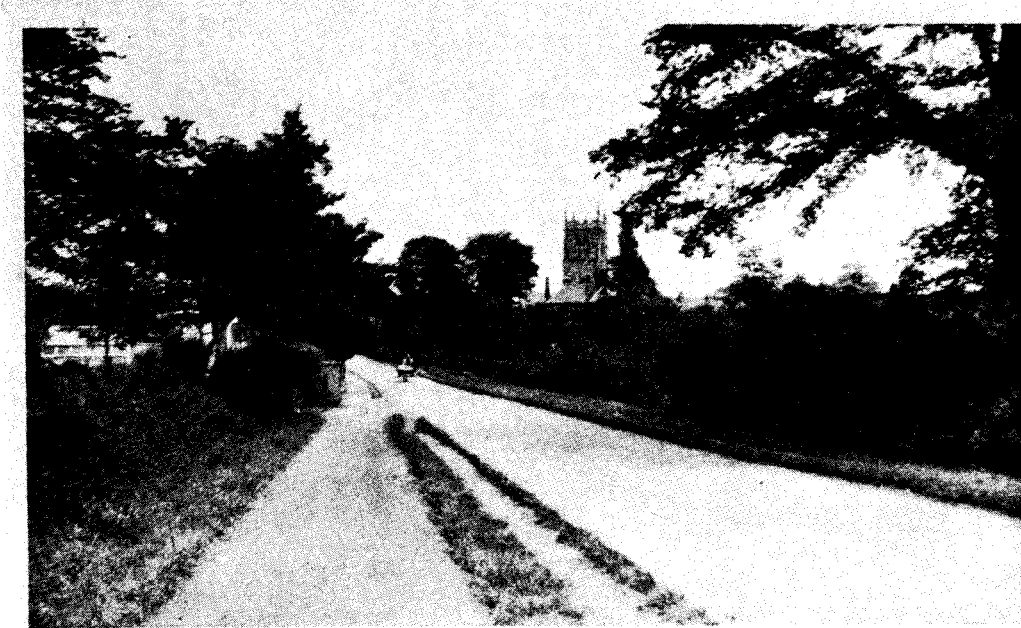


# BYGONE SILEBY



MILL LANE, SILEBY

W A K E S



No. 10

The Meaning of Wakes

Every Parish Church is identified by a name, and is dedicated to a saint, or some special event in the Christian religion. More than 800 years ago, when the first stone church was erected in Sileby, it was dedicated and opened on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary - in other words, the birthday of our Lord's Mother. This day became the annual Patronal Festival.



The word "wakes" refers to the ancient custom of the villagers congregating in the church on the eve of the feast, for a service of prayer and remembrance of the birth of the Virgin. As the service continued throughout the night, and the villagers were forbidden to sleep during the night watch, it became known as "The Wake".

The anniversary day which followed the wake was a holy day, or holiday, when apart from the necessary care of the farm animals, no work was done.

The Origin of the Feast

A legend known 1,600 years ago, tells how a host of angels was heard in the sky proclaiming that the 19th day of September as the birthday of the Blessed Virgin. It brings to mind St. Luke's account of the angel announcing the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and the heavenly host's song of praise.



The feast appears to have been mentioned first by a saint called Ildefonus, early in the 7th Century. In 688, Pope Sergius the First appointed homilies or sermons to be read on this day, and a litany to be used. It was honoured by Pope Innocent the Fourth in 1244 with an octave, and by Pope Gregory the Eleventh in 1370, with a vigil.

By the time Sileby Parish Church was built, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary was well established in the Calendar of the Church.

Rush-Bearing at Wakes Time

In the Middle Ages, before pews were introduced into churches, the congregation stood or knelt during the services. As the floor of the church was earth, and often disturbed for burials, it was the custom to cover the surface with rushes or hay. In Parishes like Sileby, where there was a river nearby, rushes were always used.

