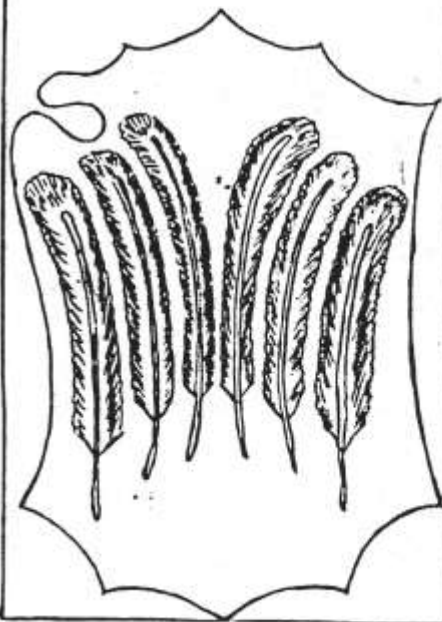


was ever put to use in the parish for agricultural purposes, was a thing laboriously created and swiftly discarded. Today it remains a grotesque memorial straddled across the parish, while not even the twinkling lights of the inner and outer circles of landing lights remain to cheer the villagers.



CHAPTER 10. FOLKLORE AND CUSTOMS

Collecting material for this Chapter presented many difficulties while the older inhabitants were often reluctant in giving information, excusing themselves in having poor memories, very few of the present generation are acquainted with the folklore of the parish. Thus the author is compelled to trust in the remembered tales of his childhood, filling in as many gaps as



possible by discreet enquiries among some of the older farmers and labourers and above all relying upon his father's many sided wisdom.

With her long history Winkleigh ought to be able to provide volumes for the chroniclers of this fascinating study. But there is a more ruthless attrition perhaps here than in any other field and although the attitudes of mind which make possible superstitions still remain in the countryside, the immediate customs which symbolise this mental attitude are eroded and betrayed into

insignificance

Only those which are over common are admitted in these days of enlightenment. The villager fears too often that his



recapitulation" will mark him also as a believer and so pleads ignorance. But more often a National Culture has obliterated our material. Westcott writing in the 17th century might dismiss tales of fairies and dragons as being either too common or numerous for his record of Winkleigh yet all we know today concerns the Well of the fairies at Hollacombe and if ever fair maid was rescued from the domestic dragon in these parts the story never survived into the last century.

Let us examine first the Customs and sports of bygone times. Today sport is confined almost entirely to football; two generations ago Winkleigh produced two international chess players in the Revd H Bremridge and Mr Harry Luxton and their ability has almost become legend¹; there are old men who remember still older men telling them of the tennis court behind the Church-yard where the church accounts show the parish priest playing bowls or tennis



with the young men of the village after evensong and cat-chising on a summer Sunday Afternoon; but these are hardly regarded as traditional country pastimes, no matter their ^{ancient} origin.

Winkleigh has enjoyed hunting from earliest times. It is the only place mention-

-ed in Devon Domesday where there was **park** for wild animals.

Yet there seems to be no evidence

of its exact location nor of its continued existence. The Park Keeper, Norman, lived at Hollacombe and cultivated $1\frac{1}{2}$ virgates of land, possibly in the region of the Barton. It is reasonable to suppose that the park was nearly. People have tried to identify it about a quarter mile each side of the Hollacombe Water, commencing with Claypits and up the winding combe as far as the old Torrington Turnpike road. Others suggest it might have stretched from Pensford to Hollacombe Moor, following the Water, and branching off to the N.W. between Wood Terril and Whitehouse. There is a field named Deer Park on Newgate small holding, and hunting gates were in existence in the early nineteenth century. But all speculation in this matter can hardly be more than speculation. The more usual foxhunting is first mentioned in 1646 when Mr. Harnamen was given $\text{1} \text{ } l.$ for killing of a fox. A year later Samuel Gidley killed two and was rewarded proportionately. In those days the fox was clearly regarded as vermin and we cannot tell from the church records when

