



A Typical Large Village Fairs as Illustrated by the Illustrated London News

Purton Fair - As Described In 1826

To the Editor of the Every-Day Book
August 18, 1826.

Dear sir,

Perhaps you or some of your readers, may be acquainted with a small village in the north of Wiltshire, called Purton, very pleasantly situated, and dear to me from a child, it being the place where I passed nearly all my boyish days. I went to school there, and there spent many a pleasant hour which I now think of with sincere delight; and perhaps you will not object to a few particulars concerning a fair held there on the first day of May and the third day of September in every year.

The spot whereon Purton fair is annually celebrated, is a very pleasant little green called the "close," or playground, belonging to all the unmarried men in the village. They generally assemble there every evening after the toils of the day to recreate themselves with a few pleasant sports. Their favourite game is what they call backwording, in some places called singlestick. Some few of the village have the good fortune to be adepts in that noble art, and are held up as beings of transcendent genius among the rustic admirers of that noted science. They have one of their number whom they call their umpire, to whom all disputes are referred, and he always, with the greatest possible impartiality, decides them.

About six years ago a neighbouring farmer, whose orchard joins the green, thought that his orchard might be greatly improved. He accordingly set to work, pulled down the original wall, and built a new one, not forgetting to take in several feet of the green. The villagers felt great indignity at the encroachment, and resolved to claim their rights. They waited till the new wall should be complete, and in the evening of the same day a party of about forty marched to the spot armed with great sticks, pickaxes, &c., and very deliberately commenced breaking down the wall. The owner on being apprised of what was happening, assembled all his domestics and proceeded to the spot, when a furious scuffle ensued, and several serious accidents happened. At last, however, the aggressor finding he could not succeed, proposed a settlement; he entirely removed the new wall on the following day, and returned it to the place where the old one stood.

On the morning of the fair, as soon as the day begins to dawn, all is bustle and confusion throughout the village. Gipsies are first seen with their donkeys approaching the place of rendezvous; then the village rustics in their clean white Sunday smocks, and the lasses with their Sunday gowns, caps, and ribands, hasten to the green, and all is mirth and gaiety.

I cannot pass over a very curious character who used regularly to visit the fair, and I was told by an ancient inhabitant that he had done so for several years. He was an old gipsy who had attained to high favour with all the youngsters of the place, from his jocular habits, curious dress, and the pleasant stories he used to relate. He called himself "Corey Dyne," or "Old Corey," and those are the only names by which he was known. He was accustomed to place a little hat on the ground, from the centre of which rose a stick about three feet high, whereon he put either halfpence or a small painted box, or something equally winning to the eye of his little customers. There he stood crying, "Now who throws with poor old Corey – come to Corey – come to Corey Dyne; only a halfpenny a throw, and only once a year!" A boy who had purchased the right to throw was placed about three feet from the hat, with a small piece of wood which he threw at the article on the stick, and if it fell in the hat, (Which by the by it was almost invariably sure to do,) the thrower lost his money; but if out of the hat, on the ground, the article from the stick was claimed by the thrower. The good humour of "Old Corey" generally ensured him plenty of custom. I have oftentimes been a loser with him, but never a winner. I believe that no one in all Purton knows from whence he is, although everybody is acquainted with him.

There was a large show on the place, at which the rustics were wont to gaze with surprise and admiration. The chief object of their wonder was our "punch." They could not form the slightest idea how little wooden figures could talk and dance about; they supposed that there must be some life in them. I well remember that I once undertook to set them right, but was laughed at and derided me for my presumption, and boast of *superior knowledge*.

There was also another very merry fellow who frequented the fair by the name of "Mr. Merryman." He obtained great celebrity by giving various imitations of birds, &c., which he would very readily do after collecting a sufficient sum "to clear his pipe," as he used to say. He then began with the nightingale, which he imitated very successfully, then followed the blackbird - linnets - goldfinch - robin - geese and ducks on a rainy morning - turkeys, &c. &c. Then, perhaps, after collecting some more money "to clear his pipe," he would imitate a jackass, or a cow. His excellent imitation of the crow of a cock strongly affected the risible muscles of his auditors.

The amusements last till near midnight, when the rustics, being exhilarated with the effects of a good strong Wiltshire ale, generally part after a few glorious battles.

The next day several champions enter the field to contest the right to several prizes, which are laid out in the following order:

- 1st A new smock.
- 2nd A new hat with a blue cockade.
- 3rd An inferior hat with a white cockade.
- 4th A still inferior hat without a cockade.

