



Births, Death and Marriage

by Christine Bloxham

People have always tried to explain the mysteries of life, and the future holds great fascination. It is hardly surprising that a wealth of folklore has developed around birth, marriage and death. Birth Some superstitions may have arisen from observation; for example in Oxfordshire it was said that if a woman's apron fell off it foretold the birth of a child within the year - perhaps only a sign of the woman's thickening waist? Others are less straight-forward; men were commonly thought to suffer pains in sympathy with their pregnant wives - in the 17th century Dr. Plot wrote of a man who suffered stomach pains which only ceased when his wife started labour. As recently as 1936 an Oxfordshire woman expected a good husband to have toothache while his wife was pregnant.

Some babies are born with a caul or membrane over their head. This, now discarded, in the past was considered a sign of great good luck, since it was valued as protection against drowning. They were consequently much in demand among sailors, and in Banbury in 1954 a woman was offered £10.00 for her child's caul by the midwife, who wanted it for a sailor friend. However, the mother preferred to keep it to protect her own child. It was once thought very unlucky to weigh a baby before it was 12 months old. A woman in Oxfordshire in the 1930's refused to have one of her babies weighed as the older one had gone funny and she blamed weighing for this.

In Spelsbury there was a superstition that one should not put a piece of silver into a baby's hand, yet elsewhere in the county it was lucky to give a new-born baby a sixpence, even if one did not know the parents. Another Spelsbury superstition said that a baby's nails should not be cut until it could bite them, although elsewhere it was considered safe if done over a Bible. This may reflect the belief that possession of hair and nail clippings could be used by witches to gain power over a person.

A child born with teeth was considered very unlucky. In 1951 an Oxfordshire midwife expressed the belief that such a child would grow up to be a murderer, but said that she would never tell the mother her views.

Babies were not considered safe until they had been christened - until then some people preferred not to call them by their name, as knowledge of a name gave power over the baby which could endanger them. Many believed that fairies could spirit away babies and leave changelings in their places, but once the child has been christened it had the protection of God. It was commonly considered that the baby who cried at his christening was merely letting the devil out.

Groaning cakes or cheeses were baked in preparation for the birth. As soon as the baby was born the cake or cheese was cut to bring good luck to the baby and those who shared the cake at the christening feast to bring good luck. The father, or whoever was cutting the cake had to do it with the utmost care, because if he cut his finger it foretold the death of the child within the year.

Marriage Superstitions and Customs

Young women had many ways of discovering whom their future husband would be, some simple but others fraught with fear and spiritual danger. Mollie Harris writes about Eynsham girls who made tisty tosty balls from cowslips. They took the heads off the main stalk, and bunched them up and tied wool round the middle. They then played Tell me True with the ball, tossing it up and chanting:

'Tisty, tosty, tell me true,
Who shall I be married to.
Tisty, Tosty, cowslip ball,
At my sweetheart's name you'll fall'.

Obviously this was a child's game, not to be taken too seriously, but dumb cake and hemp seed divinations involved invoking the spirits and were not undertaken lightly. Angelina Parker wrote in 'Folklore' (Vol. 21, 1913, p. 79) about dumb cake divination in Long Hanborough:

'It must be done on Christmas Eve, and should be carried out in complete silence. First a dough cake must be made and placed on the hearthstone, the maker must prick her initials on it, the door being carefully left open, as something terrible would happen if the spirit came and found it shut. She must then wait in perfect silence till the clock strikes twelve, when her future husband will walk in and prick his initials beside hers on the cake, and then walk out again. An old lady once told me that a girl in this way brought her future husband, who was a soldier, into the room, and in passing through the doorway he broke his sword in two. The girl picked up the broken piece and kept it. After she had been married to him for some years, in turning out her trunk she came across it, and showed it to her husband, and he was so angry that he could hardly forgive her. He told her he suffered dreadful agonies during the time she forced him to appear, though he did not then know the reason.'

Alternatively, a girl could go to the churchyard at midnight on Christmas Eve and sow hemp seed, reciting:

'Here I sow hemp seed that hemp seed may grow,
Hoping my true love will come after me and mow'.

