

RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

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HEXTON, Hertfordshire **Edited by Peter Greenfield**

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Undated (c. 1640)

Francis Taverner's notes on the history of Hexton BL Add Ms 6223
ff 11-16

. . . And I am conceited that in this place the Danish yoke lay heavye upon the, for I have not heard in any place of this Kingdome, that Hock-Monday, or the feast of Hoctide or Huxtide, which signifies a tyme of skorne and contempt which fell upon the Danes, by the the death of Hardicanute their King, by whose death the English were freed from the Danishe yoke, I say that in memorie of some yet lyving this Hocktide feast was yearlie solemnized by the best Inhabitants, both Men and Women in Hexton, in the fields and streetes | with strange kind of pastyme and lollities. Some of their Sports, and namely that of Pulling at the pole, I will relate.

They did yearly against everie Hock Day, elect two Officers called the Hockers, a Man and a Woman, whose office it was to provide the Hock-Ale and to govern and order the feast for that year, these Hockers had each of them a large birchenn broome, And on Hock monday morning which falls out as I take it, between Easter and Whitsontyde, many of the Inhabitants both men and women, and amongst them the most Substantiale of them, (for boyes and girles were not admitted) did goe together to the toppe of weyting hill, on the very toppe of which hill being the highest in this parish was one of those borowes, or grave hills, which now the mattock and the plow have worne downe, And their was yearelie a long and a very strong Ashen pole fastned into the ground, which the women with great courage did assaile and pull downe, striving with all their force to bring it downe the hill, which the men did defend pulling it up the hyll, but by reason of the great steopeness of the mountayne | the women by that advantage hayled it to the foote of the hyll, and though the men were soe waggishe, as that when they

perceived the women to pull most strongly, that then they would all wholly together let goe, where by the women fell over and over, with their Coats about their eares, yet for all that, the women would not give over, and when they had brought the pole to level ground, then some good fellowes would helpe the Women, the Hockers laying lustilye about them with their broomes, and allwayes, the matter was soe handled that the Women over came, thrusting the Men into the ditches and into the brooks, (the man hocker allwayes taking the women parte) and if they got any of the weaker men into their hands whom they could master, then they would battle and besmeare, and thus they laboured incessantlye 2 or 3 howres, not giving over, 'till they had brought the pole and sett it up at the Crosse by the Towne howse doore, where a greate number of people were attending their coming. And then the women having provided good Cheere, they brought it into the Towne house, and did there all eate and drink together | and that without any affront or dislike taken at any hand, And after they had eaten, then the Hockers did gather money of everie one what they pleased to give, part of it then given to the poore, the remaining money the Hockers delivered unto the Churchwardins, who layd out the same in reparation of the church, and Bells and the like, I fynde in an Old booke of Church wardens Accounts, beginning abut the 24th. of K. Hen. VIII. that the Hockers usually gave to the Churchwardens of that tyme, which was collected in this manner, about 20s sometymes more, and sometymes lesse.

Now in the afternoone they went all into the play Close, where amongst other Sports, the Women ran all on one side at Base, against the men, and if they take any of the weaker men prisoners, they would use them unhapilye inoughe.

I think these nicer tymes of ours, would not only despise these sports, but also account them ymmodest, if not prophane, But those playne and well meaning people did Solace them selves in this manner, and that without offence or Scandall. I have the rather reevyved the memorye of this | Sport of Pulling at the pole, because in my understanding it doth lyvely represent unto us, The deliverence from the Danes. In their assaying of the ffort, and that chiefly by the women, for their hate to the hurdanes, their beating them with poles, with beesomes, then kicking them into the kennells, and bemyring their faces, and that with all maner of Hockerie and scorne unto them, After all which, they eate and dranck, and gave money to the poore: And these solemnities of Hocking contynued some few yeares within the Reigne of Queene Elizabeth. And so likewise did their Maying feasts, with their playes of Robyn-hood, and little Iohn. At Barton, the towne next adjoyning Hexton, on Hock monday they had their Washale Cuppe, Offring Ale and Cake to everie passenger and that in great plentye, which custome contynued even to the later yeares of *Queen* Elizabeth. Note, that the nether field behind Barton Church is called Dunstall field, or Danestall field, where, they say, the Danes had an overthrowe in Battell, and in that field doth yet growne Dane-weed, or Danes bloud, soe called | they beleve bicause the Danes bloud, there spilt, did bring up this weed, which here, (and some other places,) will not be destroyed. And of this weed Mr. Camden maketh mention.

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Note: According to Edward Steele (see document description), the Hexton parish register shows that Francis Taverner, who was "Lord of this Towne of Hexton," was buried 9 October 1657. Hock Monday was the Monday

after Easter. The 24th year of Henry VIII's reign ran from 22 April 1532 to 21 April 1533. The book of churchwardens' accounts mentioned by Taverner has unfortunately not survived.

For a discussion of the evidence and myths surrounding Hocktide celebrations, see Sally-Beth MacLean, 'The Festivities of Hocktide: A New Look at the Evidence', *Festive Drama*, Meg Twycross (ed), (Cambridge, 1996), 233-41.

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTIONS

Francis Taverner's History of Hexton

Francis Taverner was lord of the manor of Hexton until his death in 1657 (buried 9 October, according to the Hexton register). Contents of the volume are letters and papers concerning Hexton sent to John Ward, Rhetoric Professor in Gresham College, London, mostly from Edward Steele of Bromley, Kent, who had the original of Taverner's history from John Cross of Clerkenwell, then the lord of Hexton: 'John Cross esquier a brewer at Harkle in the hole, Clerkenwell, lord of the manor of Hexton, had the original Ms. of Francis Taverner relating to the antiquities of that place' (f. 7). F. 38 is a letter from Steele to Ward, in which Steele says, 'I have lately had the Pleasure of Reading your Curious and Elaborate Account of Gresham College and its Professors, whereby I find, you was not aware that Fran. Taverner Esq. wrote more of Hexton, then what is given by Sir H. Chauncy in his Hist. of Hertfordshire, therefore, I humbly beg your acceptance of a small Treatise of his on the same that I have send you, which long since I copyed from the Original M.S. wrote by Mr. Taverner's own hand'. The material specifically on Hexton has a title page (f. 8): 'The History and Antiquities of Hexton, in the County of Hertford. By F. Taverner, Esq. Lord of the Mannor of Hexton. Also Some Account of the Church, and a Transcript of the Parish Register, by E. Steele.'

London, British Library, Additional Ms 6223; 1741-1755 (Antiquarian); English; Paper; i + 39 +ii; contemporary foliation (modern pencil foliation crossed out); catchwords; 244mm x 190mm; cover of olive green leather, title on spine: 'History of Hexton, ETC. // BRIT. MUS. / BEQUEATHED BY J. WARD // ADD. 6223.'