

2.6 Crying the Neck

Sources

Publications

W.J.P. Burton, "Calling the neck" *Old Cornwall* 1929, Vol. 1, No.9, p. 27 -28.

Tom Miners, "Fragments that are left", *Old Cornwall* 1932 Vol 2 No. 4, p.12.

C A Collins , " Cutting the neck", *Old Cornwall* 1951 Vol. 5 No. 1, p. 20.

Michael Tangye, "Customs Remembered", *Old Cornwall* 1982, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 309.

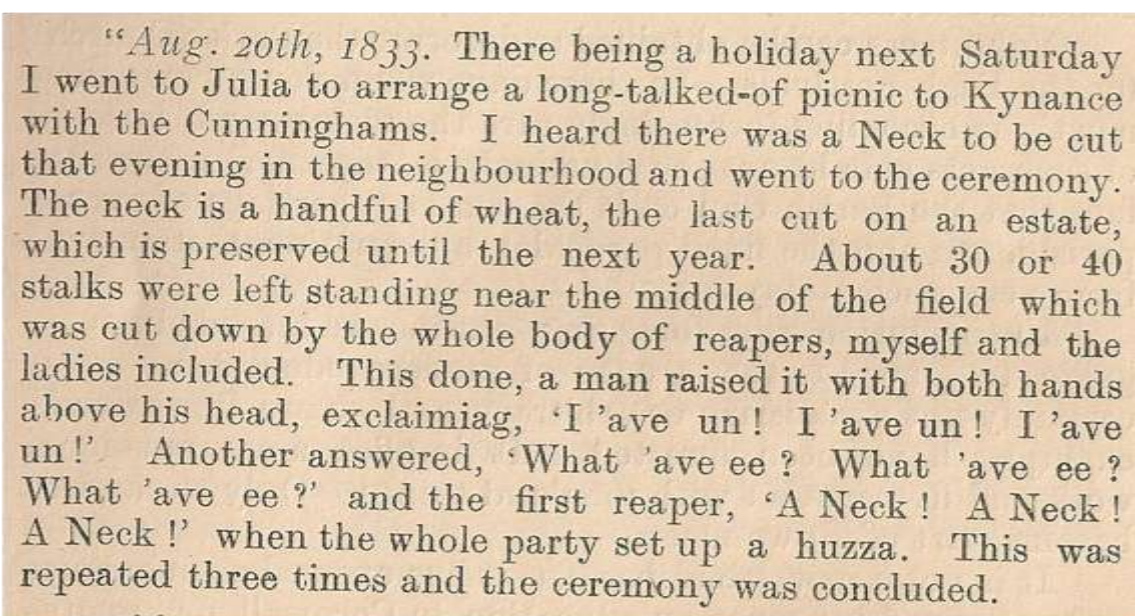
Observation

Withiel 14th September 2006.

Notes

From Diary of Rev C A Collins :

" Cutting the neck", *Old Cornwall* 1951 Vol. 5, No.1, p. 20.



"Aug. 20th, 1833. There being a holiday next Saturday I went to Julia to arrange a long-talked-of picnic to Kynance with the Cunninghams. I heard there was a Neck to be cut that evening in the neighbourhood and went to the ceremony. The neck is a handful of wheat, the last cut on an estate, which is preserved until the next year. About 30 or 40 stalks were left standing near the middle of the field which was cut down by the whole body of reapers, myself and the ladies included. This done, a man raised it with both hands above his head, exclaiming, 'I 'ave un! I 'ave un! I 'ave un!' Another answered, 'What 'ave ee? What 'ave ee? What 'ave ee?' and the first reaper, 'A Neck! A Neck! A Neck!' when the whole party set up a huzza. This was repeated three times and the ceremony was concluded.

Tom Miners, "Fragments that are left", *Old Cornwall* 1932, Vol. 2, No. 4, p.12.

In East Cornwall there was a formula for "Crying the Neck", "Three aw necks and one hurrah. The Three aw necks and two hurrahs. Three aw necks and three Hurrahs" An Old Farmer gave me the following chant on the putting in of the "Craw Sheaf":

The Craw Sheaf is in
Tis Time to Begin
To Drink Strong Beer
And we've got it here

This was followed by three cheers.

W.J.P. Burton, "Calling the neck" *Old Cornwall*, Vol. 1, No. 9, p. 27 -28.

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 handles 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 hev'en!" three times. The next man thrice responded with "What hev'ee?" after which all the harvesters shouted "A nack!" also three times. All the spectators then joined in calling "Wooraw!" (Hurrah) and this also was 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 the 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.

Michael Tangye, "Customs Remembered", *Old Cornwall* 1982 Vol.9, No. 3, p.309.

HARVEST

The gathering of the harvest was once accompanied by great rejoicing and several customs marked each stage of the occasion. No doubt the celebrations were eagerly awaited and brought a little colour into an otherwise drab existence, and good food to empty stomachs.

