

## **Peculiar Customs in the Village of Ford, Northumberland**

The records of the Ford and Etal Estate in North Northumberland were deposited in the Berwick Record Office many years ago. Slipped in amongst the invoices, receipts and other official documents was a folded sheet of parchment covered in spidery handwriting, its black ink faded but still legible. Entitled 'Peculiar Customs Still Practiced in the Village of Ford', the document is undated, but is believed to be late 18th century.

This fragment of social history inspired the following story.

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### **A Fair Beatin'**

A ring of schoolboys formed a makeshift arena in the small yard outside the schoolroom in Ford Village. Two boys entered the arena, each gripping a black cockerel. The schoolmaster held out his hand and each boy placed a coin in his cupped palm. The two boys turned to face each other.

"This time, to the death," declared the schoolmaster and raucous cheering broke out all around. Joseph Hutton and Will Fenton stared unblinking into each other's eyes and awaited the signal for the fight to commence.

"Howay!"

The cockerels in the boys hands were thrust towards each other, once, twice, then dropped to the ground. They landed on the frozen earth and sprang together in a flurry of feathers. Joseph and Will watched the fighting birds in silence, as the other boys yelled their support for their favoured combatant. Feathers flew in all directions; beaks and spurs pierced flesh. It was impossible to tell which bird was on top, until one of them lay motionless on the ground in a pool of deep red blood, with the other circling around it. Will Fenton rushed forward.

"No!" he cried, as he knelt down by the dying bird. The schoolmaster stepped in and pulled him away, then lifted the bird up by its neck and gave a sharp twist. He thrust the limp, lifeless creature towards Will.

"Here, run home with it. Your mother will want to get it in the pot before Lententide."

John Hutton sat at the head of the table, in the centre of the tiny cottage. He opened the large bible and placed his right hand on the page. He bowed his head and began to recite:

"If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen fae an ox, and four sheep fae a sheep."

Joseph Hutton listened to his father's voice in silence, with eyes cast down at the oak table. "..... If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed fae him; fae he should make full restitution; if he hev nothin', then he shall be sold fae his theft. Exodus, Chapter twenty-two, verses yin to three."

The man closed the holy book and looked across the table towards his son.

"Look at me laddie."

Joseph raised his head and glanced at his mother. She gave a weak smile, then stood and began to clear away the pots from the evening meal. Joseph turned to face his father. The

man eased the bible to one side and picked up a small earthenware jar. He upended it and Joseph watched its contents spill out onto the table. His father began to count the coins, arranging them in neat piles as he did so. He placed the last coin on its pile and stared down at the small collection.

“Sixteen coins. Yin penny less than was there the last time ah looked. What hev ye tae say laddie?”

Joseph kept his eyes focussed on his father’s, but remained silent. The man banged the table with his hand and the piles of coins were scattered, some clattering onto the stone-flagged floor. A tear ran down Joseph’s cheek as he answered:

“Ah’m sorry father.”

The man rose from the table and unbuckled the leather belt from around his waist. He folded one end to obtain a better grip. Joseph stood up and removed his shirt. He walked around the chair and gripped the sides with both hands. The first strike of the belt’s buckle felt cold on Joseph’s back. He bit into the wooden chair back as the lashes continued.

“Enough!”

Joseph’s mother grasped her husband’s arm.

“Enough, John, stop now.”

The man turned to face his wife.

“Ah’ll no hev a son o’ mine branded as a thief. Jed Taylor wes sent to the colonies for tekini’ a rabbit from Delaval’s land. Is that what ye want for ye bairn?”

He turned back to face his son and raised the belt.

“He’ll take twelve lashes.”

The bell rang out in the tiny schoolroom in Ford Village and the schoolmaster rose from his desk.

“School is finished for the day. You may leave in an orderly manner. Joseph Hutton and Will Fenton are to remain behind.”

The two boys pushed their chairs under their desks and stood behind them, hands clasped behind their backs and eyes cast to the ground.

“Come forward, come forward.”

They crossed the schoolroom and stood in front of the schoolmaster.

“That’s a fearsome bird you have, Hutton, did you raise it yourself?”

“Yes sir.”

“You were a worthy Victor.”

“Thank you sir.”

“So, are you looking forward to the Chase on Palm Saturday boys?”

The boys answered in unison.

“Yes sir.”

“And you, Fenton. You will be Victor’s Man.”

There was a short pause before Will replied.

“Yes sir.”

The schoolmaster slapped each boy on the back in turn. Joseph winced and his face turned white.

“Are you unwell boy?”

“No sir.”

“Off home with the pair of you then. Be sure to run all the way. You’ll be needing to prepare for the big day.”

The moment he got outside Joseph raced off through the gate. Will set off in pursuit and was soon on the other boy’s shoulder.

“Ye’ll hev tae run faster than that in the Chase, laddie, or ye’ll get a fair beatin’.”

Joseph did not reply, but tried to increase his speed. Will matched his pace.

“And ye needn’t be thinking ah’ll be tekin’ some o’ ye blows for ye.”

Once more Joseph tried to increase his pace. Will caught up with ease and whacked Joseph on the back.

“Bye, bye tortoise,” he cried as he raced away.

“There’ll be no Easter celebrations in this hoose. D’ye ken what ah’m sayin’ Margaret?”

