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THE PASSION PLAY AND INTERLUDES AT NEW ROMNEY.

IN many Kentish parishes, the name "Pleystole" or "Playstool" still clings to a piece of land, on which, as we believe, the Passion Play, or Miracle-plays, were performed in days of old.

During the Middle Ages, when few could read, much instruction was conveyed, respecting the historical facts of the Bible, by means of dramatic representations.

Sometimes a dumb-show of puppets; sometimes a scene which we should call a *tableau-vivant*; sometimes a combination which might be described as a Marionette Exhibition; sometimes other varieties of scenic representations were exhibited upon a platform, or scaffold. This platform might be mounted on wheels, and then it was dragged through a town, from one street to another. Such shows were called Pageants.

New Romney, and other parishes in this district, indulged more ambitious aims. Here, Interludes, or Dramatic Representations, were regularly acted, wherein each part was taken by a man in appropriate costume. Such Scriptural Dramas, when represented in a city like Chester, or in a rich town like Coventry, comprehended an epitome of the world's religious History, from the Creation to the Day of Judgment. In Chester, twenty-four distinct dramas were represented, during three days, from Whit Monday to Whit Wednesday. Each drama was performed by a separate company of actors, provided by one of the Trade Guilds of the city; or by two or three Guilds in combination.

At Coventry, no less than forty-two separate dramas were represented annually at the Corpus Christi Festival.

At Wakefield, or Woodkirk, another series of thirty-two such Miracle-Plays, or Mysteries, was used.

At Romney, no doubt, limited population and limited funds prevented any such elaborate and simultaneous representation of scenes extending over the whole period of Scripture History. The only specific names of dramas acted here, which have come down to us, are the "Interlude of Our Lord's Passion," and the "Play of the Resurrection." In 1456, John Craye and Thomas a' Nasshe, *wardens of the play of the Resurrection*, brought an action for debt and damages against John Lylye, and they recovered 4s.* In 1463, the Jurats of Romney, out of their common chest, paid to Agnes Ford 6s. 8d. *for the play of the Interlude of our Lord's Passion.*†

Probably a similar kind of spectacle was given, in 1422-4, when the men of Lydd "*came with their May and ours.*" We have no account of this show, except that it was acted by players. In 1432, the Jurats of New Romney paid for two gallons of wine, given "to the players when they shewed their May."‡

Allied to these dramatic representations, although of a different character, was the annual Festival of the Boy-Bishop, celebrated on the day of St. Nicholas, December 6th, throughout the kingdom. As New Romney Church was dedicated to St. Nicholas, this annual farce may have been celebrated with greater honour here than elsewhere. The Boy-Bishop, and his attendants, proceeded from New Romney Church to the neighbouring town of Lydd, where they were entertained at the expense of the community. As much as four, five, or six shillings, were at different times expended upon their refreshment there. The town of New Romney expended 3s. 4d. at Garrarde's inn, when the Lord of Misrule of Old Romney came to the town in 1525.

The representation of such Miracle-Plays or Interludes as those of our Lord's Passion, or of the Resurrection, required considerable organisation. Accordingly, "Wardens of the Play" were appointed. In 1456, there were two

* *Historical MSS. Commission*, Sixth Report, p. 541b.

† *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 544b.

‡ *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 540b, 541b.

Wardens, who sued a defaulter for debt. Their names were John Craye and Thomas a' Nasshe. At a later period, however, we hear of no less than five Wardens.

On the 14th December, 1517, the Jurats and Commons chose Ric. Stuppeny, Christopher Hensfield, Robert Paris, John Bunting, and William Bedell, as Wardens, in order that the town might have the play of Christ's Passion, as from olden time they were wont to have it. To such plays there was, at that period, opposition in high quarters. Consequently, on the 26th of May, 1518, the Lord Warden of the five ports sent, to the Barons of New Romney, a mandate that they ought not to play the play of the Passion of Christ, until they have had the king's leave.* Nevertheless, such representations were continued here, during many years. At so late a period as the tenth year of Queen Elizabeth's reign, some of these plays were being prepared for performance.†

