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On Old Tools and Implements

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ON OLD TOOLS AND IMPLEMENTS.

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Read at Cheltenham, 16th July, 1889.

[THIS Paper was intended to fill an interval which I expected to occur between two papers at a Spring Meeting at Stroud, an informal gathering of which the papers were not for publication. It was not wanted at Stroud, and with reluctance I read it at the Summer Meeting at Cheltenham ; with more reluctance I consent to its publication now, not because I consider the subject unsuited to our discussion and our Proceedings, but because it is dealt with so lightly, and so imperfectly.]

I want to claim your attention for a few minutes to what I call my Plea for Old Tools ; and I have been the more anxious for this opportunity because the appeal can properly be addressed only to such an audience as this. In the great workshops of Birmingham tools must disappear as soon as they are superseded ; there is no time to waste over, or space to store, any on which an improvement has been effected ; in like manner the trim-pared villas of Bournemouth have no lumber-room in which old-fashioned things may linger. So it is in a country town, in a manufacturing district like this, that I should most hopefully begin a search for survivals.

How many relics can we find, I don't say centuries old like Mr. Hyett's astrolabe, but of our own or our fathers' time ? Nay, how many can I recall which were familiar enough on the edge of my memory, not yet of 50 years' reach, yet are now treasures for a museum ? I can remember the cook's tinder box, with its flint and steel, and store of tinder and long matches tipped with yellow brimstone, though I never saw her use it : then there was another implement meant to do the work better, like a big tin pistol, in the butt of which you turned a wheel hoping to let successful

sparks fly. Where are these tinder boxes now? I am told that a neighbour treasures a part of his old box, and have a friend, a grave Professor at Cambridge, who proudly shows one he picked up in Leicestershire, and boasts very much that he has brought fire out of it! The operation would surprise us as much as it would the Andaman Islanders, who have never learnt to make fire, though it is no wonder in the Roman Church, for that the Paschal taper requires to be lighted from fresh fire year by year; two years ago, during the Easter Eve ceremonies in the chief church in Havre, I saw the beadle hard at work with his flint and steel, and his unsuccessful clicking made me think tenderly of poor women busy over damp tinder in the past. And when she had her light—think of the candle she had to use! Is there any place in Stroud which could supply a real rushlight? or a rushlight stand? that big cylinder full of holes to frighten timid children? And how many pairs of snuffers can we raise? These implements, I fancy, had but a short reign, and just as they had received their last improvements, the unlucky discovery of the virtues of bismuth wire and plaited wicks uperseded their pride. I remember my mother's last pair, the creaking and screaming as it opened its fateful jaws, and the crack and snap as the inner door shut down, too often with the light inside as well as the soot. Those candles which required snuffing are lost, and all others seem inclined to follow, under pressure of competition from oil lamps of all shapes and sizes. Perhaps systems of lighting have changed more than ought else within memory; we are becoming impatient even of gas, clamouring for the dainty electric light even in our bedrooms; yet look at this! thirty years ago not a cottage in North Scotland had more light in evening than was given by a rush wick floating in coarse fish oil, giving a lurid flame and an excessive abundance of greasy fetid smoke; thirty years ago and you might have bought them by the dozen in any village there; now the competition of cheap mineral oil has almost destroyed the memory of them! Six years back, my attention was drawn to some in the Antiquarian Museum in Edinburgh, and the one I have shewn you was obtained by a friend from a crofter in Caithness, and is

worth half-a-guinea in any curio shop in Edinburgh.¹ This is an older relic which was treasured by my grandmother, though I believe she did not know its use ; as you see it is a holder for a coil of wax taper ; when I was a boy an old clergyman, of whom I was very fond, used one habitually.

