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**Notes of Ancient British Forest Life-Material and other**

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RELICS OF ANCIENT BRITISH FOREST LIFE—  
MATERIAL AND OTHER.

By JOHN BELLOWS.

Two thousand years ago, when Julius Cæsar came to Britain, he described it as covered with forests, and the cities in it as merely fortified woods; while the houses of the natives were built of wattling, plastered with clay.

A century or two later, when this Island formed part of the Great Empire, we find the Britons famed for their Basket-work, which was regarded in the markets of Rome as of the best: and this pre-eminence in the art of plating or working wood has left its mark on our language down till the present day. Not only are the local terms *Pott*, for fruit hamper, and *Poot*, for basket used in salmon fishing, from the Welsh, or old British, *Bwt*<sup>1</sup>: but the name "Basket" itself, is but a slight change of *basq*=woven or platted, and *coet*=wood; while *wattle* appears to be only a less guttural form of *coet'l*, meaning twigs, or small wood: and *hurdle* is probably from the same root.

With some modifications, the mode of building with wattle has lasted all the way down from Cæsar's time till our own days, in parts of England where, from the abundance of timber, or the free growth of the willow, the material has been at hand for the purpose. And apropos of the willow, we should note that our local word *sallies*, for basket-twigs, is undoubtedly the same as the Latin *salix*: though whether it is a cognate form, or one derived during the Roman occupation, it may not be easy to determine.

While then, in parts of the country, such as Cornwall, where wood is less abundant, the traces of the ancient mode of building

<sup>1</sup> The *b* in Welsh has much the sound of *p*. Hence we find Shakespeare putting into the mouth of a Welshman the words "Pillows of purning prim-stone."

with wattle or timber have disappeared, we may reasonably expect to find such traces in districts like Epping Forest and the Forest of Dean still preserved to us. And we do find them, in the form of old timber-framed houses, whose panels, or interspaces, are filled up with wattle and clay. For there is a gradual transition from the hut of the Briton as it existed in Cæsar's time, to the timber-framed house of some centuries after. As civilization advanced, the need would make itself felt for houses of larger size than had sufficed for sheltering a single family: and larger timber would be employed: so that by the time the Roman occupation was fairly established here, while the public buildings, such as castles and temples, and so on, were constructed of stone, the better class of dwelling-house appears to have been a stone foundation, raised but little above the ground, with a framing of timber above it.

While timber was what it is now in America—"lumber"—costing next to nothing, the walls of such houses were made, when not wattled, of a series of uprights roughly squared and placed close together, like the fingers on one's hand held upright. The openings between were made water-tight by filling them with clay, beaten up with straw, or moss, or similar medium, to bind it.

This upright position of the timber suited our wet climate, as it facilitated the running off of the water better than laying logs longitudinally one on another.

This was the stage at which building had arrived by the time the Saxons came here; and hence the Saxon verb for "to build" was *timbrian*: shewing that stone played but a subordinate part in their construction.

Down till the time of, say Henry III., the forests still covered about one-third of the country; and timber was abundant; but as time went on, and it grew less so, the uprights of the walls got placed a little more asunder, a little more clay, or in some cases, brick and mortar, being used to fill up the intervals.

We now come to the period of houses such as are still standing—dating say between three and four centuries back: and, as a rule, we shall, I believe, find that the older the house of this timber-framed class, the closer will be the uprights in its walls: and *vice versa*.

This refers to dwelling-houses. Barns and such farm-buildings as were not used for dwelling in, or the poorest class of cottages, did not need such an expensive wall: and so we find the interspaces in these often filled up with wattling, made either with strong rods of willow, or other pliant twigs: or, with bands of split wood, roughly speaking from  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick, and 2 or 3 inches broad, interlaced, and plastered. Some good examples of this may be seen at Longhope. In Herefordshire there are very numerous instances of such wattling and timber-framing in combination; and a friend of mine owns some cottages thus built about two centuries old, which are still in excellent condition.

When we get cottages built with timber-frame, and white-washed, we have specimens of such houses as certainly existed in Britain early in the Christian era, and which may be regarded as among the most persistent *material* relics of the Forest life in this Island.

There are, however, antiquities in intangible things as well as in those which are material; and archæology in reality only deals with the material as a means of getting an insight into these; or in other words its object in examining old buildings, and old places or things, is to recover, by their aid, the evidence of actions or manners and customs which have partially or wholly disappeared.

