

A personal selection of local, British Isles and world, history.

EDITOR: Mark Brandon

WEBPAGE: [jot-and-tittle.com](http://jot-and-tittle.com)



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## GREAT SCOTT!

**E**dith Agnes Kathleen Bruce (1878 - 1947) studied sculpture in Paris under Rodin and attended Gertrude Stein's salons. In 1908 she met Captain Robert Falcon Scott and they were married in the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court. When Scott died in Antarctica in 1912 he was posthumously awarded a knighthood, making Kathleen - Lady Scott.

Kathleen was commissioned to make a bronze sculpture of her husband but due to WWI no metal was available so she travelled to Italy and worked in Carrara marble. The sculpture was shipped to Christchurch in New Zealand but a bronze copy remains in Waterloo Place London.



In Beaulieu Abbey, Hampshire, there is a memorial plaque by Lady Scott to the memory of actress Eleanor Velasco Thornton who became secretary to Baron Montague of Beaulieu. Eventually they married but Eleanor drowned with hundreds of other passengers on 30 December 1915 when the SS Persia, on which she was travelling with Montagu through the Mediterranean on the way to India, was torpedoed without warning by the German U-boat U-38, commanded by Max Valentiner. Montagu survived the sinking.

Eleanor is believed to have been the model for Rolls Royce's *Spirit of Ecstasy*, sculpted by Charles Sykes, although she does not look the part in the photo (right).



## PATRON SAINT?

**S**t Petroc is the patron saint of Cornwall\* and in his church at Bodmin lies the reliquary that once contained his bones. Petroc was probably born in South Wales and educated in Ireland. He ministered to the peoples of *Dumnonia* (Devon and Cornwall) and was very much associated with the monastery at Padstow (Pedrock-Stowe) which he founded and where he was buried (see J&T No.79 for St Petroc Minor). But, fearful of the Danes, his bones were moved to Bodmin. Unfortunately, his bones were stolen by French monks but returned in a beautiful Byzantine casket. This casket was then lost but found again in 1831. It was displayed



until 1957 when it was again stolen until eventually found on a moor outside Sheffield!

The 12<sup>th</sup> century ivory reliquary casket (left) is believed to have been made in Sicily that at the time was under Norman control. In Sicily there was a great exchange of artistic ideas between Europe and the Middle East. A similar casket is stored in the V&A.

\*Those of us who listen to Radio Three know that he is also their saint!



## DIES NATALIS

**Y**es it's that time of year again when we celebrate the birth of Christ - Welsh *Nadolig* and Scots Gaelic *Nollaig*. The historical Christ was of course not born in the winter, but in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity became the Roman state religion it was thought wise to assimilate popular pagan cults. The 25<sup>th</sup> December was the Roman winter solstice and *the birthday of the Unconquered Sun* and was thus thought appropriate to the *Sun of Righteousness*. The preceding week was the joyful (if rather bacchanalian) celebration of *Saturnalia* which was thought equally suitable. In Britain and Northern Europe the festival assimilated the Germanic mid-winter festival of *Yule*. As we know, the Christian Socialism of the Victorians formalised the celebrations and added an element of sentimentality. Prince Albert's Christmas tree (below<sup>3</sup>) replaced the mistletoe bough in 1840 and crackers were invented by a London baker in 1846.

The winter fruit-bearing plants of holly, ivy and mistletoe are all associated with Christmas from the pagan past. The berries of the male holly are said to represent Christ's blood and the prickles, his crown of thorns. Mistletoe though is so associated with the Druids that the Church will not tolerate it as decoration. However York Minster places a piece on the High Altar although I am not sure why - Viking influence perhaps?

Father Christmas/Santa Claus has been known since the 15<sup>th</sup> century but along with the reindeer, chimneys and turkey comes to us from the cultural melting pot of the USA. Before turkey it was good old British beef which is still the case at Queen's College Oxford. The plum porridge (containing beef)



has now morphed into our Christmas pudding and mince pies originally contained proper mincemeat (fat mutton).

Christmas carols originated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as popular songs to accompany round dances, hence their repeated choruses. Again the Victorians came to the fore with many of our current favourites. Local non-conformist carols and tunes can still be heard in some Yorkshire pubs and in the mid-Welsh *Plygain* (cockcrow) services.

We delved into Christmas in more detail in J&T No. 129 and there are other references in Nos. 15, 31, 54 and 105.

