The Way We Were. A Miscellany Of Old Traditions, Sayings, Songs, Sports & Pastimes on the Isle of Wight.

A goodly part of the following is from "Original Glossaries" published in 1881 by the English Dialect Society, which includes a manuscript "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith edited by his younger brother Charles Roach Smith. Henry Smith was born before 1807 submitting information to such as James Orchard Halliwell (Popular Rhymes & Nursary Tales) prior to 1841.
The manuscript appears to be the first printed glossary of Isle of Wight dialect and provincialisms so far found.
In addition we have added a few more extracts from various other sources but would be pleased to discover more.

The Christmas Boys Play, (The Mumming Play):

The following indicates that the Christmas Boys Play was widely performed in most communities on the Isle of Wight up until the end of the eighteenth century and continued sporadically up unto today. It also suggests there were many variants, the different groups updating the format and introducing or dropping characters as the occasion dictated.
Extracts from "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith RM. The chief pastime, not yet, I believe, extinct, is of a dramatic kind. It is a performance at Christmas by itinerant companies of lads and young men, called in the Island, Christmas Boys Play.
Mr. Henry Slight has published one version, " compiled from and collated with," he states, " several curious ancient black-letter editions." The characters are somewhat different from those in the Isle of Wight version, and the language is also somewhat grander. While both are full of anachronisms and inconsistencies. It has Alexander, the Turkish Knight, Agricola, St. George, Galgacus, the Christmas, King of Egypt, and Judas; from his Pageant Play or Mysterie of " St. George." Portsmouth and London, 1836.
Charles continues, while it wants some of the personages which figure in the Isle of Wight play; and particularly that of Beelzebub, which is also wanting in a copy of the letter, sent to me by Mr. W. H. Long of Portsmouth, from recollections of it as played in the western parts of the island – (WH Long later published his book; "Dictionary of the IoW Dialect", which include a full version of the play. In his introduction he thanks Captain Henry Smith for his contribution and knowledge).
Colonel Jolliffe has also sent me the result of his remembrance in the eastern parts, where I heard it when a boy. The words he gives to this character are slightly different and not quite so indicative of antiquity as those of my own recollection, which are:
Here comes I, old Beelzebub ;
Upon my shoulder I carries my club ;
In my hand I carries my pan;
And don't you think I'm a jolly old man?
He continues that - The various versions of this Christmas Play would probably be worth printing but they do not come within the scope of the Dialect Society. So, unfortunately we only have the one full version as noted by WH Long.

From Annuals of old Ropley by Marianna S Hagen, 1929.
Since the foregoing was written I have, through the medium of "Notes and Queries," obtained some interesting information on the subject of Mumming. It is referred to as the strangest and quaintest of all the old customs, and it still survives in some corners of the Isle of Wight.
The Play was called "The Christmas Boys." It was written in broad dialect with many touches of humour, and was performed with all the solemn seriousness of the amateur by the village rustics in tavern and hall at Christmastide.
"The framework of this piece seems to date from the Crusades; but various historical events and heroic characters have since been incorporated into the dialogue."
Father Christmas is the first to enter, with these words (much as the old man here gave them to me):–
"Here comes I, wold Father Crismus,
Welcome or welcome not,
And I hopes wold Father Crismus
Will never be forgot.
And now I'm come I han't got long to stay,
But my sons and I will make a little spoort

Avore we goes away
But if you don't like to hear what I've got to say
Step in, my braave *King George, and clear the way."
Each character before leaving the stage always introduces his successor in this artless manner.
At the close of the play before the laughter has died away, Father Christmas returns to pronounce the epilogue :
"Here comes I, wold, poor and mean,
And hardly worthy to be seen.
Roast beef, plum pudden and Crismus pie
Who likes that better than my sons and I?
A jug of your good Crismus ale
Wull make us dance and zing
And money in our pockets is a very fine thing.
Now all o' you ladies and gennelmen that have
Heerd my sons' voices ring
Jest drop a few ha'pence in my wold hat
And you shall hear us zing
God save the King."
*St. George was here meant, and reference is afterwards made to a "viery dragon."