A stage is erected on the green, and at five o'clock the sport commences; and a very celebrated personage, whom they call their *umpshire*, (Umpire), stands high above the rest to award the prizes. The candidates are generally selected from the best players at singlestick, and on this occasion they use their utmost skill and ingenuity, and are highly applauded by the surrounding spectators. I must not forget to remark that on this grand, and to them, interesting day, the inhabitants of Purton do not combat against each other. No – believe me, sir, they are better acquainted with the laws of chivalry. Purton produces four candidates, and a small village adjoining, called Stretton, sends four more. These candidates are representatives of the villages to which they respectively belong, and they who lose have to pay all the expenses of the day; but it is to the credit of the sons of Purton I record, that for seven successive years their candidates have generally returned the victors.

The contest generally lasts two hours, and, after that, the ceremony of chairing the representatives takes place, which is thus performed: Four chairs made with the boughs of trees are in waiting, and the conquerors are placed therein and carried through the village with every possible demonstration of joy, the inhabitants shouting "Purton for ever! Huzza! My boys, huzza!" and waving boughs over their triumphant candidates. After the chairing they adjourn to the village public-house, and spend the remainder of the evening as before.

The third day is likewise a day of bustle and confusion. At repair to a small common, called the cricket ground, and a grand match takes place between the Purton club and the Stretton club; there are about twenty candidates of a side. The vanquished parties pay a shilling each to defray the expense of a cold collation, which is previously provided in a pleasant little copse adjoining the cricket-ground, and the remainder of the day is spent convivially.

I remember hearing the landlord of the public-house at Purton, (which is situated on one side of the green,) observe to a villager, that during the three days' merriment he had sold six thousand gallons of strong beer and ale; the man of course doubted him, and afterwards very sarcastically remarked to me, "It's just as asy, measter, for he to zay zix thousand gallons as dree thousand!" Does not this, good Mr. Editor, show a little genuine Purton wit!

I have now, my dear sir, finished, and have endeavoured to describe three pleasant days spent in an innocent and happy manner; and if I have succeeded in affording you any service, or your readers any amusement, I am amply rewarded. Allow me to add I feel such an affection for old Purton, that should I at any time in my life visit Wiltshire, I would travel twenty miles out of my road to ramble once more in the haunts of my boyhood.

Believe me, my dear Sir,
Yours very sincerely, C.T.
August, 18, 1826.

P.S. Since writing the above I have received a letter from a very particular friend who went to Purton school five years, to whom I applied for a few extra particulars respecting the fair, &c., and he thus writes, "Dear C. You seem to think that with the name I still retain all the characteristics and predilections of a *hodge*; and therefore you seek to me for information respecting the backsword playing, fair, &c.

Know that as to the first, it is (and has been for the last two years) entirely done away with, as the principal "farmers" in the place "done like it, so don't suffer it. As to the fair, where lads and lasses meet in their best gowns, and ribands, and clean smocks, you must know, most assuredly, more of it than I do, as I seldom troubled about it. You must bear in mind that this fair is exactly the same as that held in the month of May, but as no notice has been taken of it by Mr Hone in either of his volumes, I suppose it very little matters whether your description is of the fair held in May or September."

I have to lament, my dear sir, the discontinuance of the ancient custom of backswording at Purton village; but so long as they keep up their fairs, the other loss will not be so much felt.

C.T.

August 30, 1826.

I forgot to mention in my particulars of Purton-fair, that Old Corey, and the other celebrated worthies, only come to the September fair, as the May fair is disregarded by them, it being a fair principally for the sale of cattle, &c. and the September fair is entirely devoted to pleasure. Perhaps you can introduce this small piece of intelligence, together with the following doggerel song written for the occasion.

C.T.

TO THE WORTHY AND RESPECTABLE INHABITANTS OF PURTON

*This song is most respectfully inscribed,
By their ever true and devoted humble servant,
Charles Tomlinson*

PURTON FAIR

Come, neighbours, listen, I'll sing you a song,
Which, I assure you, will not keep you long?
I'll sing a good song about old Purton fair,
For that is the place, lads, to drive away care.

The damsels all meet full of mirth and of glee,
And they are as happy as happy can be;
Such worth, and such beauty, fairs seldom display,
And sorrow is banished on this happy day.

There's the brave lad of Purton at backword so clever,
Who were ne'er known to flinch, but victorious ever;
The poor boys of Stretton are basted away,
For Purton's fam'd youths ever carry the day.

'Tis "Old Corey Dyne," who wisely declares,
Stretton's lads must be beaten at all Purton's fairs;
They can't match our courage, then, huzza! My boys.
To still conquering Purton let's kick up a noise.

"Old Corey's" the merriest blade in the fair,
What he tells us is true, so prithee, don't stare;
"Remember poor Corey, come, pray have a throw,
'Tis but once a year, as you very well know."

But – here ends my song, so lets haste to the green,
'Tis as pretty a spot as ever was seen;
And if you are sad or surrounded with care,
Haste quickly! Haste quickly! To OLD PURTON FAIR.

The Everyday and Table Book, by William Hone, 1827