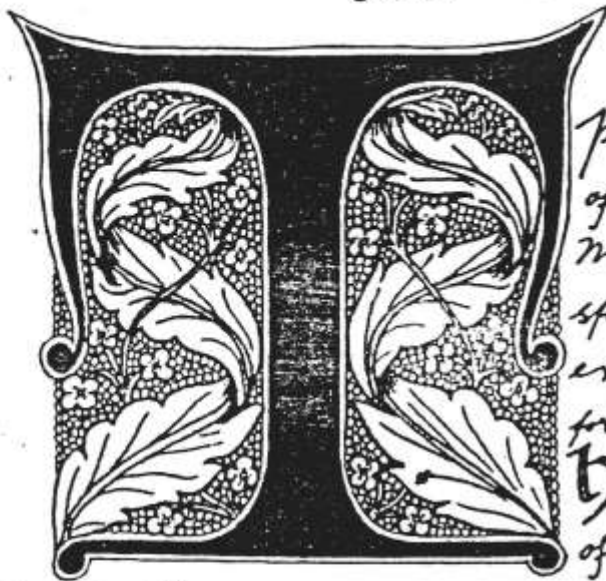
it became an object of sport. The greatest period was the last few decades of the nineteenth century when the fifth Earl of Portsmouth hunted the district. One of the largest gatherings must have been at Eggesford on August 18th 1881 when there were 400 horsemen and over 2,000 on foot.

There were ^{and the Parsonage} harehounds at Wood Turl, at one time and the Instow Beagles still meet occasionally at Winkleigh. Otters are hunted in the small streams near the junction of the Taw and badgers, of which there are plenty on the north side of the parish, have dropped out of the favour of hunters.

If hunting wild beast was one of the earliest

recreations of Winkleigh, falconry was probably a good second and there is a reference to the gift of a sore sparrow hawk (ie one under twelve months old) by William de Caynes in 1262. Today the shotgun has taken its place. Pheasants and partridges provide fair sport but landrail or (corncock) is increasingly scarce. The snipe and woodcock can also be found.

Trout, Dace, Bream and Salmon are plentiful in the Taw. Fly fishing would be almost impossible on the Hollarcombe Water. Nevertheless the men of the Coombe remember the delightful hours of their youth spent in the 'illegal' 'tickling' of trout. The poacher of old was probably amply



paid for his pains when disposing of his "pig", carried in a sack. Nowadays the poacher is no sportsman and uses lime and explosive charges to obtain fish for the black market.

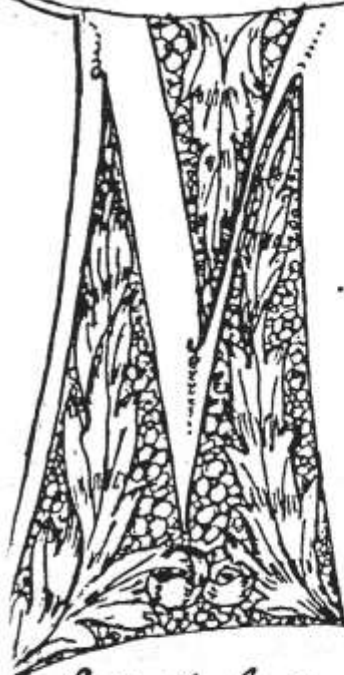
here are other ^{But} kinds of sport which used to be indulged

A "Stag Hunt" was arranged by the lads of the village to be run at the old "Horn Fair" (October 1st). The "Stag", Master of Hounds, Chief Whip, and hounds were elected a few days before the hunt. The squire usually loaned the antlers from his Hall and they were returned to him after the "Kill". The "Stag" was made up to resemble the animal as far as possible and members of the hunt were dressed up for the part. They ran all day, calling at farmhouses for refreshments. It would be agreed beforehand where in the wood the "Stag" should be found, but the "Kill" always took place in the square. The Master, with a sharp knife, deftly pierced the bladder of blood concealed on the "stag". During this time the chief whip experienced ostentatious difficulty in keeping their dogs away from the "stag": lashing the whip, each dog was called to order, by name. The dogs would yelp almost the whole time and the noise was great. The "Carcase" when ready for skinning was driven away in a cart to the Slaughterhouse. So realistic were the final stages that visitors watching this barbaric custom often fainted at the dying "stag" giving his

last drop of bullock's blood! Tradition says that the hunt originated with a much older custom when in order to hold the October Fair, it was necessary to cross the water into neighbouring villages and about a dozen men would blow bullock's horns. If they were not driven back across the water the Fair could be held. It is to be doubted if the more colourful developed from the more prosaic and there is more probably an initiatory tinge to the hunt as described.