A day or two before the Wakes, carts piled high with rushes would be seen making their way along Mountsorrel Lane from the riverside to the church. The old rushes were removed, and the sweet-smelling new rushes laid in a thick carpet over the whole floor of the building. There was a hymn sung long ago, about this practice :

"Our fathers to the house of God,  
As yet a building rude,  
Bore offerings from the flowery sod,  
And fragrant rushes strew."

At churches like Braunston and Glenfield, the floors were strewn with hay for the Wakes Sunday of the feast of St. Peter. At Braunston it was still being done in the year 1890.

#### The Julian Calendar

From the time the church was dedicated in Sileby, the Wakes was always on the 19th day of September each year.

Until the middle of the 18th Century, the old Roman Calendar of Julius Caesar was still in use in this country. It was based on a year which was supposed to be  $365\frac{1}{4}$  days long, but on that reckoning, each year was 11 minutes too long.

In 1582, another Calendar, known as the Gregorian, or "the New System", was adopted by some European countries.

#### The Year the Calendar was Changed

Great Britain continued to use the old Julian Calendar until 1752, and by that time, we were 11 days behind other kingdoms in Europe! It caused much confusion in commerce and international affairs.

In 1752, the 11 days between 2nd and 14th September were omitted as the new Calendar was introduced by Parliament. The adoption of the "New System" was greeted by riots, with the populace demanding "Give us back our eleven days!" People believed that their lives had been shortened, and they had been robbed of eleven days of life by the government.

By coincidence, the days removed from the year of 1752 were in the same month as the Sileby Wakes. The feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which for some 600 years had been celebrated in this village on the 19th day of September, was now eleven days less, and fell on the 8th day of that month.

#### Sileby Rejected the New Calendar

Traditions died hard in this village. Other villages nearby submitted to the change of Calendar, and adjusted their Wakes to the new dates - but not Sileby! The 19th of September was the



"proper" date for the Wakes, and the village insisted that it should go on as before.

To-day, 218 years after the change, Sileby Wakes is still held according to the old Julian Calendar, the 19th day of September being the key date.

As official date of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary is 8th September, the Patronal Festival of the church and the Wakes became separated. Eventually, the Patronal Festival became neglected and forgotten, and the Parish Church adopted the "Wakes Sunday" as the Harvest Festival.

#### How the Wakes Fair Began



In ancient times, on the eve of the village church festival, the people arrived to watch and pray throughout the night by candle light. By the morning, when they left the church, they were hungry and thirsty, and enterprising tradesmen from nearby villages set up stalls and booths near the gates of the churchyard where they sold refreshments, oat-cakes, cheese, ginger-bread and cakes, together with home-brewed ale and herb drinks.

Soon, other stalls were added, selling cheap trinkets, ribbons and coloured materials. "Tawdry", a word associated with cheap and gaudy objects, was first used of necklaces bought at the Wakes of St. Audrey, at Ely, held on the 17th October. These "St. Audrey laces", became known as "Tawdry laces", and later the word came to mean anything showy and inexpensive. Stall was added to stall, until the churchyard became a small market place on Wakes day.



Travelling entertainers began to appear at the Wakes, and outside the church were acrobats, tumblers, jugglers, dancers, puppet-shows and men with performing animals. It was the beginning of the "Wakes Fair".

Church authorities were displeased by these activities on the sacred soil of the churchyards, but it was not until the 13th century that Wakes Fairs were forbidden within 100 paces of the churchyard by a statute of King Edward the First.

#### Locations of the Sileby Wakes Fair

When the fair was removed from the churchyard, it is supposed that the next site was on the Barrow Road. As the north side of the churchyard was used for village archery practice, and people were accustomed to gather there, it would be a good location, being near the highway.

In living memory, there have been five different sites for the fair in Sileby:



1. The Wash Pit

This place was known in the 1700's as "The Sheep Wash", and was in the Howgate Field. The village sheep were washed and sheared there. In the 1880's it was described as being at the back of "Gate Lane", now called Swan Street.

2. Ratcliffe Road

The next site used was at the bottom of Ratcliffe Road, separated from the Wash Pit by "Mucky Lane", now Highgate Road.

