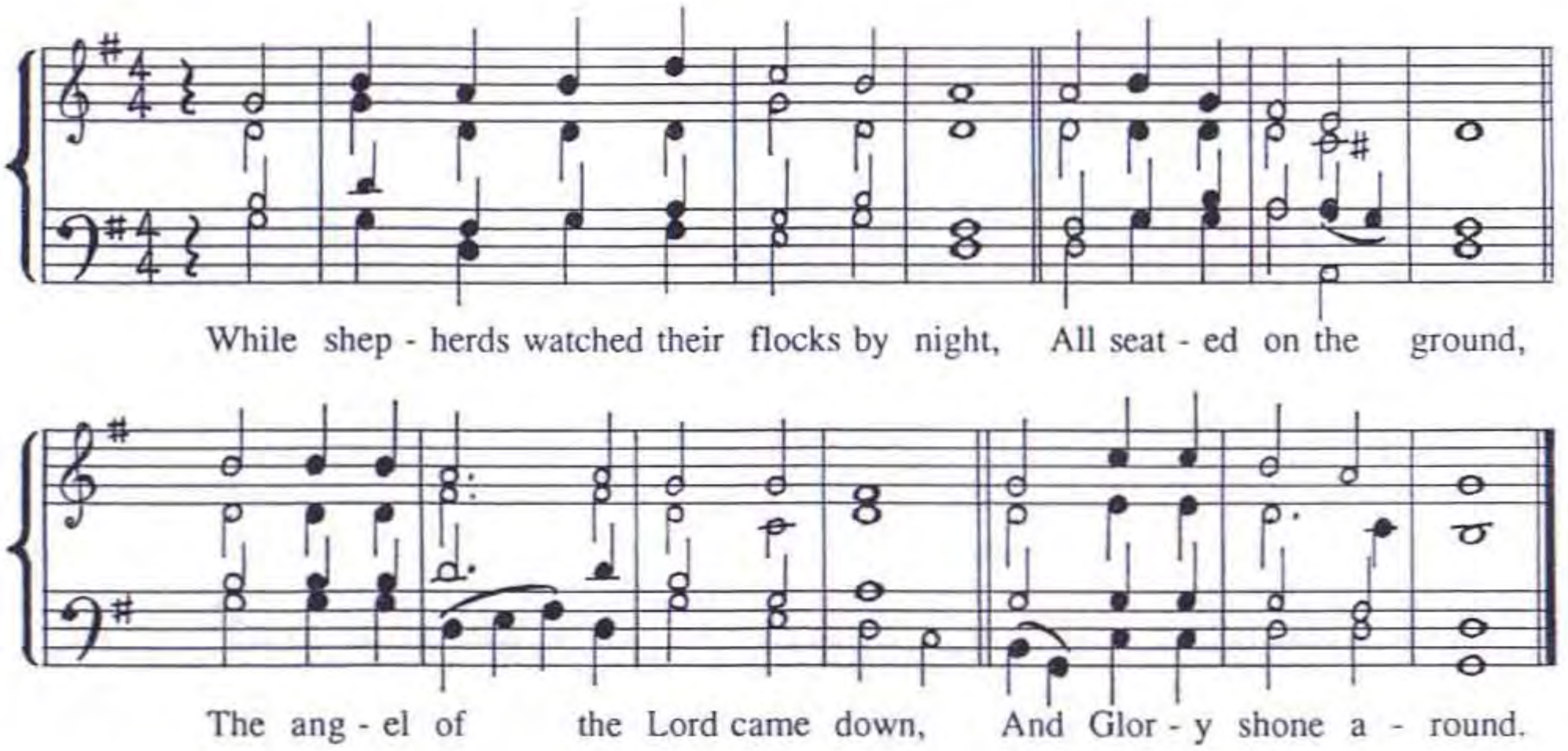
# "The Three Harks"



## Carol Tune from Cotgrave

December 1993

In these days of copyright, we usually think in terms of one song one tune. However, as folk songs and hymn books demonstrate, songs were often sung to any number of tunes in the past, and vice versa. There once used to be a lot of localised variants of Christmas carols. For instance the tune of "Ilkley Moor bar t'at" was originally a setting of "While Shepherds Watched". Try it. Notts also had it local carols, often arranged and sung as glees (unaccompanied three or more part harmonies). The following traditional carol tune is also a setting of "While Shepherds Watched". It comes from Cotgrave in the pre-colliery days of the mid 19th Century.




*(from the Nottinghamshire Guardian, Jan.1925)*

## Jurassic Folk

Is that erstwhile institution the **Folklore Society** jumping on the **"Jurassic Park"** bandwagon or what? When the 1993 volume of the society's journal "Folklore" dropped through my letter box, I quickly flicked through, and my attention was grabbed by several photographs of **dinosaur** skeletons. What have dinosaurs got to do with folklore you may ask? The photos went with a paper entitled "What were the Griffins?" by Adrienne Mayor.

Griffins were the mythical beasts with a body like a lion's and a head like an eagle's with a pronounced knob on top. They were sometimes also depicted with wings. Adrienne is a cryptozoologist, which means she tries to find rational explanations for beasts such as the Big Foot, Unicorn, Dartmoor Panther, etc. She has examined all the ancient references to the griffins, and they show that they were supposed to live near the eastern end of the Silk Road - probably in the Gobi Desert. This is a region where the ground is even now covered with large quantities of dinosaur bones, and they would have come to the attention of ancient traders travelling along the Silk Road.

Adrienne's thesis is that the myth of the griffin was based on stories about these bones, in particular the skeletons of ***Protoceratops***. I am usually a skeptic when it comes to explanations of the "true origins" of myths and customs, but I have to say I find the evidence quite convincing. And if a few more people get interested in folk because the timing of the article coincides with "Jurassic Park" mania, then that's alright by me.

# TIGER MISCELLANY

A Collection of Folklore Items from the Tiger Newsletter

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