Wardens being chosen, they, no doubt, organized the players. Local brotherhoods or fraternities seem generally to have furnished the actors. At Canterbury, according to Mr. Brent's account, the Corpus Christi Brotherhood, otherwise called the Fraternity of Jesu's Mass, seems to have furnished the players, at the joint cost of all the crafts and mysteries in the city. Coventry and Chester had a great number of trade fraternities, or guilds, which sufficed to supply actors for all their plays. Here, at Romney, there were six fraternities connected with the church of St. Nicholas, which, although not nominally trade fraternities, no doubt furnished some or all of the players. They were called the Fraternities of the Holy Cross, of St. Stephen, of St. John Baptist, of St. Edmund, of St. Katherine, and of St. George. In connection with the latter, the Guild or Fraternity of St. George, there may have been especial pageants or plays. In 1480, there was some great celebration here, when an image of St. George was put up.‡ On that occasion, the men of Lydd came over to join in the cere-

* *Hist. MSS. Com.*, Fifth Report, pp. 552*b*, 553.

† *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 553*b*.

‡ *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 547.

mony, and were entertained at the expense of the town of Romney. We know that throughout Kent, even at the present period, the drama of St. George is roughly enacted at our doors, during Christmas-tide, by seven men, who personate St. George, the dragon, Father Christmas, the Doctor, the King of Egypt, a Turkish Knight, and the Giant Turpin.

Fraternities, of Holy Cross and of Holy Trinity, were connected with St. Laurence Church here; and there was a Fraternity of St. Mary, in St. Martin's parish, in Romney.

Thus, there would seem to have been an abundant source upon which to draw for players. The Wardens of the Play were, no doubt, assisted by some of the chaplains, who said mass in the three churches and two chapels of the town. We know that, in 1489-90, one chaplain was paid for going to Lydd to see a play, which was to be reproduced at Romney. In 1496-7, money was paid to Thomas Penystone and Thomas Gammel, chaplains, for the debt due to them on the play; and we cannot doubt that the chaplains had a great deal to do with the details and organization of the representation.

Dresses, and all needful paraphernalia, were obtained and preserved by the Wardens of the Play. Thus, in 1490-1, the Jurats paid 20s. to the Wardens of the Play for the loan of vestments.* Similarly, in 1502-3 the Jurats delivered to Warden of this town for the play, in the way of loan, 20s. 6d. During the same year, they paid 3s. 4d. for the carriage from London of gear for the play.† In 1504-5 the Jurats paid 28s. 3d. to Thomas Lambard, for the old debt due to him by the town for the play.‡ While in 1517-18, the larger sum of £3 18s. 5d. was paid, for the expenses of the Romney players, as set forth in the account of Christopher Hensfeld. Four years later we find this entry: "Paid to Mores whenne he went to Londone to Master Gybsone with the bill of arreyment for the play etc., 8s."§ Whether this relates to a play to be acted, or a plea to be sued out, is not quite clear. Such entries as the following,

* *Hist. MSS. Comm.*, Fifth Report, p. 548.

† *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 549b.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 549b.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 551a.

however, are beyond doubt: "1503-4, Paid to Mr Wodar for hay on the occasion of the play 12^d," and "for wine delivered at the play 7^d." "1513-14, Paid Hy Holle, Jos. Hakkett, Christopher Hensfeld, and John Buntyng, as a reward for their trouble and expenses upon the play 13^s 4^d."

The book, or manuscript copy, of the play, is not mentioned, as such, until June 1516. Then it is recorded that "Le Playboke" was delivered to Henry Robyn to keep, for the use of the town. In the year following, it was delivered "from the keeping of Henry Robyn into the hands of Robert May, Common Clerk, safely and securely to be kept to the use and behoof of the said town."* Further, it is recorded that on the 6th of July, 1517, Richard Bursell, junior, sent William Bukherst to obtain *the Playbooke*† from Robert May, who delivered it into his custody. In 1568, each player was required to bind himself, under a penalty of 40s., that he would persevere in performing the play, or else he was to surrender his part. Although no playbook, nor any parts, had previously been mentioned under those names, there had been similar entries respecting certain manuscripts, which were probably equivalent to the playbook cut up into separate "parts."

