

Flitters

A Manx tradition for Good Friday

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Good Friday, which is observed as the anniversary of the crucifixion of our Saviour is in some instances superstitiously regarded in the Island. No iron of any kind must be put into the fire on that day, and even the tongs are laid aside, lest any person should unfortunately forget this custom and stir the fire with them; by way of substitute a stick of the rowan tree is used. To avoid also the necessity of hanging the griddle over the fire, lest the iron of it should come in contact with a spark or flame, a large bannock or soddag is made, with three corners, and baked on the hearth.



The Manx people have – or, until recent times, had – a peculiar custom of going to the sea-shore on Good Friday to gather shell-fish. If the day proved fine, large numbers of both sexes wended their way to the rocky shores and creeks, particularly round the south and west coasts of the Island, for the purpose of gathering pennywinkles and flitters. An old chisel, or knife, was generally carried by each, to be used in detaching the limpet from the rock to which it tenaciously clings. Considerable dexterity, and prompt decision, is required to do this; as, if the limpet is not attacked unawares, and removed at one stroke, before it has had time to think, it instantly draws itself closer to the rocky surface (something on the principal of a boy's leather sucker), and will suffer its shell to be pounded off its back before it will let go. Most people have very likely heard the story of the fox, who, on attempting to lick a limpet out of its shell, was held a prisoner by his tongue, and so kept until the advancing tide had risen and drowned him. Flitters are boiled in, or fried in fat, and sometimes eaten raw – tasting not unlike an oyster. [...]

This employment was an especially appetising one – to meet the demands of which the thick bannock (bonnag, or “Soddhag” cake) – generally made of oatmeal – was usually baked early in the morning, on the embers, without the intervention of the iron “griddle,” on which the “clapt” cakes, or “griddle” bread, was originally baked. The “Soddhag” would be divided on those who went on this customary outing, on the field operations, and at a time when its qualities would be duly appreciated.

A. W. Moore
Folk Lore of the Isle of Man (1891)

Good Friday. – Jy-heiney chaist, or, as Bishop Phillips has it, Jy-heny-ghayst, "Easter Friday," was a day on which several superstitious customs were observed. No iron of any kind was to be put into the fire, and even the tongs were laid aside, lest any person should unfortunately stir the fire with them, a stick of the mountain-ash (cuirn) being used as a substitute. To avoid placing the iron griddle on the fire, - a large thick cake, called a soddag, which is triangular in shape, was baked on the hearth. It was also a custom for people to go to the shore on this day to gather shell-fish.



FLITTER, FLETTHER, the common limpet.

He's throwin' his money about like flitter-shells. He's spendin' his money like flitters.
And woudn' regard, not him, spendin' it lek fletthers.

Peel Town skitters
Goin' to gather flitters.

(Said in derision by country children to Peel children.)

NIARBYL (yn Arbyl) [...] "The" Niarbyl, with its magnificent South-Westerly outlook, is a favourite resort of the few summer visitors who penetrate to that out-of-the-way spot, but the local people do not take much interest in it summer or winter, excepting on tolerably fine Good Fridays. On that day it is their custom to meet there on the shore. Nothing special happens; cakes, sweets and "pop" are consumed, perhaps shellfish – flitters and so on – are gathered, or were till recently; the people merely walk about, sit if it is warm enough, and chat; not only Dalby people, but outsiders from as far off as Peel. The habit suggests that some sort of a fair was held there once, even as Periwinkle Fair was held on the shore near Strandhall in Malew.



Of the last dance I shall mention very little survives, but that little is interesting; partly because it employs a 'stamping' step not found in any of our other dances and is performed to a curious modal air, and partly because I think it links a very ancient Celtic ritual with a custom which still survives quite strongly, at any rate in the country districts of the Island – that is, the custom of going to the nearest seashore on Good Friday to gather 'flitters,' or limpets, and often to cook and eat them at a picnic meal on the beach.

My first informant about this dance and custom, Mrs Callow of Maughold, said that when she was a child the whole business used to be quite a ceremony. A fire was made of flotsam and jetsam ('mychurachan' was the Manx Gaelic word she used) gathered on the beach, and cakes were made and backed on it of barleymeal. They had to be made without the use of iron or steel, so neither a knife nor a griddle could be used, and they were mixed and moulded by hand and baked in the hot ashes. The 'flitters' were also baked there in their shells, and then everyone ate of them and the cakes, and drank milk which had been brought with the party. After the meal, all the food and drink remaining was cast into the tide with the words: 'Gow shoh as bannee shin' ('Take this and bless us'). The fires were then put out, and everyone danced over the ashes in a chain of couples, which had to wind to and fro in the shape of an S.

Mrs Teare of Ballaugh also remembered the cooking and eating of 'flitters' and cakes on the shore, and a dance in the shape of an S, but not the food being thrown into the sea afterwards, or the spoken invocation.

Kathleen Faragher
'At Easter' in *English & Manx Dialect Poems* (1967)

"D'yer remember them Easters," says Margaid,
"When us we were bits o' lumpers at school,
An' the sun always seemed to be shinin',
An' new hats, coats an' shoose was the rule?"
"Could I aver forgit them?" says Janie,
"Gath'rin' flitters an' jacks at Purt Mooar,
An' rowlin' coloured eggs Easter Monday
On them brooghs that runs down to the shore!"



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