3. High Street

The fair moved to "Sharp's field", at the back of the brewery in High Street.

4. Cossington Road

After a year or two, the large field at the rear of the Conservative Club was used.

5. Little Church Lane

In recent times, the fair has used a field behind Church Farm, off the lane.

The Hiring Fair

A statute of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First regulated the hiring of agricultural workers on a yearly basis. This event was known variously as a Hiring Fair, Mop Fair, or The Statutes. In Sileby it was known as the "Statis" and was held in the village during Wakes time, the Feast Week.

The "Statis" took place in High Street, and the workers were hired as they stood along the pavement. Reference is sometimes made to "The High Causey" in High Street, and some suggest that the name was used because the footpath was unusually high above the roadway. It was not the "High Causey", but the "Hire Causey", the place of hiring.

On the appointed day in the Feast Week, all those seeking employment gathered along the Hire Causey. They were identified according to their work. The cowmen had a knot of hairs from a cow's tail on his hat; a shepherd had a piece of wool; a thresher, some ears of wheat; the waggoner, a piece of whip cord; milkmaids carried a stool and housemaids, a mop or feather duster.

The farmer or householder who wished to employ one or more of the persons standing for hire, discussed wages and conditions with them. Agreement was made by word of mouth, and a shilling was



given to the employee to seal the bargain. A former Vicar of Sileby who engaged a man as a gardener and odd-job man, to live in the out-buildings, agreed to pay him, "Seven pounds ten shillings for the year, a suit of clothes, and another suit of clothes before the year end, provided he behaved himself".

As many of the persons presenting themselves on the Hire Causey were from other villages, and strangers, there were sometimes rogues among them who gave false names and trades, and went off with the hiring shilling.

The workers were usually hired for a year less one day, and not for a full twelve months. This arrangement was a necessary precaution, because if anyone resided in a parish for one year, they could claim to be legally "settled" in that place, and in time of need or sickness could obtain relief on the Poor Rates. With this year-less-one-day system, parishes avoided the obligation of having to support strangers from other towns and villages. A man might work for the same master for many years, but still had to attend the Hiring Fair during the Feast Week. By the same regulation, a man could live in Sileby for that period, but not "belong" to the village.

### The Wakes Holiday

The records of the National School, on Barrow Road, show that the months of August and September were enjoyed by the children, because they were away from their classrooms. First came the "Harvest Holidays", towards the end of August, when they assisted their parents in the fields. They returned to school until the third week in September, when they had the Wakes holidays.

On the 22nd September, 1872, the schoolmaster entered in his Log Book, "The Feast Week. No School."

The Wakes in Sileby and other villages came as a welcome relief to the routine of quiet village life. No opportunity was lost to visit a fair, as the Log Book shows :

1871. 4th November. "Attendance this morning rather thin. Many of the children gone to Cossington and Seagrave Wakes."

1875. 12th July. "Attendance not quite so good to-day, owing to Feasts or Wakes being held in two adjoining parishes."

1879. 10th October. "Leicester Fair had a marked influence on the attendance on Thursday and Friday."

1879. 14th November. "Loughborough Fair caused the attendance on Thursday and Friday to be very poor."



## Wakes Cakes

The end of August and the beginning of September saw housewives busy preparing their Wakes Cakes. Some, of course, left the work until later and made their cakes between the Tuesday and Friday before the feast week-end. Every house had Wakes Cakes, and free slices of cake were available in all the ten public houses in the village.

It was the custom to hire loaf-tins from bakers, and to return the tins filled with the cake mixture to be baked in the large ovens. The hire charge was  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. for a 2lb tin, and 1d. for a 4 lb tin. Some would hire up to a dozen tins.

It was always a sign that the Wakes was near at hand, when people were seen taking the loaf tins to the bakehouse. As they were heavy, they were carried in clothes baskets, perambulators and even on handcarts.

Each cake was identified by a piece of paper or card stuck on the top of the mixture, bearing the name of the woman who had made it.

