



Crying the neck At Withiel

The Cornish Celebration of Guldhise (Harvest Home)

Described by Mrs Burton in 1929:

The calling of the neck took place on the evening of the day in which the last of the wheat had been cut and there was great rivalry among the farmers of the parish as to who should be the first to finish the wheat-cutting. On the occasion when I myself heard it the Rector of Withiel who farmed the Glebe, finished first, and the calling took place that evening in the Rectory Grounds.

Between 6 and 7 o'clock all the folk in the village, who were able to get away from their homes trooped to the Rectory, and took up their positions opposite the front door. On the steps which led up to it, the men who were to do the "calling" were already standing. These had been chosen not for the musical quality of their voices but for the strength of their lungs, as their ambition was to be heard as far afield as possible.

The leader held the "neck" in his hand. This was a small sheaf of wheat made from the finest ears, specially selected. It was tied with bright coloured ribbons just underneath the ears and the outside straws were woven into several plaits into which flowers were inserted.

Each of these was arranged around the inner straws in a curved position, something like the handle of a loving cup. The straws were then trimmed to a uniform length, and again tied with ribbons two or three inches from the bottom.

The leader stepped forward, and holding out the neck at full length called out in stentorian tones "*I hav'n!*" three times. The next man thrice responded with "*what av'ee?*" after which the next man responded with "*What Hav'ee*" after which all the harvesters shouted "*A nack!*" also three times. All the spectators then joined in calling "*Wooraw!*" (Hurrah). And this was also repeated three times.

This concluded the ceremony, and the villagers went back to their homes. The harvesters were regaled with a hot supper in the Rectory Kitchen, where the neck was hung from one of the rafters till the morning of the next Christmas day, when it was given to the best dairy cow as a special tit-bit for her breakfast.

On several following summer evenings the sounds of the calling of the neck could be heard from neighbouring farms, but that was the only occasion at which I was actually present. I was quite a small girl at the time, yet I can recall it as if it only took place this summer, and I think it is a great pity the quaint old custom is no longer observed.

(Tom Miners Old Cornwall Society Magazine, 1929)





In 1930 Stan Opie recorded further details of this ceremony at both St Wenn and Withiel :

The following ceremony is remembered at the putting in of the the "crow" or "crow sheaf" in the building of the rick. This would be well raised on poles (6 or 7 lengthways with the cross poles) laid across the tops of the stone "keps and posses" (caps and posts).

The "Mow stead" or rick was built up sheaf by sheaf and when it came to the putting in of teh top corner sheaf the following verse would be proclaimed so that it could be heard all over the parish:

*The crow sheaf is in
Tis time to begin
To drink strong beer
And we've got it 'ere
While one of them would lift the beer jar*

(Michael Tangye, Old Cornwall Society Magazine 1982)

Cock In Britches

Dance and Song provided by Mrs Rowse of Treesmill in 1982

The Words of the song and the mime of the dance tell the story of the corn:

When the Seagull comes on land,
Take the seed lip in your hand,
Sow one for the rook and one for the crow,
One to rot and one to grow,
If that old crow eats more than his share,
Rake the stack and he won't be there...

The weeds must go the corn to grow,
So keep the paddle going
Keep the paddle going, keep the paddle going,
The weeds must go, the corn to grow
So keep the paddle going

Take the zwy and swing it high,
Take the zwy and swing it high,
If you can whet the zwy yourself,
Take the zwy and swing it,
If you don't whet the zwy yourself
I will whet it for thee

Swing them high and swing them low
And we'll be there before thee
We'll be there before thee
We'll be there before thee
Swing them high and swing them low
And we'll be there before thee

The corn it is for we to keep
Up on high we'll toss the sheet
The wind will blow the dust away
So say good bye to gertie grey
With whitest bread and sweetest milk
If thee don't come I'll break the hilt

We'll thrash away, we'll thrash away
So keep the threshel going
Keep the threshel going
Keep the threshel going
We'll thrash away, we'll thrash away
'Till we again start sowing.