Standing in the quaint old Court Room at the Speech House, we are reminded by the date carved upon the doorway that the house was built in the time of Charles II.; and that consequently the room itself cannot have been used for the holding of the Forest Courts for more than two centuries.

But there was a "Verderer's Court" held in the Forest of Dean, as well as in several other Forests, long before the time of the Stuarts; and if we take the trouble to trace back this tribunal to its establishment, we shall find ourselves in the presence of an antiquity which leaves even the Roman occupation of Britain in the foreground.

Let us premise that the Verderer's Court is held in this room, not as other courts in the kingdom, or elsewhere in Europe, are now held, at periods of a month, or six weeks, or three or six

months ; or at any other even division of time, as time is now reckoned. They are held *every forty days*, at *twelve o'clock at noon*.

The oldest written laws we have which relate to the Forests of Britain, are those of Henry III., dating from 1225 ; and of Canute, from, I believe, 1018.

Canute's Forest Charter was written in Danish : but a remarkable point in it is that in its mention of the several offices, such as Verderer and so on, it gives in duplicate the current, or accepted, *English* words for such offices. This shews that Canute did not establish them as something new : but merely dealt with what was already established and, so to say, in full work. It would have been a very strange thing had this been otherwise : for the Forests of England in the days of Canute covered at least one-third of the whole country ; and their influence must, therefore, have been very powerful in the political changes that affected the Island.

We must remember that when a country is conquered by a foreign invader, a change in the dynasty, while it revolutionizes much, leaves still the great bulk of the manners and customs of the people untouched. It is not the policy of a conqueror, who is compelled to alter much, to do so for the mere sake of alteration, or to meddle with matters which do not affect the stability of his government. Take, as an example, the conduct of the British in India, where the mass of the people are left in as much enjoyment of their old habits and customs, as is compatible with ruling them at all. In accordance with this, we find that William the Norman scarcely touched the customs obtaining in the Forests of England.

The Charter of Henry III. goes more fully into detail, on some points, than that of Canute : but for the reasons we have just mentioned, and from other evidence, it is clear that he made no material change in the old order of things. In this charter we have the order of the Forest Courts specified ; and these were *three* in number. First came the Court of Attachment (called in Dean Forest, "Court of the Speech"), which was to be held *every forty days*. It was simply for the hearing of evidence, or getting up the cases, ready for the *Swainmote*. The Swains were free-men : and

their *mote*, or assembly, took place *three* times a year, when they received the evidence of *three* witnesses in each case; and the Verderers and other officers of the King passed sentence in accordance with the laws laid down in this charter. From this Swainmote Court there was a final appeal to the justices in *Eyre* (*Eyre* being the Norman equivalent of *Itinerant*; because they went on circuit). We must mark, however, the period at which this grand Court of *Eyre* was held—*i.e.* once in *three* years. As already pointed out, *forty days* was a recurrent period which bore no relation to the divisions of time known to either Saxons or Normans: for their months and years were like our present ones, with the slight exception of the modern change made about leap-year. But we have the clue to it in the constant employment of the figure *three* in all Forest matters: for, to go back, we find the Court of *Eyre* held every *three* years; the Swainmote Court *three* times a year: *three* witnesses needed to prove in it—and so on. Similarly, we find in the perambulations of the forest, that they were to be made every *three* years, and that the Royal officers appointed to make them were to be accompanied by *nine* (= *three* times *three*) foresters in fee, to see their interests safeguarded. And in Manwood's Forest Laws we have an ancient verse quoted, which summarizes in popular form the duties of foresters. It is drawn up in *nine* lines. We must bear in mind that 3 was the sacred or lucky number of the Druids; and its square—9, consequently regarded by them with special veneration or preference.

Now let us digress for a few moments, to enquire what was the length of the Druid *year*: and we shall see more clearly, on our return to the main subject, the reason for the 40 day division of it.

Cæsar, in his very brief but pithy account of the Druids, tells us that they transmitted the mysteries of their craft orally: but that when they had occasion, as they sometimes had, to employ writing, they made use of the *Greek* alphabet. As he further tells us, they were very proficient in *astronomy*, it seems clear that they must have derived their astronomical knowledge from the same source as their literature—and therefore that they had it from the Greeks.