From Wight Christmas Traditions:
Another version of this costumed pageant, in many ways the ancestor of the modern pantomime, probably taking the form of a battle in which Good, represented by Father Christmas, Mother Christmas and their son St. George/King George, overcame Evil, in the form of a Turkish Knight and the Noble Captain. The script of one of these performances is recorded in W. H. Long's 1886 "*A Dictionary Of The Isle Of Wight Dialect*".
The Mummers Play later evolved into a play called "*The Christmas Boys' Play*", which consisted of such characters as:
King George
The Noble Captain
The Valiant Soldier
Father Christmas - dressed in a "John Bull[1]" manner wearing a Union Flag waistcoat, riding breaches and a top hat.
Mother Christmas - dressed in traditional English farm garb
Gurt Head & Blunder - a comic character who was a traditional country bumpkin. Also, Old Poor & Mean.
The Doctor, or Doctor Good – a magician as much as physician who would restore the dead characters to life.
Even after the Christmas Boys' Play had died out by the Twentieth Century, part of it remained. The Doctor's speech from the Christmas Boys' Play, even after the tradition of performing the play had long died out, was still heard in Shanklin's schools' playgrounds as a skipping rhyme into the 1920s:
"Ere be I, ol' Doctor Good
And in my hands lies that man's blood
And if he'd been dead six weeks or more
To him, his life, I could restore.
I got a little bottle in my backside waistcoat pocket
Called "Oakum Smokum allicopainy"
And if I puts a little drop on this man's cheek
He'll rise and boldly fight againy."

From Isle of Wight County Press (December 1937):
A traditional dancing and acting group in East Cowes called the Christmas Boys, which was defunct for more than 30 years, was revived. The group was made up of some of the original members as well as new ones, and performed festive scenes and songs at the Island's Christmas events.

Of recent Times:
From 1970:
The newly formed Morris Dance Group, Men of Wight, performed an updated version of the play for a number of years. One Cliff Maidment, of Wootton Bridge, updating it. Guith will make it part of there performance repertoire.

Pupils from Carridbrook High annually performed a Mumming Play for a number of years, possibly the version updated by Cliff.
The group Mr Baker's Dozen annually perform a version of the Mumming Play and a group at Arreton enact the playin the style of the Island version in the Dairyman's Daughter, on Boxing Day.

Shroving:

An extract from "Popular Rhymes And Nursery Tales: by James Orchard Halliwell, 1849. Captain Henry Smith of Arreton Manor supplied the information.
Until within about the last thirty years, it had been the custom in the Isle of Wight from time immemorial at all the farms and some other charitable houses to distribute cakes on Shrove-Tuesday, called Shrove-cakes, to the poor children of the parish or neighbourhood, who assembled early in the morning at the different villages, hamlets, and cottages, in parties of from two to thirty or more, for the purpose of what was denominated "Going Shroving," and the children bore the name of it. At every house they visited they had a nice Shrove-cake each given them. In those days the winters were much more inclement and of longer duration than at the present time, and it often happened that, in addition to a severe frost, the ground was covered several inches high with snow, yet however cold or intense the weather, it did not prevent these little ones from what they called in the provincial dialect, and they jogged merrily along hand in hand from one house to another to obtain their cakes; but, before receiving them, it was expected and deemed necessary that they should all sing together a song suitable to the occasion; those who were considered the best singer sometimes had an extra cake bestowed on them; consequently, there was no want of noise (whatever there might have been of harmony) to endeavour to get another Shroving gift. There were many different versions of the song according to the parishes they lived in. The one generally sang by the children of the East Medina area was as follows: -
A Shrovun, a Shrovun, I be cum a Shrovun, A piece a bread, a piece a cheese, a bit a your fat beyacun, Or a dish of doughnuts, Aal of your own mayacun! A Shrovun, a Shrovun, I be cum a Shrovun, Nice meeat in a pie, My mouth is verrey dry! I wish a wuz zoo well a-wet, I'd zing the louder for a nut!*
A Shrovun, A Shrovun, We be cum a Shrovun!
**Composed of flour and lard, with plums in the middle, and made into round substances about the size of a cricket-ball. They were called or, and quite peculiar to the Isle of Wight. nutsdough-nut*

The song of the children of the West Medina was different:

A Shrovun, a Shrovun, I be cum a Shrovun, Linen stuff es good enuff, Vor we that cums a Shroven.

