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STAVE DANCES

A Stave is particularly a symbol of the various Friendly Societies who had an annual Club walk and Feast day with banners and band. An interesting account is given in "West Country Friendly Societies" by Margaret Fuller published by the Oakwood Press for the Museum of Rural Life, University of Reading.

The annual feast day was the climax of the friendly society's year, the only public event in the life of the societies and the procession of members demonstrated their unity and pride of association to their families, friends and spectators who could come from miles around. Everyone shared the festive atmosphere of the day, enjoying the colour, noise and excitement. The directions for procedure and instructions for behaviour were the subject of numerous rules, surprising for an annual event with little connection with the conduct of the society's business. The day usually began with roll call at the club house about 10 am. An orderly procession was formed behind a band, the banners unfurled and all walked to church for a sermon, then to the club house for the feast, often taking an indirect route to include a tour of the district. The feast could be at the public house that normally served as headquarters if it was big enough. Most clubs perambulated the district after the feast, calling on friends and benefactors who each extended hospitality. Later all joined with the public in the enjoyment of music, dancing, sports or a visiting fair.

The common days were Whit Monday and Oak Apple Day, 29th May, but Easter or days in July or August were sometimes used or local traditional festivals like 'Coker Feast Monday', 'Tuesday in Donyatt Play week' or 'Monday in Odcombe Feast week' were fixed upon.

Members were obliged by their rules to attend the feast day celebrations or be fined a shilling or half a crown. They were exempt only if sick or living more than a specified distance away. They might be fined even if late. The procession would be order as they stand on the roll, with the longest serving members at the front. Some places allowed women and children in the procession, sometimes to represent absent members, sometimes as a relic of the times when they were included in the membership of such societies.

Most of the village societies died with the rise of the national societies and improved social benefits. Many photographs can be found all over the country of processions. Some men's societies still exist such as at Priddy, the Victoria Inn with its feast still on Whit Monday, and South Harting with a procession like a carnival and at Bampton, Oxon. Many more clubs survived in the 1930's such as Crewkerne and Timberscombe and at some places such as Warminster several clubs combined for the day. There were a number of Women's Societies and at least one survives at the Rose and Crown Inn at Nether Stowey and whose feast is on the last Friday before Midsummer's Day. However such societies were never numerous because before the 20th century all a women's goods belonged to her husband or father and there was little point in a benefit club that might not benefit the saver.

There has been no national review of the village societies, their operation or survival.

Interesting accounts exist in Harvey "Club Day, being a description of a Kilmersdon 'Old Club' Annual Parade" published in 1927 and in William Barnes "Whitsuntide an' Club Walken" published in "Poems of Rural Life in Dorset Dialect" 1886. The following comes from the main reference,

Having assembled in regulation splendour of Sunday clothes, cockades, ribbons, staves and banners,

"Zoo off they started, two an' two,

Wi' painted poles an' kots o' blue"

to church behind the band,

"Whiles fifes did squeak and drums did rumble,

An' deep beazzoons did grunt and grumble."

In smaller churches the staves had to be stacked in the porch,

"An' then at church there wer sich lots

O' hats a-hangen up wi' knots,

An' poles a-stood so thich as iver,

The rushes stood beside a river."

The preacher denounced the very things that the society fined,

"An' Mr. Goodman gi'ed em warnen

To spend their evenen lik' their mornen;

An' not to pray wi' mornen tongues,

An' then to zwear wi' evenen lungs;

Nor vu'st sheake hands, to let the wrist

Lift up at last a bruisen vist;

Vor clubs were all a-mean'd vor friends,

He twold em, an' vor better ends

Then twiten vo'k an picken quarrels,

An' tipplen cups an' empten barrels, -

Vor meaken woone man do another

In need the kindness ov a brother."

At the Feast,

"An' there they meade sich stunnen clatters

Wi' knives an' forks, an' pleates an' platters;

An' waiters ran, an' beer did pass

Vrom tap to jug, vrom jug to glass:

An' when they took away the dishes

They drink'd good healthes, an' wish's good wishes,

To all the gre't vo'k o' the land,

An' all good things vo'k took in hand;

An' woone cried hip, hip, hip, an' hollow'd,

An' tothers all struck in an' vollow'd;

An' grabb'd their drink wi' eager clutches,
 An' swigg'd it wi' sich hearty glutches,
 As vo'k, stark mad wi' pweisson stuff,
 That thought theirzelves not mad enough."

After the unfamiliar experience of so much food and drink,

"An' after that they all went out
 In rank agean, an' walk'd about,
 An' gi'ed some parish vo'k a call;
 An' then went down to Narley Hall
 An' had some beer, an' danc's between
 The elem trees upon the green.
 An' down along the road they done
 All sorts o' mad-cap things vor fun;
 An' danc'd, a-poken out their poles,
 An' pushen bwoys down into holes....."

In addition to presenting a respectable personal appearance, the members of many societies wre required by their rules to wear ribbons in their hats. The usual colour was blue. Combe Hay had a cockade of purple and pink ribbons on the hat. Top hats were common and the ribbon would be wound round the top of the crown, with the rosette pinned to the side, with its tails flowing down beyond the brim of the hat. Sashes appear often in photographs but were seldom mentioned in rules. Those preserved in museums are elaborate and in expensive materials. The photos show that they were worn over the right shoulder, often 3 inches wide, crossed ends by the waist and pinned with a rosette.

