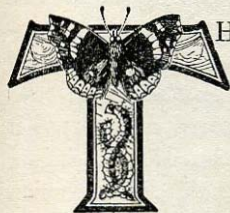


## ARTICLES MADE OF STRAW.



THE Orkney peasantry of two centuries ago lived in a poor country — a country ground down by the tyranny of greedy and unscrupulous rulers; a country whose inhabitants had neither the raw materials from which to construct many necessary utensils nor the money to purchase them. It is interesting to note some of the ways in which our forefathers overcame the circumstances in which they were placed. One of the most notable is the ingenious use of straw for the construction of many domestic utensils.

The materials from which articles of straw were made were principally *bent* and the straw of black oats. The bent, after being cut, was loosely bound into rough sheaves and left to dry and wither. It was then bound into neat sheaves called *beats*, the legal size of which used to be two spans in circumference. Each beat was carefully pleated at the upper end, gradually tapering upwards into a cord which served to bind two beats together. The pair of beats so fastened was called a “band of bent,” twelve of which formed a “thrave.” From this bent were made the cords, always called *bands*, which

were used in the manufacture of straw. During the long winter evenings each ploughman was required to wind into bands one beat of bent. The cord was spun or twisted by the fingers, the two strands being each twisted singly, and at the same time laid into each other in such a way that the tendency of the strands to untwist was the means of keeping the two firmly twisted together.

The straw used was that of the common Orkney black oats, which was at once tougher and more flexible than that of other cultivated kinds. The straw to be used was not threshed with the flail, which would have spoiled it, but was selected from the sheaves, held in a bunch between the hands, and beaten on some hard edge to remove the grain. Such straw was called *gloy*. From those two materials, bent bands and *gloy*, a very wide variety of indispensable articles were manufactured by the Orkney farmer.

These articles may be divided into three classes—flexible, semi-flexible, and inflexible. Of the flexible type, the most simple and primitive article was the *sookan*, or, to give it a still older name, the *wislin*. This was simply straw twisted loosely into a thick cord of one strand, for temporary use. If not at once used to tie round something, it had to be wound into a clew to preserve its twist.

A very common use of sookans in the winter-time was to form what were known as “straw boots.” A loop of the sookan was passed round the instep, over the shoe or *rivlin*, the thick straw cord being then wound round the ankles and the lower part of the leg. When the snow was deep, such straw boots

formed a very comfortable part of the peasant's attire. Less than a century ago, on a Sunday when the snow lay deep on the ground, more than forty men wearing straw boots were seen in one Orkney church. It must be added that on the way home some of them were severely reprov'd by a neighbour for having performed this unnecessary labour on the Sabbath day!

Next in order comes *simmans*. This was a strong straw rope made of two strands, also twisted by hand, and rolled into great balls or clews, the size of which was the width of the barn door. The main use of *simmans* was to thatch the corn stacks, and also the roofs of the cottages. A newly-thatched cottage, with the bright warm colour of the new straw ropes, was a pleasing object in an Orkney landscape. The sombre colour given when the *simmans* were twisted of brown heather was less cheerful, but Nature did her best even here by her decoration of the low walls with bright yellow and green lichens.

Most of the ropes and cordage required by the Orkney farmer were made either of hair or of bent. The bent bands already noticed were made into ropes on a rude machine called a *tethergarth*, and were used for tethering cattle and sheep, and for "boat tethers" for small fishing-boats. Finer bent ropes were applied to a great many uses, such as flail "hoods," sheep shackles, and all parts of horse harness. A very important part of this, the collar or *wazzie*, was formed by twisting four thick folds of straw together; and, when properly made, I suspect the *wazzie* was much cooler for the horse than the

modern collar with its absurd cape. Even the plough-traces were made of bent ropes, which, if quickly worn, were easily replaced. For bringing in the crop, a large net made of bent cord, and called a *mazie*, was put round a bundle of sheaves, and suspended, one on each side of the horse, from the horns of the *clibber*, a rough kind of wooden pack-saddle.

*Flackies*, or mats made of straw bound together with bent cord, were used for many purposes. Small ones were used as door-mats, and large ones were hung up as an apology for an inner door. Horse flackies were laid over the back of the horse to protect it from the friction of the *clibber*, and his sides from the load which it supported. Flackies were also fixed on the rafters, under the straw, when thatching house roofs.

We next come to what I have called the semi-flexible class of straw articles. The first to be noticed is the *kaesie*, which, in various shapes and sizes, was put to a great number of uses. It was made of straw, bound by bent cord, like the flackie, but was of a closer texture, and it was usually in the shape of a basket. The *meils-kaesie* was so called because it was made to hold a "meil" of corn—that is, a little over a hundredweight.