Vine veathers in a pie, My mouth is verrey dry. I wish a wuz zoo well a-wet, Then I'd zing louder vor a nut! Dame,* dame, a igg, a igg,† Or a piece a beyacun. Dro awaay‡ the porridge pot, Or crock to bwile the becazun. Vine veathers in a pie, My mouth is verrey dry. I wish a wuz zoo well a-wet, Then I'd zing louder vor a nut!
A Shrovun, A Shrovun, We be cum a Shrovun!
* *Dame. The mistress of the house, if past the middle age, was called Dame, i.e. Madame.* † *An egg an egg* ‡ *Throw away.*
If the song was not given sufficiently loud, they were desired to sing it again. In that case it very rarely required a second repetition. When the Shrovers were more numerous than was anticipated, it not unfrequently happened that, before the time of the arrival of the latter parties, the Shrove-cakes had been expended; then dough-nuts, pancakes, bread and cheese, or bread and bacon, were given, or halfpence were substituted; but in whatever they were not sent from the door empty-handed. It is much to be regretted that this charitable custom should have become almost extinct; there being very few houses at the present time where they distribute Shrove-cakes.

Extract from the book Stations of the Sun, a history of the Ritual Year in Britain, by Ronald Hutton.
The begging song in Newchurch was: -
A-shroven', a-shroven', we be come a-shroven',
Nice meat in a pie, my mouth be very dry,
I wish'e was a wet,
I'd sing a louder for a nut, *
A pancake or a truffle of cheese,
Or a bit of your own making, I'd rather have than none at all,
A bit of your own baking.

From Brighstone: -
Shroving, shroving, I am come to shroving.
White bread and apple pie,
My mouth is very dry;
I wish I was a-wet,
As I could sing for a nut.

Wassailing:

From Wight Christmas Traditions:

The tradition of wassailing, from the Anglo-Saxon toast Wæshael, meaning "*good health*", is linked to the harvest of apples and was celebrated on the Island on New Year's Day and Twelfth Night. On New Year's Day in the town it involved the communal wassail bowl, a wooden ash bowl filled with roasted apples, hot, spiced ale, cream and sugar, and the wassailers would tour the town allowing their neighbours a drink from the bowl from a wassail cup decorated with ribbons and displaying a large apple. There they would sing the "letting in" song: -

Wassail, wassail, to your town, the cup is white and the ale is brown.
The cup is made of the ashen tree and the ale is brewed of good barley.
Little maid, little maid, turn the pin, open the door and let us in.
God be here and God be there, we wish you all a Happy New Year.

Wassailing also took place on Twelfth Night, where on the farms and orchards themselves a different celebration took place. The head farmer would take the farm workers into the orchard, seize a branch of the most prominent tree, and recite the Wassail Song:

Old apple tree, we wassail thee, and hope that thou wilt bear.
For the Lord doth know where we shall be, 'til apples come again next year.
To blow well and bear well So merry let us be
Let every man take off his hat, and shout to the old apple tree;
Old apple tree we wassail thee I hopes that thou wilt bear
Hat-fulls, cup-fulls, three bushel bag fulls and a little heap under the stairs.

The orchard would be toasted with warm cider, with the remaining cider fed to the roots of the trees. In the 1920s in Yarmouth, when the Apple Tree was wassailed, a pistol was fired through the branches of the tree to the shout of *Hip-Hip Horray!*, but apparently not before then, and not everywhere on the Island.
This tradition carried on in the first half of the 20th Century, but then, sadly, died out.

Further to the "letting in song" above is the following. Again from Henry Smith in his communication to James Orchard Halliwell:

There was another very ancient custom somewhat similar to the Shroving, which has also nearly, if not quite, disappeared; probably it began to decay within the last half-century: this was a gift of cakes and ale to children on, who, like the Shrovers, went from house to house singing for them; but, if we may judge from the song, those children were for the most part from the towns and larger villages, as the song begins: - "A seyal, a sayel in our town".

There is no doubt but it was written for the occasion some centuries since, when "a sale" was not a thing of such a common occurrence as now. It was often held in an open field in or near the town on New Years Day, as for the phrase, it seems to be a corruption, the original sense having been lost. The following was the song, but within the last fifty or sixty years, as the custom began to fall off, the chorus or some other part was often omitted.

A seyal, a seyal in our town, The cup es white and the eal es brown; The cup es meyad from the ashen tree, And the eal es brew'd vrom the good barlie.
*Chorus.*Cake and eal, cake and eal, A piece of cake and a cup of eal; We zing merrily one and aal For a piece of cake and a cup of eal.