The Staves only appeared on Feast Day. The "Club Stick" as it was usually called or wand, pole or tipstaff, varied from 4 to 8 feet long and was stained or painted either in a single colour or striped. At Kilmersdon the 4 foot stave was painted blue with red and white spiral stripes, decorated with red, white and blue tassels and ribbons hanging from below the polehead. At Wookey, where they met at the Ring O'Bells Inn, the wooden knob was painted red and mounted on a blue pole 6 foot 4 inches long. At Donyatt by Ilminster their 4 foot 4 inch stave had a gilt head with a blue tassel and a ribbon a yard long. The blue ribbon fixed to the blue staves of Hatch Beauchamp had to be no less than one yard and a half.

The length of the pole varies from about the length of an old rifle to the length of a rake handle. Old ones at the Rural Life Meseum at Reading are about 6 foot long and tapered, either because they were made from coppiced wood or planed to be so. They were naturally a little flexible and light in weight so that with a substantial pole head the centre of gravity was quite high. They were easy to dance with. Too often the balance can be poor and the stave bounces on the shoulder and bruises. As an implement for dancing the hanging decoration is important and the more the merrier with materials of different weights allowing the haberdashery to flow out behind the dancer.

The use of brass pole heads which make such a fine show was confined to Somerset, south Gloucestershire, south west Wiltshire, north west Dorset and north east Devon. During the 18th century Bristol had a large brass industry and it is believed Bristol was the main source for the brass pole heads. Although the variety of design was enormous, the Reading collection illustrated in the reference book comprises 333 examples, there were two clearly defined types, one consisted of a flat sheet metal shape slotted into a tubular socket or ferrule to fit on the top of the stave, and the other consisted of a three dimensional shape formed in the round with an integral socket. The pole heads would be from 5 to 8 inches high. The shapes included fleur-de-lis, variations on spear heads, halberds, crowns and representational designs deriving their subjects from the names of the meeting places. The majority of the round emblems were urn, ball or acorn shaped. Other examples can be seen in many museums, at Blaise Castle, Salisbury, Bridgewater, Taunton and others. Wooden stave heads were very common, they just did not survive to be collected.

Cutting pole heads from sheet brass is not too difficult although brass sheet is not too cheap. Sometimes a machine shop will produce a punch for a small run of the same shape. However today it is effective to make them of cast aluminium as any secondary school metal working department can do or in mild steel and plate them. Making up an example in wood and card will help in any discussion with workshops.

The Societies usually had banners or flags. The banners betrayed kinship both in design and use with the military standard and were either almost square or of the common rectangular flag shape. They were made of silk with painted or applique decoration and often edged with a fringe. The designs were of two types - those which were heraldic in character and consisting of individual symbols on a plain background and those showing allegorical or historical figures. Early on these were very often locally made and fine examples of folk art but later they became plain ensigns with the Union Jack in the first quarter and the name of the Society across the lower half. The appearance and carriage of the banners were much like those used still by Trade Unions.

Many Societies ended the day with a dance and some included dancing in the activities during the Club Walk. Raymond in "English Country Life" 1934, mentions the dancing of Hunt the Squirrel and the Four Hand Reels. Maud Karpeles collected a finishing dance in Wiltshire which was a version of Up the Sides and Down the Middle. At Faulton step dancing is specifically mentioned in a local history. Where formal dancing was done it was derived directly from contemporary social dance. Dancing seems to have featured west of Gillingham, Dorset. A newspaper account described dancing at a wedding at Buckhorn Weston, the men carrying their staves to do a version of the 6 hand reel. The minute book of Fifehead Magdalen states that Haste to the Wedding, Pop Goes the Weasel, the Dorsetshire March and Spithead Fleet would be practiced and danced at the stations on the walk. At Stourton Caundle, pronounced Stert'n Candle, a note exists of the agreed first and second parts.

Raymond wrote " when the hour for dancing came there was a certain want of unanimity about the brass but this was amply compensated for by the precision of the big drum. The youth of Sutton (Veny, in Wiltshire) with peonies in their button holes, without invitation, seized the willing maids all dressed in white and frisked and bobbed them round as merry as lambkins. You cannot waltz upon the grass, and they danced the old country dances of long ago which were so much like romps."

The final dance of the evening for the Churstanton Unity Friendly Society was ' the cock and the hen dance' which is said to have started with a row of men facing a row of women with a space of about 10 or 12 feet between. Each side then advanced working heads and arms and pretending to peck each other. They then paired off and carried out further movements. The dance is said to have been very pretty when properly carried out, but, after some years, it was practiced with some vulgarity and banned from then on.

As can be seen the tradition of stave dancing is very thin although dancing is strongly associated with the Club Days. The material from Stourton Caundle can be assembled as separate dances with the first parts as the common figures and the second parts as the choruses. The list of dances from the neighbouring village can be interpreted using published notations of dances with those titles of that period.