John Hutton pushed his plate to one side and leaned across the table towards his wife.

“It’s a pagan festival; if them folk in the church up on the hill wants tae mark it, then so be it, but ah’ll hev none o’ it in this family.”

“Hush John, ye’ll waken the bairns.”

“If the bairns wake to witness the word of the Lord, then ah’ll no be sorry.”

Margaret crossed the room to check on the four children sleeping in the box bed, then returned to her chair by the fire.

“Ye’ve to gan canny, John. Ah’m feard o’ what’ll happen if we gets on the wrong side of folk. The flittin’s not long away and they could hire a younger hind.”

John spat into the fire.

“Ah’ll no be worshipin’ false idols to suit any man.”

“Naebody’s askin’ ye tae worship false idols, John. It’s just a bit o’ harmless mischief. And Joseph’s been up at the crack o’ dawn all through lent gettin’ ready fae it.”

“Haud yer wheest woman.”

“Nae John, ye’re a guid man, but ah’ll no stay silent and see my bairns homeless and starvin. Ye’ve tae let Joseph run the Chase in the morn; I’ll hev time tae get him and the other bairns over tae Etal for the meetin’.”

John Hutton stood up and marched across the room. He grabbed his jacket from its hook, opened the door and lurched through it. The door slammed behind him.

The early morning sunshine had melted the frost and the worn stones felt damp beneath Joseph’s feet. He leaned against the cottage door and gulped in the cool air. Smoke was rising from the chimney now and the oats would be simmering in the pot. Joseph looked up the hill towards the church. Its tall spire towered over the two rows of tiny one-room cottages, occupied by the estate workers and their families. Joseph lifted the sneck, pushed open the door and entered the cottage. Its occupants were already seated around the table and the boy joined them without speaking. John Hutton did not raise his eyes from the open bible that rested on the table in front of him.

“We’ve been waitin’ fae ye, laddie.”

“Sorry father.”

The man began to read from the holy book.

“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.....”

A babble of schoolboys surrounded the church of St Michael and All Angels, each shouldering a large palm frond. The schoolmaster emerged from the porch with Joseph Hutton and Will Fenton by his side. He addressed the excited crowd.

“The Victor and Victor’s Man will run from the church down to the river, and back over Ford Hill. In the time-honoured manner, you boys will run thrice around the church before you give chase.”

He turned to Joseph and Will.

“Are you ready boys?”

The two boys nodded. The schoolmaster slapped each of them on the back.

“Howay!”

Joseph sped past the ancient gravestones and away down the hill towards the village. The sound of the mob racing around the decaying church faded into the distance. Will followed close on Joseph’s heels.

“Ha! The tortoise has turned .....to a hare.....has he.”

Joseph registered the surprise in his companion’s voice and smiled, but did not reply. He looked ahead towards the village. A crowd had gathered outside the rows of cottages. As they got closer, Joseph could hear the shouts from the farm labourers, their wives and daughters, enjoying a rare respite from their daily toils. The encouragement spurred him on, and Joseph increased his speed.

“Howay Joseph, lad!”

Joseph recognised his mother’s voice, as he raced past a blur of faces.

It did not take the two boys long to reach the wide, sweeping meander of the River Till, close to where it is joined by the Bradford Burn. They turned to follow the smaller stream. Joseph had pulled ahead of Will, but could still hear his Man’s heavy panting close behind him. The pursuing mob could now be heard descending the boggy field down to the Till. The Canon Burn came into sight, signalling the beginning of the climb up Ford Hill, back to the church. Joseph’s pace slowed as the gradient steepened. Will was now at his shoulder.

“Ah’m in awe man..... ye’ve earned ye spurs.”

Joseph’s lungs were burning, but he managed a gasped reply.

“Thanks.”

He glanced over his shoulder; the pack had reached the foot of the hill and was beginning the climb. Ahead, the church spire was just coming into view. Joseph put his head down and was just about to start the final sprint when he felt a heavy blow to his back. He lost his balance and his momentum carried him forward. Before he realised what was happening, Will was on top of him, pinning him to ground. Joseph rolled over, but was unable to free himself from the other boy’s grip.

“This is for killin’ mah champion cock.”

Will spat in Joseph’s face, then leapt up and ran off in the direction of the church. Before Joseph could get to his feet, the pack had surrounded him. Blow after stinging blow rained down on him until he heard a barked command:

“Enough!”

The pack ran off whooping and hollering. Joseph looked up. The schoolmaster stood over him. A grinning Will Fenton stood by his side.

Joseph winced as his mother bathed the cuts on his face and neck.

“We mustn’t be long, your father’s expectin’ us at the chapel. He’s preachin’ this morn and he’ll no be best pleased if we arrive late.”

The woman rose, gathered her other children and ushered them through the door. Joseph took his jacket from the hook, slid it on and followed. The younger children skipped off along the cobbles, as the group set off on the two mile walk to the neighbouring village of Etal.

“Best no tae mention this morn’s events tae yer father, eh Joseph?”

The boy looked at his mother and smiled.

“He wants the best fae ye, ye know that.”

Joseph mopped his brow and smarted, as the sweat worked its way into the cuts on his face.

“Aye, mother,” he replied, “ah know.”

Sean Fleet