It has been in

abeyance since before 1900.



sex perverts were "Staghunted" in precisely the same way as the original Stag hunting custom of the October Fair.

A daring villager impersonated the wrong-doer, and the "Kill" took place near the offenders' home.

There are several other customs connected with particular days but they are all in abeyance today. In some cases the origin is conjectured

but the local explanation is of doubtful validity.

Shrove Tuesday was Old Shreds (Shawrds) Day. Villagers, chiefly lads and lassies, indulged in throwing shreds at the doors of their neighbours. If caught they had their faces blackened by chimney soot by their captors, but they were afterwards entitled to a pancake. The custom was not

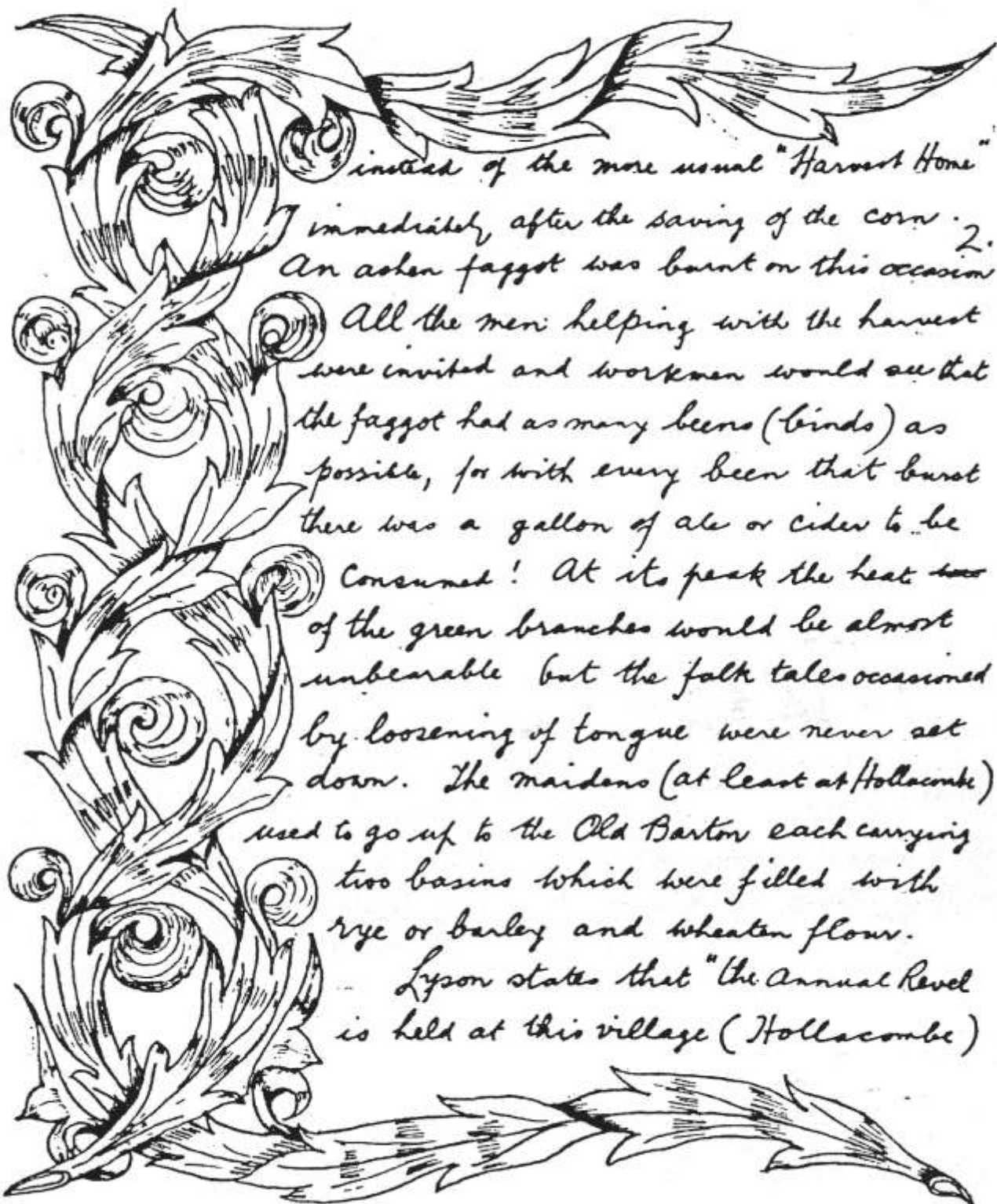
considered an unfriendly act although the author in the early 90's was "biked" by a farmers wife with a large piece of bread and cream, not to throw shreds at her front door! Disagreeable villagers often fared badly on this day. A cracked earthenware pitcher filled with filth was thrown into the centre of their living room.