Now both the Greeks and Romans, at the time of Cæsar's visit to Britain, made their year to consist of 360 days only. This they had from the Egyptians. We may smile when we come to think of the difficulties into which such a division of the year would land them: for as it would not coincide with the solar year, in process of time the feasts, &c., which had been instituted for one season of the year would fall due at a totally different one; and cause endless confusion. To obviate this, the Egyptians allowed five days to fall between the old year and the new, without really belonging to either; and they were substantially followed in this practice by both the classic nations. Thus in Rome the odd days were called "*terminalia*," and were not reckoned in the payment of servants, &c. Julius Cæsar changed this inconvenient year by the introduction of what is known as the Julian Calendar: giving 365 days to the year, and adding one day to the leap-year. Up till his time, the last day before the termination was according to Roman reckoning, the "6th of the Calends of March:" and on leap-year Cæsar's system repeated—*i.e.* made *two* days date as "6th of the Calends of March:" whence our term *Bissextile*. It is a curious circumstance that for, at any rate, more than a century after this change had been made in the Roman year, we still find the soldiers paid for 360 days and not for 365: for a soldier's year's pay in the time of Domitian gives an even number of *ases* per day, if it is divided into 360 parts. Suffice it for the present purpose, that at the period Cæsar wrote his account of the Druids, it is clear that their year consisted, like the old Greek and Roman year, of 360 days only. If we divide this by 9—the number on which they laid such stress, we have *forty days* as the month, if it may, by a verbal licence, be so termed: and this at once accounts for forty days having been the ancient period of assembling for the Forest Courts. It would be tedious to enumerate all the facts which shew the importance of this number 9 in the Druidical system, and by tradition, in the Forest customs of this country. Certain it is that it goes back to a very remote antiquity: to a period, in fact, before the separation of the families from the North West of India whose descendants now people Europe.

In the Highlands of Scotland, among the heathenish customs that, even to our own day, have held their own, there is one connected with the Beltine, or fire-worship, in which a libation and a cake play a part : but the cake must have on it *nine* little bosses, to indicate something : *what it may* indicate being forgotten.

In our own county, as well as in other parts of England, we find places called *Nine Elms* : clearly pointing to a season when a group of *nine* of these trees was purposely planted there : for we should meet, were it not for the superstition attached to the number, with other numbers—such as *Eight Elms*, *Six Elms*—and so on : *but we never do*. We often hear of *Seven Oaks*, etc.—but not of *Elms*, in connection with seven.

If we turn to the Romans we find them setting up *nine* Gods, and in their earlier days making their weeks of *nine days*. As the markets were weekly, the word *nundina* came to mean markets : and this sense survived the chronological division itself. Even after the nine-day week was abandoned, they retained a group of nine days in each month, under the name of *nones*. Then, too, we have the old story of the Sibylline books—how *nine* was the perfect set, which the old witch diminished by *threes* till only *three* were left.

The Druids retained this curious value for *three* to such a degree as to hand down to us a system of poetry which classed all its subjects into *threes* ; and of which the *Triads* are the representative. It is but natural, then, that as the Druids had their centres of worship and administration of justice, in Forests, that the influences they left should be more strongly impressed upon the inhabitants of the Forests than elsewhere : and that the series of courts they held should continue to be held as to their seasons or periods, even when changes of dynasty, &c., had altered all other points in connection with them. We have written evidence that these periods have remained unchanged from the year 1225 until now—six centuries and a half : and as we have no evidence as to how much farther back than even that they were in existence, it seems clear, from the divisions of time allotted to them being Druidic, that the courts themselves, in some form or other, go back

to the Druidic times. This would, I believe, be proved sufficiently by the evidence already adduced, as to the periods of

9th of a year	}
3rd of a year	
and every 3rd year	

but there is one more very curious confirmation which ought to be added. The Druids reckoned their time by *nights*, and not by days—that is, they counted the day as commencing at noon, and including the whole night, ending at next noon.

Now at Minchinhampton Common, where some curious ancient customs prevail, there still lingers on one which is called “May-boughing,” on “old May-day,” as it is termed. On that day the boys and girls arm themselves with boughs of the beech, and perform certain games with them: but exactly as the clock strikes 12, they throw them away, under pain of being stigmatized as “May fools.” Noon marked the beginning of the Druid day: and the Verderers’ Court at the Speech House, besides being held every *forty days*, or at the *ninth* of the Druid year, opens exactly at *twelve o’clock at noon*. The significance of these periods becomes the more evident, if we compare them with the times at which courts sit for other purposes; for we shall look in vain, among any other tribunals, for anything similar to the customs we have been considering in relation to the “COURT OF THE SPEECH.”