

# Miscellanea

## A RELIC OF THE PAST

Turf (peat) has been put to many uses in Ireland through the ages, quite apart from its use as fuel. Its use in buildings is well attested, not only in the construction of the house-walls for many of the homes of the poorer people during the last couple of centuries but also as a lining under thatched roofs. The following note is, however, of particular interest in showing its use in the construction of churches—and subsequently (consequently?) as a sort of religious relic!

We were shown to-day a relic of the past—which is preserved with religious care, and is about to accompany its possessor across the ocean to the Far West. It was a simple sod of turf—and yet, would not be parted with for all that was heaped upon the quay to-day. It once formed portion of the old Augustinian Church, which stood in Creagh-Lane, built there in the year 1774. The sod of turf is cut quite evenly, like a brick, and was used as part of the materials required near the erection of the Altar. It was found, with a number of others, similar in shape, some eight years ago by workmen engaged in pulling down portion of the old walls, and that portion against which the Altar rested. Such material was probably used, as in other buildings, at that time, to prevent damp, and ensure a dry receptacle for articles composed of precious metals or other valuables. In this church too, was played the first organ ever used in any sacred edifice in this city.

—*The Munster News*, 25th July, 1866

The date 1774 seems to be an error, if John Ferrer, writing very soon afterwards, is to be believed. He (*History of Limerick*, Limerick 1787, p. 197) states that the Augustinians built their chapel and house in Creagh Lane in 1778. The chapel was one of the favourite houses of worship in the city until the community moved to George's Street in 1823 (*Limerick Reporter & Tipperary Vindicator*, 24th March, 1882).

SEAN MARRINAN

## ORIGIN OF THE JEWS-HARP

In 1983 we published an important article by Ann Buckley on the history and archaeology of jew's harps in Ireland (vol. 25, pp. 30-36), as an addendum to which we also published, in 1985, a note on jew's harp makers in Ireland by Siobhán de hÓir (vol. 27, p. 87). Meanwhile some discussion has arisen amongst some of our members concerning the origin of the term itself: jew's harp. Various theories have been put forward, but the following account (kindly brought to our attention by Siobhán de hÓir) published on the 2nd of March, 1850, in *Notes and Queries*, 1(1849-50), 277-8, may perhaps help in solving the problems. (E.R.—*Hon. Editor.*)

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The "Jews-harp," or "Jews-trump," is said by several authors to derive its name from the nation of the Jews, and is vulgarly believed to be one of their instruments of music. Dr. Littleton renders Jews-trump by *Sistrum Judaicum*. But no such musical instrument is spoken of by any of the old authors that treat of the Jewish music. In fact, the Jews-harp is a mere boy's plaything, and incapable in itself of being joined either with a voice or any other instrument; and its present orthography is nothing more than a corruption

of the French *Jeu-trompe*, literally, a toy trumpet. It is called *jeu-trompe* by Bacon, *Jew-trump* by Beaumont and Fletcher, and *Jews-harp* by Hackluyt. In a rare black-letter volume, entitled *Newes from Scotland*, 1591, there is a curious story of one Geilles Duncan, a noted performer on the "Jews-harp," whose performance seems not only to have met with the approval of a numerous audience of witches, but to have been repeated in the presence of royalty, and by command of no less a personage than the "Scottish Solomon," king James VI. Agnes Sampson being brought before the king's majesty and his council, confessed that

"Upon the night of All-hallow-even last, shee was accompanied as well with the persons aforesaid, as also with a great many other witches, to the number of two-hundredth; and that all they together went to sea, each one in a riddle or sive, and went into the same very substantially, with flaggons of wine, making merrie, and drinking by the way, in the same riddle or sives, to the Kirk of North Barrick in Lowthian; and that after they had landed, tooke handes on the lande and daunced this reill or short daunce, singing all with one voice,

"Commer goe ye before, commer goe ye:

Gif ye will not goe before, commer let me.'

"At which time, she confessed that this Geilles Duncan (a servant girl) did goe before them, playing this reill or daunce uppon a small *trumpe* called a *Jews-trumpe*, until they entred into the Kirk of North Barrick. These confessions made the King in a wonderfull admiration, and sent for the said Geilles Duncan, who upon the like *trumpe* did play the saide daunce before the Kinge's Majestie; who in respect of the strangenes of these matters tooke great delight to be present at their examinations."

It may be well to mention that in the Belgic or Low Dutch, from whence come many of our toys, a *tromp* is a rattle for children. Another etymon for *Jews-harp* is *Jaws-harp*, because the place where it is played upon is between the jaws. To those who wish to learn more upon the subject, I beg to refer them to Pegge's *Anonymiana*; Dauney's *Ancient Scottish Melodies*; and to my edition of Chettle's *Kind-Harts Dream* printed by the Percy Society.

EDWARD F. RIMBAULT

### A PREVENTATIVE AGAINST MILK-STEALING

The following interesting local custom, associated with the area near Ennistymon, Co. Clare, was told to me in February 1971 by my late mother, Mrs. Molly Fox, née O'Brien, who had family connections with the Lisdoonvarna-Ballyvaughan regions:

No cow was ever sent out to the field for the first time after calving without a red rag being tied around her tail. This was done to prevent anyone 'stealing the milk'.

EDWARD FOX