On Good Friday, although there were no games of football throughout the whole year, a match was played where rough play was encouraged. This probably has no tradition behind it and in any case the custom has ceased because of the lack of young men.



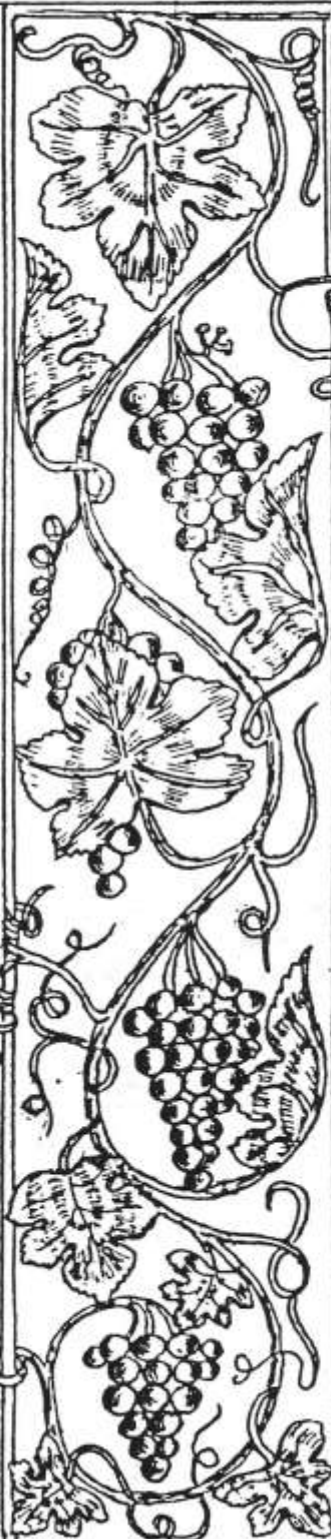
An old May Custom was "whip up" day when all the "lie-a-beds" were whipped out of bed with stinging nettles. The 29th of the month was Chick-Clack Day. All wore a sprig of oak (chick-clack) on that day and, if possible, an oak apple.

Christmas has a rich store of custom. Carol singing was, of course, general. The wandering Chorus were at times accompanied by the Violin and English Concertina. The poor cottager often left his "donation" in the Keyhole! Good Char was provided at the larger farms. A "Killing Feast" was also held on Christmas Eve.



instead of the more usual "Harvest Home" immediately after the saving of the corn. 2. An ashen faggot was burnt on this occasion. All the men helping with the harvest were invited and workmen would see that the faggot had as many beens (binds) as possible, for with every been that burst there was a gallon of ale or cider to be consumed! At its peak the heat ~~was~~ of the green branches would be almost unbearable but the folk tales occasioned by loosening of tongue were never set down. The maidens (at least at Hollacombe) used to go up to the Old Barton each carrying two basins which were filled with rye or barley and wheaten flour. Lyson states that "the Annual Revel is held at this village (Hollacombe)

at Michaelmas"³. This was undoubtedly the "Holy Day" of the Feast of St Michael, to which the Chapel at Higher Hollacombe was dedicated. It is now known as Blackberry Revel and Revel Sunday is 1st Sunday in October, after this date blackberries are considered uneatable, the pixies contaminating and the devil entering into the fruit - a strange mixture of pagan and Christian mythology! In later years the Revels were held on the Monday. Stalls were erected on the Green and games and dances took place. The type of dance as described by the old people is almost impossible to guess correctly but it



is presumed that most were similar to Morris Dances or the more intricate Barn Dances.