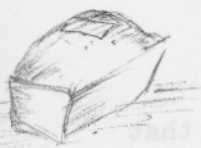
There were several kinds of cake made for the feast. The true Wakes Cake, filled with fruit, was known in the village as "Plum Cake". There was also plain cake, and the popular seed cake, in which a quantity of aromatic caraway seed was mixed.

In the days when James Newbold had a bakery by the brook off the west side of High Street, people crossing Dudley's Bridge could smell the seed cake baking in his oven.

Although Wakes Plum Cake was supposed to be made to a standard recipe, some women tried to make their cakes better than their neighbours, and the mixture was so rich, the identifying papers sank into the cake during baking. There were some lively and noisy arguments at the bakehouses when the women were trying to recognise their own cakes among those which had no paper - it having "dropped in" or fallen off.

There were remarkable differences in the plain and seed cakes when they emerged from baking. One baker said that some cakes were so poorly made, "they came out of the oven like a piece of concrete!"

The bakers regarded the baking of the cakes as a service to their customers, and charged only  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. and 1d. for the use of the oven. They were often out of pocket, as tins were not returned.





### A Recipe for a Sibley Wakes Plum Cake

Below is an authentic recipe for a Sibley Wakes Cake, known to be one hundred years old :

1 lb Flour, plain  
1 oz Baking Powder (or kali obtained from the Chemist)  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  tea spoon of Salt  
7 oz Sugar  
5 oz Lard  
2 oz Butter  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  oz Lemon or Mixed Peel  
6 oz Currants  
2 oz Sultanas  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  pint of Milk  
2 Eggs

### Homemade Wine for Visitors

The laws of hospitality in Victorian Sibley demanded that every visitor at Wakes time should be offered a choice of cake, a slice of plum, seed or plain, and a glass of home made wine.

Barrow Road was noted for its wine makers. It is said that in the various wine making seasons, the aroma from pans and cauldrons filled the air along that road. Folks from other parts of the village passing houses where husbands and wives stood "watching the world go by", would stop, sniff, and shout across the road, "Yer at it agen, ayer?" In some houses, visitors could have a glass of wine after choosing from any one of a dozen different bottles. The most popular were dandelion, cowslip, coatsfoot, elderberry and parsnip. The sweet, fragrant wine was deceptive, having a high alcohol content. (The present writer was invited by one dear old lady to try a glass of "my home-made cordial." Having consumed one tumblerful, another was poured. The outcome was two days in bed. The "cordial" it was later discovered was dandelion wine, twenty-five years old).



### Visitors

Relatives and friends came from other villages for a day during the Wakes. Visitors to the poorer families often brought their own food with them. One man who used to call on his relatives a few days before the feast, always said on leaving, "Wayl say yer next wake at the weeks."

### Beef at the Wakes

In Sibley there was a long tradition of eating beef at the annual feast. A rumour would go round the village that some butcher was having a prize bull for the Wakes. Even if it was not a bull, and had never been awarded a prize, its appearance

in the village caused some excitement, and it was accompanied to its final destination by crowds of shouting children.

A butcher in High Street placed stalls along the pavement, on which he displayed huge joints of beef. As few people could afford to pay immediately for so large a piece of meat, they would arrange to pay by instalments, sometimes as little as a penny a week if times were hard. It was known that some would be paying for their "Wake beef" until the next Wake came round. People were always aware when someone had made their final payment for their "Wakes beef", as this butcher took his customer across to the Old Plough Inn for a glass of whisky to mark the occasion.

There was a practice of roasting the beef with a Yorkshire pudding underneath, so that the juices of the meat dropped on to it when it was cooking. The pudding was eaten with gravy as a first course.

The public houses had their own large roasted joints which were cut up and given away to the customers. Those buying drinks accepted "a free slice o' Wake beef on a piece of bread." Some who could not resist the urge to get something for nothing, went from one inn to another to get their fill of free meat.

#### Wakes Cricket Matches

Many of our older readers will remember the two-day cricket matches which were played on the Wakes Saturday and Monday, between Sileby and the Nottingham Manufacturer's team.