In 1498 (13 Hen. VII) it was enacted "that the criers of the banns of the play of Romene (commons of that town),

* *Hist. MSS. Comm.*, Fifth Report, p. 552b.

† *The Play Book* is enrolled among the "Records" of the town in the following list, made in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and inscribed in the "*Book of Notte*:"

Ffyrst the Charter of the towne.
The customall.

The exemplificacion of the recorde in
theschequir for our marshe.

The lease of our marshe.

The lease from the busshope of Can-
terbury to the towne.

The booke of Nott [*given by Thomas
Notte.*]

VI. books of Statutes.

The Indenture of the Contribucion
bytweyne Lydd and us.

An olde booke of the Chamberlyns
account where it apperyth that
our marshe hath ever byn to the
towne.

The brodhell booke.

iiij Courte books.

Th'olde customall in french.

The booke of th'allegcion.

A mace of Sylver.

The comen seale.

The seale of office.

A Court horne.

A payer of balance & weights of
brasse.

A measuer pott.

The Play booke.

The booke of the new customall of the
V ports.

A letter of pardon.

A chartre that we are ffree from Cus-
tom.

iiij fyles.

A bundell of proclamacions.

A bundell of proces.

V hole harnes.

A booke of Assise of bread.

should carry in their banns, or at least bills of the same, before the feast of St. George next."* Those who failed to do so were liable to forty days' imprisonment, unless they could find sureties for the deliverance of the banns. In 1501-2, the sum of 8d. was paid to John Lane, as a reward "for carrying a parcel of the banns of the play of the town of Romene."† It is difficult to ascertain, exactly, what these bans of the play were. We do not hear of them until 1474, when the Romney town clerk begins to use two peculiar expressions: (i.) the proclamation of the bans of a play, and (ii.) crying the bans. For "crying the bans," or for "proclaiming" them, the payment made was generally equal in amount to that which had already been repeatedly entered, in previous years, as given to the players for "shewing the play." Ordinarily, 6s. 8d. was the amount of this fee, in addition to the gift of meat and drink for the performers. In the Lydd Records, the same amount of fee, on the average, is entered, as given to the players, for acting the play. Consequently, I am inclined to believe that the expressions "crying the bans" and "proclaiming the bans" were peculiar to a certain town clerk of Romney, and meant "reciting the parts of each character," or acting the play. Perhaps the meaning of each scene was proclaimed to the audience, by a man blessed with a strong voice, as each change was made. Whenever, thus, the play became a succession of *tableaux-vivants*, or a series of marionette performances, the men who shouted out, or proclaimed, what the scene meant, or what the figures were supposed to say, would fitly be said to cry the bans, for the word "bans" means proclamations.

We cannot state precisely the usual place where, and the periodical times when, the plays were acted at Romney. We find, however, that in 1441-2, the Crockhill in Romney, situated within the parish of St. Lawrence, was the spot whereon the men of Wittersham shewed their play‡ to the people of this town.

* *Hist. MSS. Comm.*, Fifth Report, p. 551b.

† *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 549b.

‡ *Ibid.*, Fifth Report, p. 542.

I find, in *the Book of Notte*, that the Crockhill was so called in the reign of Edward VI; but in the forty-second year of Elizabeth's reign it was written "Crockey Green;" and in the fifth of James I, it was written "Crockers Green." We can thus identify it with "Crockley Green," at the south-west end of New Romney.

The scaffold, or platform on which the passion play was performed, was similar in construction to that used in front of our ordinary shows at fairs. A covered and hidden room, upon the ground, was surmounted by an open platform above. The players dressed below, and then mounted to act upon the open upper stage, in sight of all.

As to time, we find that in 1476-7, a play was performed here on Whit Tuesday, when three men were especially paid for keeping watch against foes approaching the town, during the time of the play. In 1539, rehearsals took place in Lent.