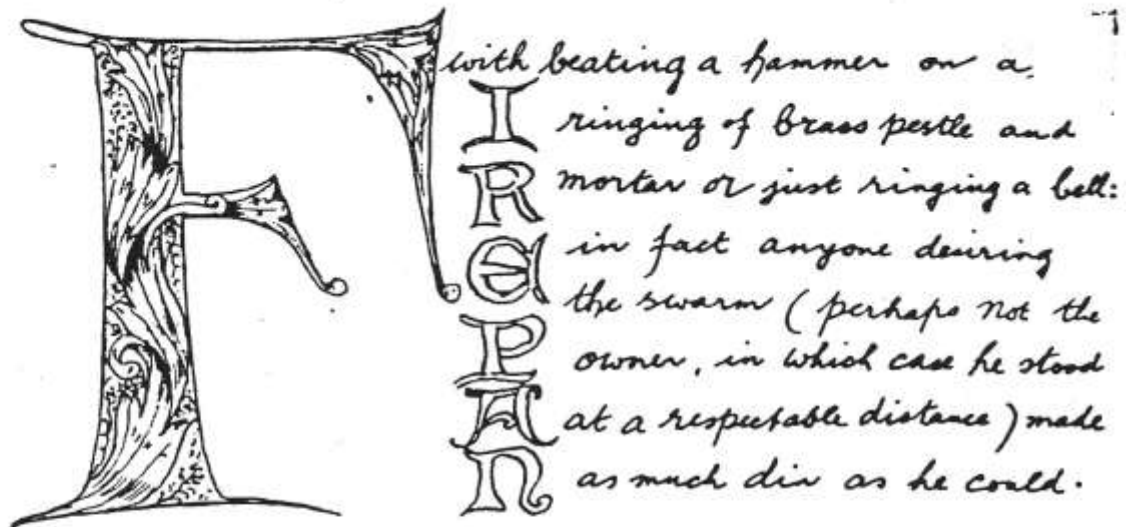
In the 1820^s a puritanical wave swept the valley and these delightful pastimes gradually passed away.

One other annual ceremony disappeared when the Great Tithes due to the Ecclesiastical Commission instead of being received at the Kings Arms was collected by post. With it went the feast⁴.

Other customs are related to events in the year which have no fixed date. At the time of the Sowing of the hay, if there were any women in the field the men very quickly and quietly made

CUSTOMS

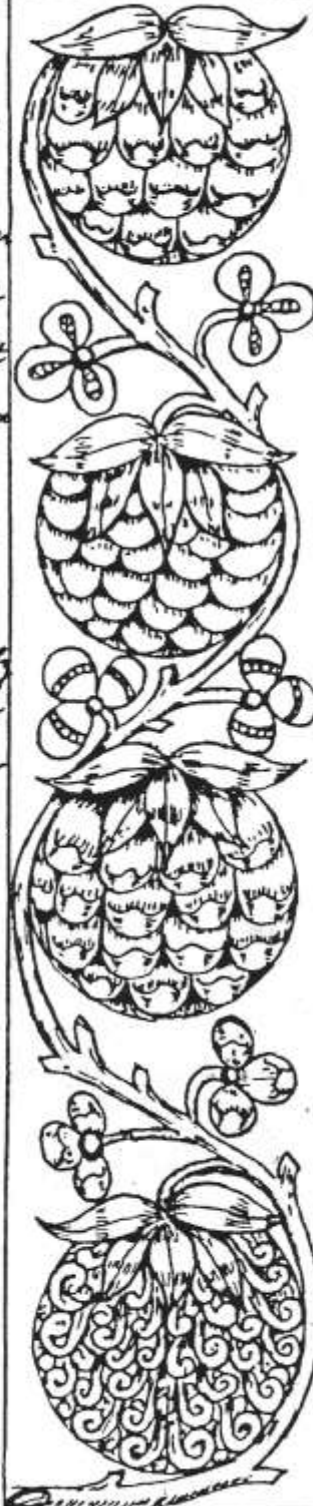
a rope of hay, and
when least expected
they ran to the maid (or matron)
When caught, sometimes after
a mock chase, her neck was
swathed in the rope and the
resultant kiss "made the hay
sweet", again when bees
swarmed, it was the custom
to "play them in", that is
entice them by making
a loud noise as



Weddings too had their customs. Archways of evergreens, especially laurel and ivy were constructed at the entrance of the house or cottage while the building itself was propped up with long poles (as is done with ricks) to welcome the newly married couple as they crossed the threshold for the first time. At the wedding ceremony itself male members of the party would vie with each other to snatch the first kiss from the bride. These are probably common to such ceremonies the world over, in one form or another. Yet it is almost remarkable how many legends and customs differ from the parish of Winkleigh to the hamlet of Hollecombe.