Again, where the milder manners of the present time threaten only "the utmost rigour of the law," which Mr. Justice Mathew considers a fair invitation to trespass, in my time all the notice boards warned of "mantraps and spring-guns;" how many of either have you seen? Jeffreys, in his *Gamekeeper in a Southern County*, gives an elaborate description of a man-trap ; in our last spring excursion someone saw a broken one at Old Sodbury Manor House,² and I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. Wathen

¹ The lamp is called a *goose-nib*, and evidently derives its name from its shape, being like the skull and upper bill of a goose, wrought in iron ; each lamp has two of these, the lower one rivetted to the bar by which the lamp is hung up, the other to a rod which hangs on a tooth projecting from this bar ; the oil and wick are put in the upper one, the lower seems intended to catch the overflow : besides these, a hook and spike are provided for trimming. The wicks are called *naib*, or *rushes* ; in fact they are rushes, and authorities are careful to warn you that they must be pulled at full moon. The oil was made from the dog-fish, and the day when the fish were boiled down was anything but a gaudy-day. The friend to whom I am indebted for my goose-nib shewed me a yet more curious, and much rarer, tool, a sort of rough spring pincers fastened to an upright to hold the splinter of bogwood which serves as candle in inland places ; it was called *puir-man*, because it took the place of the poor wayfarer who might earn his night's shelter by holding the light.

² Mr. Wathen's Mantrap was a more frightful object than I had expected, and I begged permission to keep it for some weeks for the edification of holiday visitors. The trap proper consisted of two square-cornered jaws, not only serrated but armed with sharp spikes some two inches long ; they were kept open by a pin from one side which caught under a projection from a plate in the middle, which plate would turn aside, and free the pin, under the pressure of any stray foot ; this, of course, answered to the plate on which in a rat-trap the bait would be fixed ; the jaws being thus freed, two strong springs came into play, which were rivetted to the two ends of the flat bar, which made the base of the whole. The whole weighed 54 pounds ; the bar was 6 feet long, and had a hole at each end for a pin to fasten it down ; a victim would be held by the jaws, and their spikes, just below the knee, and could certainly not reach both springs at once, so that he must wait for help to get free ; Jeffries says that he knew a man who had managed to get home with one at his heels, but I am sure Goliath of Gath could not so have dragged this one. I have curious evidence of the length of time such things must have been out of use, in that two of my neighbours,

for permission to show this magnificent specimen. Spring guns I have only seen in the Museum at Reading, and cannot make out what harm they could do beyond giving an alarm; yet I remember to have heard that the use of them was given up in consequence of an *obiter dictum* of a judge at Norwich assizes about 1847; he spoke somewhat as follows: "Your private legislation would make trespass, which at worst is only a misdemeanour, a capital crime; if a case comes before me, I shall know what to call it."

From tortures pass to punishments: how many stocks can you find in the county? When I was a boy every village had its pair, fixed generally between a duck-pond and a nettle-bed, and I believe I remember seeing a pair occupied in the market place at Shrewsbury. Now the only one I know is that handsome wrought-iron one at Painswick, with a rail and the churchyard wall to rest against, and a gas-lamp instead of a whipping-post; any man might be proud to be enthroned there, yet I have been told that the police officer at Painswick held for a long time a warrant of about 1860 directing him to seat there for two hours a man who had the bad taste to run away! At Huntley there is a wooden pair; it was described to me as complete, but on cross-examination I could not be sure that it had a whipping-post; that fell out of use sooner, and though we might manage to put a patient safely away away in the stocks, I fear a sturdy rogue might hunt the county over without finding a constable capable of tying him up in proper form, and beating him "till his back was bloody." The form of the companion pillory is known to us all from pictures, but a London acquaintance, who had been out with the Archaeological Association every year of its existence, and with the parent society several years before,¹ had never seen an original pillory till we visited Marlborough from Devizes in 1880. Of the gallows I don't suppose we have any local relics, even though Sir now about 65, natives of different parts of the country, remember to have seen such traps hung up in apple trees in their youth, but had never actually beheld one set.

¹ I think I have seen lately, in the *Illustrated London News*, some sketches from Waltham Holy Cross, in which the pillory figures as still existing.

Anthony Kingston, who no doubt had been put to inconvenience by hurried makeshifts in the course of his campaign in the west, left lands to endow one in Sheepscombe, and another in Painswick.