First came the 'neck cutting.' One of the earliest references to this occurs in the Accounts of the Manor of Tehidy for 1771⁵ referring to harvesting on the farm attached to the Mansion. The reaping here was done by women, who protected their hand, or hands, with 'harvest gloves,' and used 'crooks' to cut the wheat. the men did the 'binding and mowing' i.e. binding the sheafs and building them into mows. The Bassets "Paid for 3 doz. of bread for Cutting ye Neck of Wheat 3.0."

resembled that of 'cutting the neck.' An observer recorded this ceremony in 1867.

"Hurrahing at the neck cutting, and the pitching up of the crow sheaf are less frequent than formerly, what is termed cutting the neck is well known throughout the county but catching the crow sheaf only in the eastern part. It was the sheaf that was placed to complete the mow at one end; when the sheaf was thrown up, the person making the mow would call out, "I have it! I have it!" The person throwing up the sheaf enquiring "What have you? What have you?" The reply would be "A crow! A crow!" Then all being assembled in the mowhay, a hearty hurrah would be given which was frequently heard at a considerable distance."¹⁴

Stanley Opie recorded further details of this ceremony at St Wenn in the 1930's.

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

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

"The crow sheaf is in,
Tis time to begin
To drink strong beer
An we've got it 'ere."

While one of them would lift the beer jar."¹⁵ This rhyme was also recorded at Withiel at the same period.¹⁶

In 1867 it was customary in East Cornwall at harvesting time of "presenting everyone employed, with a large cake every night after supper. While the party were draining the large bowls of milk punch, the farmer's wife or daughter would place the cake on the table. In the first quarter of the present century many farmers gave their labourers and tradesmen a feast at Christmas, called in the Eastern part of the county 'The Harvest Feast,' from the fact that all who had assisted in the harvest were invited this custom too is going or gone."¹⁷

Mr. E. Reynolds of Ruan Highlanes near St. Mawes, now 80 years old, worked on the Caerhayes Estate for 'Squire Williams' during the 1920's. He remembers the old farm labourers at that time always made two pheasants from the wheat and pinned one on each gable end of the corn rick, with a stick, when it was completed.

The custom was once widespread throughout Cornwall and in 1809 was witnessed by an observer one evening whilst travelling by horseback from Torpoint to Liskeard. A crowd of farm workers had gathered in a harvest field:

“The small remnant of corn that remained standing soon yielded to the sickle, when a blooming daughter of Ceres advanced in front of the party she displayed, in seeming triumph, a small bunch of wheat-ears, intermingled with flowers and bound together with ribbons. In a moment all was silence. She waved the trophy over her head — an honest rustic caught the sight, and instantly exclaimed in seeming rapture, “Anneck! Anneck! hurrow!” “TI have it! I have it!” rejoined the damsel, upon which the whole company burst forth in a grand chorus of “Anneck! Anneck! hurrow!” And this they repeated three several times. In vain were all my enquiries for the meaning of this singular custom.”⁶

If this was accurately recorded it would appear to differ from the present ceremony. There must also arise the question as to whether ‘Anneck!’ ‘Horrow!’ are really ‘A neck!’ ‘Hurrah!’ or some long forgotten Celtic expression.

A correspondent in 1898 wondered if the correct version was “Us have’n! Us have’n! An eck! An eck!” Suggesting ‘eck’ derived from the Greek ‘Echo’ — ‘I have.’⁷

Jonathan Couch⁸ records that the ‘neck’ at Polperro, consisted of a miniature sheaf with projecting arms and bedecked with daisies and other flowers, perhaps representing some forgotten spirit or even a human sacrifice as a form of thanksgiving.

In 1888 Thomas Cragoe recalled ‘crying the neck’ at Old Kea on the Fal, when a boy, stating that his father stood “at the inner door, bottle in hand, and to every nut brown, toil bent labourer ... was proffered a gleaming glass of Jamaica. Master and men settled down to festive board, each man and woman taking home a neck cake.”⁹

This celebration was known in the 1930’s as the ‘neck cutting supper’.¹⁰ It was also recorded at the same period at Treen, Porthcurnow.

“It is still remembered that on Christmas Eve the ‘neck’ from the last harvest was given to the finest and fattest ox on the farm.”¹¹ This custom was also recorded at Withiel in East Cornwall¹² and at Polperro¹³ where it was given to the master ox in the stable.

Appendix 2.6 Crying The Neck (See contents page for link to mp3 audio clip of cry in English and Cornish)
Withiel 14th September 2006.

Master of Ceremonies – John Bennallack, St Wenn, (St Columb Old Cornwall Society
Cutting the Sheaf Mark Hawken, (Previously farmer at Whitehay Withiel)

Ceremony was held at the top field of Blackhay Farm and part returned to Withiel
Village hall for supper organized by the Old Cornwall Society and a singing session.

Audio file : Field Recording

140906-1: Introduction by Johnn Bennallack

140906- 2: Cutting the Corn

140906-3: Pysadow – Prayer in Cornish

140906-4: Pen Yar – Crying the neck

140906-5: Pen Yar Crying the neck

140906-6: Hymn in English – We Plough The Fields and Scatter

Images:

Mark Hawken and
John Bennallack
Crying the Neck
Ceremony Withiel
14th September 2006