The seed immediately grew and the future husband came to mow it with a scythe - Christmas Eve was one of the times when the gap between the spirit world and the real world narrowed and strange things could happen.

A girl who acquired two slices of wedding cake could induce dreams of her future husband by putting the slices under her pillow. She had to get into bed backwards and recite:

'I put this cake under my head
To dream of the living and not of the dead;
To dream of the man I shall wed,
Not in his best or Sunday array,
But in the clothes of everyday.'

Another form of divination was found in Hanborough - the girl pinned her garters on the wall above the bed and carefully put her shoes beside the bed in the form of a T, and after getting into bed backwards said:

I pin my garters to the wall
And put my shoes in the shape of a T,
In hopes my true love for to see
Not in his apparel nor in his array
But in the clothes he wears everyday.
If I am his bride to be,
If I am his clothes to wear,
If I am his children to bear,
I hope he'll turn his face to me.
But if I'm not his bride to be,
If I'm not his clothes to wear,
If I'm not his children to bear,
I hope he'll turn his back to me.'

After saying this the girl had to remain silent all night and her lover should appear in her dream. In Spelsbury two clocks striking together or two spoons in one saucer were wedding omens. If a girl stumbled going upstairs it was a sign that she would not be fulfilled. Beware of beginning a patchwork quilt and not finishing it - on the Berkshire border it was said that once a quilt had been begun the daughters of the house would not marry until it is finished but once it was done one or more would marry within the year.

Much folklore is attached to wedding clothes. Now white is common, but in the past different colours were worn. Green and yellow have always been considered unlucky, probably because they are associated with fairies. White and blue were the luckiest colours; gold, as the colour of light, was lucky and so was silver. In Heyford they said:

'Married in black,
you'll wish you were back,
Married in green,
not fit to be seen,
Married in brown,
you'll never live in a town'.

The bride should never make her own dress, nor try on the complete outfit before starting for church, or look at herself in her veil in the mirror until the last moment. If she did, she risked an unhappy marriage, or the death of herself or the groom before the wedding. It was extremely unlucky to lose or break the wedding ring. Lent, May and Fridays were not lucky for weddings. June was the luckiest month. On leaving the house for the wedding or honeymoon, the front door should always be used.

Death

Omens of death are common. A robin entering a house or tapping on the window foretold death. In Oxfordshire this omen was said to hold good for only 11 months of the year, November being the exception. To hear a robin singing near the house was a sign of bad news and if it perched on a chair in which someone was sitting, that person would die within the year. A ticking noise in the house was a death omen - a Leafield woman heard a 'ticking spider' in the cupboard under the stairs just before the death of her father in 1927.

It was believed that a person could not die if he was lying on a pillow containing pigeon's feathers and if a person was having a hard death the pillow might be removed in case that was the reason.

After a death in the house it was most important to tell the bees - in some places it should be the oldest occupant of the house, who must walk round each hive three times and tell the bees the full name of the dead person three times. If this was not done the bees would fly away - this fate befell a man in Clifton Hampden in 1926 who neglected to tell them of the death of his daughter. In some areas it was customary to pin a piece of black crepe to each hive, and give the bees some of the food from the funeral feast. Bees have been connected with souls of the dead, which may explain this belief.

At Iffley at the turn of the century babies were buried in small white or pale blue coffins. Four girls carried the small coffins to church, supporting them on white ribbons. At Northleigh if the burial was that of a young person the carriers wore white trousers, gloves and ties and black coats. Four young women acted as pall-bearers -they wore white dresses, bonnets and gloves and black jackets. Their bonnets were straw, made to look white by covering them with muslin or handkerchiefs. At Piddington the bearers wore smocks and black hats and black gloves at funerals till c. 1950.

There are numerous other similar customs: and superstitions of this nature and, although most of those recorded here have now disappeared, it is interesting to see how many do survive today.

This Copyright 1997 Oxfordshire County Council & Vale and Downland Museum, Wantage

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire. The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com