From outdoors let us go back again home. I knew smoke-jacks, but never saw a turnspit at work ; what is left of the old kitchen fittings, and what of the laundry implements of my youth ? Does anyone *dolly* clothes ? or do we find we can wear them out fast enough by boiling them with strong chemicals ? Do laundresses now amuse themselves with *gofering* machines ? or *crimping* machines ? and what has become of the old array ? The modern mangle is a poor toy in comparison with the old box filled with river pebbles, which was forced backwards and forwards by a strap passing over a wheel : even in my time that was giving place to the first patent, in which a chain replaced the ricketty strap, and the reversing action was automatic, with a noise which rivalled a steam roller !

I don't like to talk about tools lest I should display my ignorance ; for instance, I have not seen a flail for thirty years, but am not sure that it is not used still for some kinds of seeds, though not for corn. About spinning and weaving I am on somewhat surer ground. Perhaps the earliest of all human inventions was that of a spindle and whorl to help twist thread, but, though it is still used by wayfarers in India, and no doubt by savage tribes all the world over, it has been forgotten in this country for many generations ; yet of its remote descendant, the spinning wheel, how many genuine specimens, wheels not made to meet a fad of the last three years, can be found round the country ? and how many specimens of the old hand-loom, working, I believe, in every house in this neighbourhood in the youth of men still living, so that, I am told, its rattle gave a nickname to the villages about White's Hill and Randwick ? Three years ago the Vicar of Uley told us at Dursley that one was still to be found at work in his parish ; as a loom implies yarn, I wish I had asked how the old weaver furnished himself with that. In the Manchester Exhibition of 1887, I wanted to explain the working of a loom to my boy, but there were only two handlooms, both for silk, both

hampered with such a multitude of healds that I could make no headway.

About means of locomotion I had better say nothing ; a stage-coach is too big for any museum, and I don't know that any detached bit could be worth keeping. A sedan chair I have once seen put to good account by being fitted up as a china cupboard ; two or three were to be hired in Shrewsbury when I was a boy, and a very smart one is still in use at the Pumproom Hotel in Bath. But how about packsaddles ? Once, when I was walking up the hill towards Rodborough, an old man pointed out the line of the old road up which packhorses scrambled in his boyhood ; I could not believe his point of time, but a century back I fancy most of the Stroud valley cloth made its way to market by such means ; are any packsaddles left ? and could any one properly charge them ? A packsaddle is a more ticklish thing to load than a railway van.

If I had been writing this paper for any other town I might have been tempted to ask if there are any relics of the trappings used in falconry ; but in Stroud I should be sharply pulled up by Major Fisher's assurance that falconry is neither a dead nor a decaying sport. But, as cock-fighting has now been illegal for some 40 years I trust we may speak of its ancient popularity and wide prevalence as extinct ;¹ if we cannot find any of the " fair silver spurs " of the past, have any of the fair steel ones escaped ?

Now I have a practical end in view in this short paper ; our Society is concerned, not only with antiquities of pre-historic and mediæval times, but also with those of our own ; and I want to instigate people to treasure up the relics of old fittings with the object of keeping a plain memory of their uses. I think people would be surprised if they could realise with how frail a tenure we hold most of our handicrafts ; in spite of the vast mass of printed books which load our shelves, I am convinced that printing would be lost, and would need slow re-discovery, if all towns

¹ After I had written this pious hope, my friend, Chancellor Ferguson, sent me his paper on Cock-fighting, wherefrom I learn that a late dignitary at Carlisle kept his cocks and cockpit up to his death, some 10 years back ; and that the sport still lingers in the county ; mains are still fought for £100 a side !

could perish at once. I may conclude with a story which will show how a useful art may be lost ; fifty years ago, the iron of the Sone valley was smelted by aid of bellows built up of big leaves pinned together with thorns ; great search was made for a specimen to be sent home for the Exhibition of 1851, only one imperfect specimen could be found, and either funds or skill were wanting to repair it, or make a new one. Now the art is lost beyond recall.