#### CHRIST'S MASS<sup>4</sup>

**A**lthough the half-pagan ceremonies associated with Christmas began to coalesce as long ago as the 11<sup>th</sup> century some of its customs were subsequently condemned by the Puritans. However, a few still survive. One such is *Y Mari Lwyd* (the grey mare<sup>4</sup>) a bone or wooden and canvas horse with snapping jaws and bottle-glass eyes carried on a pole by a man covered in a white sheet. In Glamorgan it is accompanied by a Mare Leader, a Sergeant, a fiddle playing Merryman and a black-faced Punch and Judy.



Before entering a house they must conduct a verbal battle of questions and answers in Welsh verse.

We have all heard of the *Yule Log* but what was it? On Christmas Eve a large log, sometimes decorated with holly etc. was ceremoniously brought in. It should never be bought, only taken from your own land or given, and was lit with a fragment of last year's log. This fragment was kept to ward off fire and lightning during the year. The log was kept alight for at least twelve hours. Those with large inglenooks might burn a whole tree trunk for the twelve days of Christmas. If the fire were to go out then bad luck would follow. The Scots tended to use oak whereas the English favoured ash or fruit wood. In Somerset and Devon a bundle of green ash sticks (*Ashen faggot*) tied with twisted bark *binders* was preferred. As each stick burns through it is an occasion for another round of drinks.



*Mumming* may have derived from the German *mumen*, a mask as players hide their identity and sometimes are silent. In 1377 a *mummerie* of masked and elaborately costumed Londoners dined, danced and feasted with Richard II in complete silence - is this where *mum's the word* comes from? As with many other pagan ceremonies, their basis is fertility, luck and an opportunity to give alms to the poor. Masked mummers were suppressed by law

in 1511 as it might provide an ideal opportunity for thieves and so mummers resorted to *blacking-up*. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the format was that of a play although women only started to take part recently.

The oldest type of dress was to sew paper strips over clothes and hats to hide their identity. The play begins with a *letter-in* in the form of a clown or Old Father Christmas. The central figure is the *hero* as saint or King George but can be a local hero such as Wallace in Scotland. This character fights villains such as *Bold Slasher*, *The Black Prince of Paradine* or the *Turkish Knight*. One is killed and a *doctor* (page 3<sup>5</sup>) appears who boasts nonsensically of his skills before reviving the dead man. Now follow various comic characters (especially a hefty male 'lady') who make topical and local allusions whilst encouraging the audience to give generously. There are of course many variations of theme with Robin Hood being the basis of some.

### THE DRESDEN CODEX<sup>6</sup>



The illustration (in the Public Domain) is of six pages (out of 78) depicting eclipses, multiplication tables and the flood. It is from the Mayan civilisation of Yucatán in Central America and dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. It resides in the Saxon State Library. It is made of *amate*, a paper made from bark and the book folds accordion-style. The word *Maya* is a modern construct taken from the abandoned city of Mayapán as it is not thought that the peoples encompassed by the name thought of themselves as one unit.

Their counting system is shown right. Note that they had the zero, more or less contemporary with it being used by the Indian civilisation. They used a vigesimal system based on 20 but varied it when necessary - so a unit of 20 days was multiplied by 18 to give 360 in a year. This means that their calendar was more accurate than the Julian. Although proto- Maya might go back as far as 8,000 BC, their communities collapsed before the Spanish arrived. The kings were governed by tradition that made it difficult to adapt to changing circumstances. That along with internecine warfare seemed to be the catalyst for decline.

0	1	2	3	4
○	●	●●	●●●	●●●●
5	6	7	8	9
—	●	●●	●●●	●●●●
10	11	12	13	14
—	●	●●	●●●	●●●●
15	16	17	18	19
—	●	●●	●●●	●●●●
—	—	—	—	—

The codex is a rare survival as the Inquisition ensured that most writings were destroyed. We know that their astronomical work was quite advanced. They measured the 584-day Venus cycle with an error of just 2 hours.

## JOHN DEE<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth I's astrologer John Dee used an Aztec obsidian mirror to see the future, making him closer in outlook to a Mayan priest astronomer. Co-incidentally, I have just read about Dee's obsidian mirror in S J Parris' historical novel *Prophecy* (Harper-Collins 2017). I recommend her *Giordano Bruno* series, if like me you enjoyed C J Sansom's *Shardlake* series (Pan-Macmillan).