In 1466-7, the play was performed on a Sunday, during which day the town of Lydd employed four watchmen, to keep a good look-out at home, probably from Lydd Church steeple.*

We are astonished at the number of parishes, from which came companies of players, to perform before a Romney audience. We find that the players of Hythe were here in 1399, and again in 1466, when they went on to Lydd also. Four times later, in 1482, 1486, 1494, and 1503, they played in Romney again.

The players of Lydd were paid for performing here in nine different years, between 1422 and 1509. The players of Wittersham twice "shewed their interlude" here; once in 1426, and again in 1441. They were at Lydd in 1440. The players of Herne came to Romney in 1429, and to Lydd in 1440.

The players of Ruckinge were at Romney, and at Lydd, in the year 1430. The players of Folkstone came in 1474; and also in 1478, when they went on to Lydd. Those of Appledore appeared in 1488, at Romney; having, twenty years before, performed at Lydd.

To Romney, players came, with their Interludes, from

* *Hist. MSS. Commission, Fifth Report, 523^b.*

Chart in 1489; from Wye in 1491; from Rye in 1489, 1493, and 1518 (the Rye men were at Lydd in 1479). From Halden in 1499, and in 1511; from Bethersden in 1508; and from Brookland in five several years, in 1494, 1505, 1511, 1519, and 1521, troops of players came to Romney, to perform these miracle plays, or Passion-plays of the period, and were entertained at the town's expense, in addition to receiving an average fee of 6s. 8d. for each play.

The Romney men, on the other hand, went into neighbouring parishes to perform their play. In 1428, Lydd gave them 13s. 4d., as a fee, and refreshments costing 5s. 5d. In 1430, Romney men performed their play at Lydd, on the Sunday after June 24th, the day of St. John the Baptist's Nativity, and received 6s. 8d. as their reward, in addition to being regaled with bread, wine, and ale, costing 2s. 8d. Lydd must have been gay during that summer, since the men of Ruckinge also performed there, within three weeks after the Romney play had been exhibited at Lydd. The Ruckinge men received the usual fee of 6s. 8d. for their performance, on the Saturday after Relic Sunday (which was the third Sunday after June 24th.) In the following year, 1431, Romney men played their sacred drama at Lydd, on June 28th, the eve of the day of SS. Peter and Paul, and received the usual reward of 6s. 8d.

In 1438, Wittersham and Herne, as well as Romney, sent players to Lydd, which thus witnessed three strange plays, or interludes, in one year. Romney seems then to have ceased, for some years, to send its passion-play to Lydd. Inferior performers went thither from Ham in 1453, but they received only 3s. 4d., half the usual reward. In 1454, and 1463, the Romney players, and in 1466 the Hythe players, performed at Lydd, on the day of the dedication of Lydd Church. Three years later, the Romney players were at Lydd on Whit Monday. Eleven years seem to have elapsed before they again played at Lydd, in 1478. Meanwhile, inferior plays had been shewn there; one from Appledore in 1468, for which a reward of 3s. 8d. was paid; and another from Stone, in 1469, for which Lydd paid only 3s. 4d. More elaborate performances were given at Lydd, by the Folkestone

“ban-criers,” in 1478, when they received the usual fee of 6s. 8d., and upon them the town of Lydd spent an equal sum in refreshments. Two years later, the New Romney men again went to Lydd, and again received the usual fee of 6s. 8d.; but on this occasion they are styled in the Lydd records “*the bane-cryars of the town of Romene,*” a title never before given to them in the Lydd accounts. It therefore seems to be synonymous with the title of players, which had theretofore been used, in the Lydd records, when the same reward or fee of 6s. 8d. was paid.