Little maid, little maid, troll the pin,* Lift up the latch and we'll aal vall in;† Ghee us a cake and zum eal that es brown, And we dont keer a vig vor the seyal in the town.
*Chorus.*W'ill zing merrily one and aal Vor a cake and a cup of eal; God be there and God be here, We wish you aal a happy New Year.

* *That is, turn the pin inside the door in order to raise the latch. In the old method of latching doors, there was a pin*

inside which was turned round to raise the latch. An old Isle of Wight song says,: –

Then John he arose, And to the door goes, And he trolled, and he trolled at the pin, The lass she took the hint, And to the door she went, And she let her true love in.

† "*Aal vall in,*" *stand in rank to receive in turn the cake and ale*

Superstitions: From "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith RM.

A Loaf baked on Good Friday was put by to serve, with other things, for looseness in calves.

The death of the master or mistress was announced to the bees.

A robin pecking at the window was supposed to foretell a death in the family.

The flight of magpies to the right or to the left, and the number of the birds, foretold good or bad luck, and happy or disastrous events.

Ravens are birds of ill omen; and their presence near dwellings presage death. The acute sense of smell in these birds may attract them to diseased persons. My sister-in-law told me that previous to the death (from fever) of one of her children at Landguard two ravens sat daily in the lime trees near the house, and did not leave until the child was buried.

Rising before the sun on St. Patrick's Day, and sowing seed, would make the flowers double.

The key and bible divination to discover a thief has descended to the present generation; and the same with the belief in "cunning men," supposed also to have the power to discover concealed money.

Belief in witches still lingers here and there. A friend writes: "There was a legend of an old woman, who lived about Hale Common or Arreton, for a frolic turning herself into a hare; and when close run by the hounds of Mr. Thatcher of Wackland, made her escape through the keyhole of the door." It was at Wackland a story was told of a witch coming to the door in the form of a black cat, when the cook, who was frying pancakes, threw a spoonful of boiling lard upon it, which caused the cat to run off crying with pain. The reputed witch was afterwards known to have had a great sore on her back.

The belief in supernatural influences at the erection of churches is of very early origin, and it appears to point to the period of transition from paganism to Christianity. That connected with Godshill church is, that when the materials for building were collected in a field below, they were removed, at night, to the elevated spot on which the church now stands. The field from which the building stones were removed is called the Devil's Acre.

Watching the corpse at night was a general custom; usually by a couple of men, who often told of what they had seen or heard of the supernatural.

In Fairies and Night Mares there yet lingers a belief. The former, in one version of the building of Godshill church, are prominent actors; to them are ascribed the circular growths of fungi upon the downs, the fossil echini, etc. The Night Mare not only visits the bed-chamber, but also the stables. On one occasion, noticing that a particular horse was in profuse perspiration, I was told that probably the old hag (hags and witches are usually old) had been riding it in the night. Horse-shoes are everywhere nailed in proximity to stables as a protection against evil influences.

Ladies in white, not of earthly mould, were once supposed to be seen, at certain times, in a long yew and box walk which reached from Landguard to Hook's Hill, towards Shanklin; and one of Miss Johnson's sonnets is an invocation to a spirit said to haunt Wroxall Down, upon which are ancient tumuli. Upon the Down of St Boniface adjoining is a Wishing Well, a relic of pagan superstitious practices of which so much has been recorded and so much yet survives. Here the popular belief is, that if the well be reached without once looking back, any wish formed while drinking the water will certainly be granted. The story goes that the lads and lasses of the neighbourhood used to resort to the well to deck it with garlands of flowers; and that vessels were wont to lower their topmasts as they passed in view of the sacred spot.

In some parts of the Isle of Wight, Dragonflies are found of a peculiarly large size, and their colours are extremely beautiful. There is an old legend respecting them, which is still current. It is supposed by the country people that their sting or bite is venomous, as bad as that of a snake or adder, and perhaps from

this belief their provincial name of snake-stanger or snake-stang is derived. It is said that these insects can distinguish the good children from the bad when they go fishing: if the latter go too near the water, they are almost sure to be bitten; but when the good boys go, the dragon-flies point out the places where the fish are, by settling on the banks, or flags, in the proper direction. This curious myth is commemorated by the following song: -

Snakestanger! snakestanger! vlee aal about the brooks; Sting aal the bad bwoys that vor the vish looks, But lat the good bwoys ketch aal the vish they can, And car'm awaay whooam to vry'em in a pan; Bred and butter they shall yeat at zupper wi' their vish, While aal the littul bad bwoys shall only lick the dish.*

* Carry them away home.