Superstition still dies hard, but witchcraft has long been buried. We no longer boil a live toad and look into the water to see the face of the person who has "witched" us when we suffer misfortune. Neither do we stick pins into a bullock's heart and hang it up the Chimney Corner,

Consult the "seers" of Exeter. Or sprinkle our gate posts, hedges and walls with a powder, or say the Lord's Prayer backwards in order to ward off further calamities. For it is only a few years now since we last saw a person spit before an oncoming magpie in flight and the "of magpies" is often as anxiously rehearsed as a child's eager ~~over~~ puffball "Inker tailor soldier sailor beggarman thief". If no one troubles today to alter the position of a hayrake if it were left lying teeth uppermost to avoid a downpour of rain at haytime, it is probably because the rake is a disappearing implement and we would recognise as taken against harm from human



no one believes that to kill a spider would bring rain yet many still cross second over under finger to avoid ill luck. Perhaps those that remain are due to the gypsies, some of whom claimed the uncanny knack of revealing the thoughts of men and would make shrewd guesses into the future. For 6th a lad was long before 1914, correctly informed of his Great War experiences and another informed of his love affairs with most unexpected but nevertheless faithful forecast.

Passing finally to legends, Westcott mentions the traditionally pretty tales of dragons and fairies associated with the Castle but he leaves no record.⁵

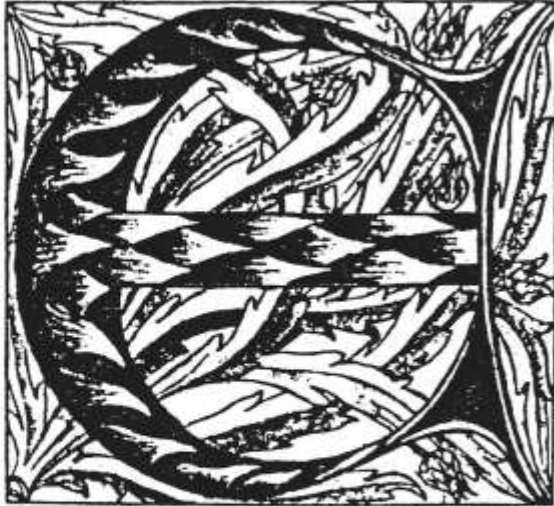
Tradition says there

is an underground passage from Court Castle to Croft but the entrance to the latter side has never been discovered. Many a lad has spoken with pride of having explored the tunnel from the Court and but the candle has always been extinguished when half way, or approximately 300 feet along inside. Perhaps modern youth with electric torch and breathing apparatus might succeed and accomplish what earlier adventurers failed to do - discover the Elizabethan Treasure. Unfortunately modern tenants to the property cannot find even this entrance! And so even the scenes of dragons and fairies fade before the approach of modern sceptics. Yet a later writer had dared swear they still remained, as one



passed on a midsummer evening⁶.

Let us end with a miscellany as befits the half remembered debris of the past. "A certain man, a craftsman of Wycklegh whose name is unknown, who had his right hand so drawn together and closed for such a long time that the fingers of the same hand almost made a hole in it, in the church of Whitestone, after he had touched the body of a deceased man as it was being moved from the place of its first burial, was cured of his infirmity in this manner, as men tell."⁷ The young Sabbath breaker who went nutting found all the branches bent by the Devil so that at his approach they obliged him by bending down to the level of his body. William



de Tracy built the original tower of the parish Church as one of the four he had promised to build to **expiate** his prime role in the murder of Thomas à Becket.

"Whosoever tampereth with the home of the Rook, will have bad luck all his dayes"; conversely a rookery once established near a dwelling brings luck to the occupants. The best remedy for a cut finger is a cobweb, doubtless because the dirt on the web helped to make a good bandage seal. A ploughman was seen to put a the spear (or tongue) of a viper near the "works" of a watch to ensure its reliability. A horse must not be whipped with mountain ash switch or the animal would pass bloody water. A carriage, drawn by headless horses passes under the village. Winklergh lads were called "Winklergh Hears" while those of Hollacombe were known as "Hollacombe Bantams". Creaking boots or shoes have not been paid for, but the wearer of an abnormally loud pair was a fortunate individual.

Finally, a beautiful legend from Hollacombe. At one time, lilacs of the valley grew as profusely as the primrose on the banks and hedges of the hamlet.