Dee (1527 - 1608) was a mathematician, astrologer and alchemist and tends to be regarded as something of a crank but science was not as closely defined as today and even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Newton studied alchemy. You only have to delve into Dee was a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge and was one of the original fellows of Henry VIII's Trinity College. Here he is particularly well known for putting on a play with a special effect that ever afterwards gave him the reputation of a conjuror and magician.

The portrait (right) by an unknown artist is in the Royal College of Physicians library which contains more than 100 books previously belonging to Dee. This is the largest known collection of Dee books surviving in one location. They were acquired as part of the library of the Marquis of Dorchester, presented to the physicians in the 1680s. It is not clear how these volumes came to be owned by Dorchester, however there is evidence that many of them were stolen from Dee by a certain Nicholas Saunder. The Dee Collection contains some of the most dramatic and beautiful books in the RCP library, including mathematical, astronomical and alchemical texts. Many of the books



are heavily and elaborately annotated by Dee himself. Dee built, and lost, one of the greatest private libraries of 16<sup>th</sup> century England. He claimed to own over 3,000 books and 1,000 manuscripts, which he kept at his home in Mortlake near London, on the River Thames. The authors and subjects of Dee's books are wide-ranging and reflect his extraordinary breadth of knowledge and expertise. They include diverse topics such as mathematics, natural history, music, astronomy, military history, cryptography, ancient history and alchemy.

In 1547 he returned from the Low Countries with the first astronomer's staff designed by Charles V's cosmographer, and two globes by Mercator. These were given to Trinity College when he moved to Louvain where he was taught by all the great geographers who became his friends. He used this knowledge to instruct the great English seamen of the age including Frobisher, Raleigh and probably Drake. He was always popular with Elizabeth I (having calculated the most auspicious day for her coronation) and counted among his acquaintances the Emperors



Maximillian II and Rudolph, Henry II of France and many of Europe's finest minds. In 1550 he moved to Paris where he lectured to enormous audiences on Euclid. On his return he was introduced to Cecil and by him to the King who gave him an annuity of 100 crowns.

He was imprisoned for a time due to a false accusation of an attempt on Queen Mary's life by poison or magic but was acquitted by the Star Chamber. He petitioned Mary to create a Royal Library to ensure the preservation of manuscripts, and historical monuments but unfortunately it came to nothing. He was in Hungary and Lorraine for a time and then was employed by the Government to calculate the effects of moving to the Gregorian calendar and worked out that 11 days would be needed to adjust. This was of course fiercely fought by the Church. Dee often was called to see Elizabeth and Elizabeth also visited Dee at home, on one occasion listening to him for three

days discourse on a new comet that had terrified the court. He was also called in, probably by Cecil or Walsingham to cope with a crisis when a wax figure of the Queen was found in Lincoln's Inn Fields with a pin driven into its breast. I suspect that it was this incident that formed the germ of an idea for Parris's *Prophesy*.

His interest in alchemy was part of his devotion to the writings of *Hermes Trismegistus* (top-left<sup>8</sup>) the legendary Hellenistic figure that combined the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth. His supposed work, the *Hermetica* (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), was the highly influential foundation of philosophers like Dee being interested in the interrelationship between the material and the divine. You can see this mixture today in the work of Rudolf Steiner. Like many clever men, Dee was also naïve and was taken in by a scoundrel called Kelly who, with his claims, destroyed a good part of Dee's reputation. He died in poverty, selling books to keep going. His reputation should be of a true Renaissance Man: as well as 16<sup>th</sup> century science he was a prolific writer, pioneer diarist and was said to have coined the phrase *The British Empire*.

Seasons Greetings and best wishes for a safe and healthy 2025.

Mark



Editor

1. Royal Society of Sculptors, Wikipedia and Brian Harris's *Harris's Guide to Churches & Cathedrals* (Ebury Publishing 2006).
2. *Treasures of the English Churches* by John Martin Robinson (Sinclair-Stevenson 1995) and Simon Jenkins' *England's Thousand Best Churches* (Penguin 2009).
3. Courtesy of English Heritage.
4. *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain* by Charles Kightly (Thames & Hudson 1986). Photo courtesy of Horniman Museum.
5. Bradford-on-Avon Green Man festival.
6. Wikipedia and *The No-Nonsense Guide to World History* by Chris Brazier (New Internationalist Publications 2006).
7. *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP 1995) and *Who's Who in Tudor England*, C R N Routh (Shepherd-Walwyn 1990)
8. Courtesy of Wikipedia.