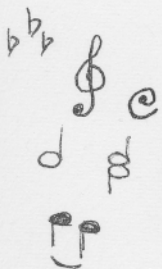
In the large field on the north side of Mountsorrel Lane, a marquee was erected to serve as a pavilion for changing and refreshments. The food, mainly sandwiches and beer, was supplied by the Fountain Inn, in Brook Street. A man remained on guard throughout the Saturday night and all day on Sunday to watch over the barrels and bottles reserved for the continuation of the match on Monday.

Wakes weather was usually good, and the matches were played regularly, attracting great crowds.

#### The Wakes Band Concert

At tea-time on the Wakes Sunday, the Sileby Town Band assembled on the green by the brookside near Dudley's Bridge. Crowds of people stood in Brook Street and along the bridge to listen to a concert. Someone who looked back on those days with affection, said, "It was a joy to listen to those lovely tunes."

When the bells of the Parish Church began to peal, the concert was concluded, and the Band marched to church to attend the service. After church, they marched down High Street to the show field at the





9  
back of the Conservative Club, where another crowd gathered to listen to a fine selection of hymns. A collection was taken on the field, and the money sent to the Leicester Royal Infirmary.

#### Stalls outside "The General Moore"

There was a public house near the corner of High Street and Brook Street, opposite Dudley's Bridge. Across the front of the building was a long board on which was painted "The General Sir John Moore". The house was named after a most distinguished Scottish soldier, who is best remembered for his expedition to Spain in 1808, where he fought with great success against the French. He was slain at Coruna, in 1809.

Between the General Moore and the roadway, there used to be an area of unpaved ground, and here at Wakes time, a number of stalls were erected.

Some will remember visitors to the fair standing round a stall where pigs' trotters and hot peas were sold, with customers helping themselves to salt and vinegar bottle.

The proprietor of the "trotter stall" lived at Loughborough, and when he began his homeward journey late at night with his horse and cart, he was seldom alone, as the Constable required him to convey a number of persons to the Loughborough Police Station, having been taken in charge as drunk and disorderly.

Another stall outside the General Moore at the Wakes and other times, sold crockery, and was known as the "pot stall". John Birkin Marston, the Town Crier about 1910, was employed by the stall holder to go round the village ringing his bell and pausing here and there to announce that "a grand sale of pots" would take place that evening.

A man who sold sweets at bargain prices set up a stall at the Wakes. It is said that "the kids got a gret bag o' rock fer a penny - enough to kape um chewin fer a wik."

Nearby was a stall selling Wakes brandy-snap, a gingerbread wafer, round in shape, and rolled to form a tube.

The stall sites were let by the landlord of the Sir General Moore at sixpence a day.

There were rival stalls on the opposite side of the road in High Street. In the gateway which led to Marlow's blacksmith shop, there was a stall selling brandy-snap and gingerbread.

#### Sileby Wakes Fair

During the past ten years, eye-witness accounts of the Wakes Fairs from 1880 to the beginning of the First World War have been collected. As the fairs occupied three different sites during



those thirty-five years, it is difficult at this distance in time to discover which particular shows and roundabouts were located at any particular site. The description of the fair given in these booklets is a general impression of this annual event during that period of time.

### The Arrival of the Fairground Shows

Old hearts were stirred and young hearts were gay when the time of the Wakes feast drew near. One lady can remember a September afternoon before the First War, when, as the children were leaving school, they had the glorious sight of traction engines towing waggons, horse-drawn vans and brightly painted caravans moving slowly into Sileby along Barrow Road. They raced back into the school to tell the other children, screaming "the shows ar cum!" She recalls the children laughing, shouting and dancing in the road with excitement, and "the show-folks staring at us as they passed by."

The word "show" was always used in this village when speaking about the Wakes fair. The place where it was held was called the "show field." People would ask each other in passing, "Ayer gooin down show fayld termorrer?" The word was also used to describe every kind of amusement on the field, being applied to roundabouts as well as entertainments presented in tents. It was not as confusing as it might seem, because the word "show" was preceded by the name of the owner. When one person knew exactly the type of entertainment, and its usual place in the show field.