Minstrels enlivened with music the representations of these plays, and the records enable us to affirm that the payments to such musicians were frequent and considerable.*

Since this paper was in type, Mr. Henry B. Walker has found, and has kindly copied for me, various extracts from the Chamberlain’s accounts, which shew that in 1560 the Plays were revived at Romney with great splendour. Four plays were given; one on Whit Tuesday, when £12 5s. 6d. were collected from spectators; the others subsequently, when sums of £6 10s. 9½d., £4 9s. 0d., and £2 7s. 6½d. were collected. The expenditure had been lavish. The “devysor” of the plays received £4; and the Common Clerk wrote out the play book on parchment, and the parts on fourteen quires of paper, for about £2 per play. From the Jurats of Lydd, copes and vestments were bought for £9; from London came stuff for dresses costing £4 11s. 5d.; for making the apparel many pounds were paid. Especial mention is made

* In 1422, 1429, and 1430, minstrels of the Duke of Gloster were paid by the town of New Romney, 6s. 8d.; 7s. 8d.; and 3s. 2d.; in 1448 minstrels of the King, 6s. 8d.; in 1449 minstrels of the Archbishop and of Lord de Say, 7s. 6d.; in 1474 minstrels of the King, 3s. 6d.; of the Earl of Arundel, 10d.; and of the Duke of Clarence, 10d.; in 1476 minstrels of the King, 4s.; of the Prince, 12d.; and of Lord Arundel, 10d.; in 1479 minstrels of the Queen, 3s. 4d.; of the Prince, 12d.; of the Duke of Gloster, 12d.; and of Lord Arundel, 8d.; in 1480 minstrels of the King, the Queen, the Duchess of York, the Prince, the Duke of Gloster, and of Lord Arundel, were paid; in 1483 a minstrel of King Richard was paid, so were three of Lord Arundel’s, and one of Lord Northumberland’s; in 1484 and 1486 those of the Queen; in 1488 those of the King; in 1489 those of Lord Arundel; in 1490 one of the Prince; in 1491 minstrels of Sandwich; in 1493 of the King, the Queen, and the Duke of Bedford; in 1497 one of Cardinal Morton; in 1498 those of the King, Queen, Lord Cardinal, and Lord Oxford; in 1502 those of the Lord Admiral; in 1504 of Lord Oxford; in 1508 of the Prince.

of John Baptist's painted coat, the cotton coat of Judas, and twelve sheepskins for "godhalls coats." Beards and wigs were hired for four "ban cryers," and a beard for the Fool. Three wayne-loads of bows; escutcheons costing 20s.; dozens of gold-skins, and sheets of goldfoil; pounds of glue, brimstone, red lead, red ochre, verdigris, rosset, florrey, and nails; a gross of points; ells of buckram; a paschal lamb, which was "drest;" a shoe, set on the centurion's horse; a wayte, a drummer, and minstrels; were provided for these four performances at Romney in the reign of good Queen Bess, A.D. 1560.

Few records in Kent, perhaps indeed no others, give us so plain a proof of the general prevalence, even in small parishes, of these Passion-plays, interludes, miracle plays, or mysteries, as do the archives of Romney and Lydd.

These records shew that such small parishes as Stone and Ruckinge; Brookland and Bethersden; Wittersham and Appledore; vied with the towns of Romney, Lydd, Hythe, and Folkestone in getting up popular scenic representations of the events of scriptural history. The distance of the parish of Herne did not prevent its players from making their way to Romney and to Lydd, where they knew that appreciative audiences would be found, and where the municipal authorities would not only pay the customary fee of 6s. 8d., but would be liberal in their distribution of wine, bread, beer, and other refreshments.

We may, however, thankfully observe that the use of printing, and the spread of education, have obviated the necessity for resorting to Passion-plays and interludes, as means of instructing the populace in Scripture history. Each man can now read for himself, in Holy Writ, the accurate account of those events, which were rudely presented, in exaggerated and inaccurate forms, to our illiterate forefathers, by means of interludes and Passion-plays. Honour is due, however, to those who, before printing was invented, and when preaching was infrequent, laboured to set before the eyes, of the ignorant, striking representations of great facts recorded in Holy Scripture. The parochial fraternities, and

the clergy, who, in Passion-plays and Interludes, thus taught by appeals to the eye, were the popular mediæval fore-runners of Bible Societies, and of Sunday Schools.

Architects and Sculptors took part in the same good work, when, as on more than two hundred and fifty stone bosses of Bishop Lyhart's roof of the nave, in Norwich Cathedral, they represented a conspectus of Scripture history, from the Creation to the Last Judgment.

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