It was in these *meils-kaesies* that the corn was carried to the mill, and the meal brought back from it; for carts were unknown, and roads were but paths or tracks. Each horse carried a full *kaesie* on either side. The horses travelled in single file, the head of each being tied to the tail of the one in front. A man was in charge of each pair of horses, to attend to the proper balancing of their loads. A

train of twenty or thirty horses marching in this way was a picturesque sight. On arriving at the mill, the burdens were removed, and the head of the foremost horse was tied to the tail of the hindmost, which prevented their moving away until their drivers were ready to return home.

Next may be mentioned the *corn-kaesie*, which was used to hold dressed grain. These were shaped somewhat like a barrel, and were made in various sizes. Then comes the common *kaesie*, used for carrying burdens on the back. These also were of different sizes. In form they were narrow and rounded at the bottom, and widened gradually towards the top, which was finished by a stiff circular rim called the *fesgar*, to give firmness to the basket. To the *fesgar* were fastened the ends of a bent rope of suitable length, called the *fettle*, by which the *kaesie* was suspended from the shoulders of the bearer.

To the same class as the *kaesies* belong the *cubbies*, the names and uses of which are legion. These were smaller than the former, and firmer in texture, while the shapes showed more variety, as might be needed for their special uses. We need only mention a few. The *windo'* or winnowing cubbie was used to pour out the corn gently on the barn floor, while the wind blowing in at one door and out at the other carried away the chaff. The *sawin'* or sowing cubbie carried the seed corn in spring. The horse cubbie was used as a muzzle for a horse when necessary. The hen cubbie was suspended as a nest for the domestic fowls. The use of the spoon cubbie, which hung by the side of the fire, needs no explanation. The bait cubbie and

the sea cubbie must close our list, the former used for carrying bait, and the latter for the catch of fish. A cubbie was always carried by the beggars who swarmed before the introduction of the poor law, and to "tak' the cubbie and the staff" was a phrase meaning to be forced to beg one's bread.

We now come to what I have called inflexible articles. Here we may mention first the *luppie*, once in universal use for holding all sorts of dry materials, such as meal, burstin, eggs, and the like. Luppies were round and barrel-shaped, close in texture, and as firm as a board. They varied much in size, being made from about ten inches to three feet in height. They had a rim round the lower end to protect the bottom, and two "lugs" at the top. Those of the smallest size were used by housewives as work-baskets.

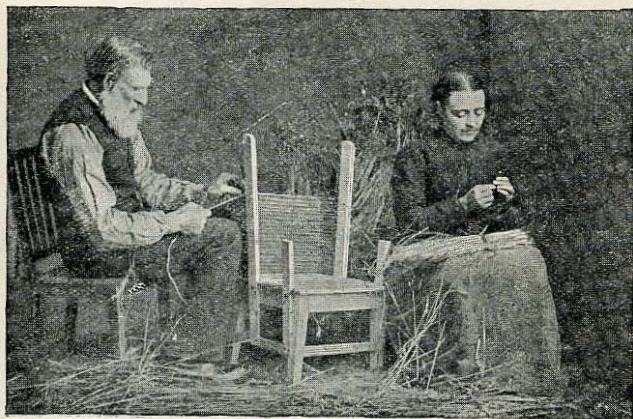
The work on these luppies, and on the straw stools to be mentioned next, was considered the finest and most durable. Small coils or gangs of straw were firmly and closely laced over one another. The lacing cord was of the strongest bent, and the projecting ends of the bent were carefully clipped off. These bands were known as *stool bands*.

We now come to the straw stools or chairs, which were mainly of three kinds. The first was a sort of low, round stool without any back. Such a stool could be easily lifted to or from the fireside, and on an emergency could be instantly converted into a luppie by simply being turned upside down. The next was called the low-backed stool, having a semi-circular back reaching to the shoulders of the sitter. Last comes the high-backed or hooded stool, which

was the easy-chair of the Orkney cottage. In later times the seat was always made of wood, in the form of a square box, with a slightly projecting top. Strips of wood were used to support the front edges of the back, and to form elbow rests in front of these. The seat box usually contained a drawer, in which the goodman kept his supply of snuff, and perhaps the few books which made up the cottage library. This form of chair, which is now regarded as the orthodox one, was invented in the middle of the eighteenth century by a native of North Ronaldsay, as the construction of the seat of wood took far less time than working it all in straw; but the older form, with its circular straw seat, and the side slips and elbow rests entirely covered with straw and bent cords, was much more elegant in the lines of its form.

WALTER TRAIL DENNISON.

(Adapted from "Orkadian Papers.")



*Making a straw-backed chair.*