### The Fair

For the children, an important part of the Wakes season was to stand about the show field watching the roundabouts and booths being assembled, and the wonder of a bare field becoming a fairground.

On the first night of the fair, they found that the field, usually dark, empty and unnoticed, was transformed into an exciting area of lights, colour and music.

The fair was brilliantly lit by numerous flaring naphtha and paraffin lamps. The naked yellow flames from the naphtha lamps which were suspended in front of the side-shows and booths, swayed and roared in the breeze of the cool September evening. There was always a danger that the flames of the naphtha lamps, which spread outwards and downwards from a nozzle, might be blown backwards and upwards by a sudden gust of wind. When this happened, the hot flame could catch the canvas roof, and a second or two later, high flames were leaping above the booth. As the audience fled from the tent in panic, fairground workers were throwing buckets of water over the unburned canvas to prevent the fire spreading. As soon as the charred debris was removed from the interior, the show went on.

## The Old Fairground Atmosphere

Pressure-lamps with brilliant incandescent mantles protected by glass globes, produced a strong white light. These hissing lamps emitted a peculiar smelling vapour. It was not unknown for the pressure-lamps to explode, showering their contents over those who happened to be nearby.

Against the dark night sky above the showground, smoke and steam rose from the traction engines and steam-driven machines which supplied power to the roundabouts, and the small merry-go-rounds. In the glare of the fairground illuminations, the smoke and steam had an orange and yellow tint as it drifted away.

The field was filled with noise. There were people everywhere laughing and talking loudly to make themselves heard, roundabouts rumbling and clattering on metal wheels, the roar of traction and steam engines, the high warbling notes of steam whistles, the clang of brass bells on the merry-go-rounds, the distorted voices of men with megaphones attracting customers to their side-shows, and above all, the thrilling sound of the massive steam organs.

No Wakes fair would have been complete, or acceptable, without the presence of a "show-organ", as it was called in Sileby. The huge instrument was an entertainment in itself, not only to stand and listen to the rich and powerful sound of marches and waltzes pouring out of the gilded pipes, but to watch the colourful wooden doll-like figures, which were part of the mechanism, moving their arms to strike drums, cymbals and a triangle.

FOR HIGH-CLASS INTERIOR OR EXTERIOR WORK  
AND DECORATING  
GOOD QUALITY PAINTING  
BY  
JOHN SKORIK  
The next booklet in this Series, No.12, continues the story of the Wakes, and contains descriptions of the roundabouts, sideshows and other features of the showground.



We are told that there were other ways of arranging a rendezvous during the Feast :

" Wayl say yer next wil at the Week."

" Arm cumin to the Week next wik, - arl say yer down the fayld."

\* \* \* \* \*

ADVERTISEMENTS

HIGHGATE TAXIS

YOUR LOCAL TAXI SERVICE - ANY DISTANCE  
ANY WHERE  
ANY TIME

AND NOW ALSO A SEVEN-SEATER MINI-BUS

How do I get a TAXI or the MINI-BUS ?

RING SILEBY 2015

Or, you can book them at the

"Modern Maid" Baby Wear and Wool Shop, 28, King Street.

Telephone: Sileby 2962.

PLEASE REMEMBER THE NAME - "HIGHGATE TAXIS."

Proprietor: Mr. H.J. Taylor.

\* \* \* \* \*

GOOD QUALITY PAINTING

AND DECORATING

FOR HIGH-CLASS interior or exterior work

BY

JOHN SKORIK

TELEPHONE SILEBY 2057. FREE ESTIMATES..REASONABLE PRICES

\* \* \* \* \*

BYGONE SILEBY

The next booklet, Number 11, will describe the village and its people about 1200 A.D. From now on, we shall be able to identify individual villagers by name. Number 12 continues the story of the Wakes, with accounts of the shows, booths and roundabouts.