This has of late years been introduced into the nursery, but in different suit of clothes: -

Dragon fly! dragon fly! fly about the brook; Sting all the bad boys who for the fish look; But let the good boys catch all that they can, And then take them home to be fried in a pan; With nice bread and butter they shall sup upon their fish, While all the little naughty boys shall only lick the dish.

*James Orchard Halliwell:*The compiler's best thanks are due to Captain Henry Smith for the very interesting communication of rhymes current in the Isle of Wight; *April*, 1849.

Sayings: **From "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith RM.**

When St. Catharine wears a cap, then all the Island wears a hat.

When the clay beats the sand, Then 'tis merry England.
When the sand beats the clay, Then, Old England, well-a-day.

The moon. A Zaturday's new, and a Zunday's full; never did no good, and never wul.

A Saturday's moon, once in seven years it comes too soon.

When the oak leaves come before the ash, we shall only have a gentle splash;
But when the ash is before the oak, then England may expect a soak.

A rainbow by night is the shepherd's delight; a rainbow in the morning is the shepherd's warning.

Evening red and morning grey, are sure signs of a fine day.

If the ice be strong enough to bear a man before Christmas, it will not bear a goose after.

Mares' tails and a mackerel sky, not four and twenty hours dry.
A mackerel sky and mares' tails make lofty ships carry low sails.

If Candlemas day be fair and bright, winter will have another flight:
If Candlemas day be clouds and rain, winter is gone and won't come again.

When the wind is in the east 'tis good for neither man nor beast.
When the wind is in the east, the fish bite least. When the wind is in the west the fish bite best.

Magpies. One, sorrow; two, mirth; three, joy; four, a birth.

But for the robin and the wren, a spider would overcome a man.
If we here accept the Robin and the Wren as representing insectiverous birds in general, and the Spider as all classes of destructive insects, this old saying is founded upon experience, and should be impressed upon every child in every school and at home.

Sports Pastimes & Games: **From "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith RM.**

Some Sports and Pastimes of remote antiquity have descended to our days, modified happily, but not extinguished. Bull-baiting has left a trace at Brading in the iron ring by which the bull was confined when attacked by the dogs. Cock-fighting has a visible record in a public house between Branston and Hale, called the "Fighting Cocks" This game was universal from the time of the Romans, and probably in that of the Britons. It was until a late day pursued with ardour all over the island. The Isle of Wight cocks have fought at Westminster against those of all England and when they have been sent to Newport with a load

of wheat have been known to fetch more money than the wheat itself. I can find no trace of the atrociously barbarous practice of throwing at cocks at Shrovetide, once common throughout England, nor of burying the live bodies of geese or other birds, and throwing or shooting at them, common near Rochester within the memory of man. Foxes were not indigenous, and are of a very recent introduction. Otters and badgers are almost, if not quite, extinct. Bowling Greens were common. Sir John Oglander speaks of one upon St. George's Down, between Arreton and Newport, which was resorted to by the chief gentry of the island and one was made for the amusement of Charles I, when confined in Carisbrooke Castle.
On Isle of Wight Games, Colonel Jolliffe writes:
"Our rustic youth play a game of great antiquity, called 'Siege of Troy,' which at Winchester I heard called "Peg Nine Holes". It is played by boys making use of potshards and pantiles for men. When at Muscat, in Arabia, I saw two Arab merchants playing a somewhat similar game. Nearly every stable bin, as far as I can recollect, had a "Siege of Troy" cut on the lid of it."

The Roman game of "Five Stones" is played with a difference, with nine knucklebones. It is called "Nine Bones" and it requires some dexterity in playing.
The game of Skittles is also altered from ninepins to four, and is called "Four Corners".

Songs & Snatches: **From "Isle of Wight Words" by Major Henry Smith RM and other sources.**

Many songs were printed within W. H. Long's "A Dictionary Of The Isle Of Wight Dialect" and are so easily obtained. Also, the singing group "Dollymopps" have of recent times put tunes to some of the songs therein and are publicising them widely, so they need not be included in this narrative.
The following song was part of the vocal entertainment at the home-harvest at Landguard.
The old carrion crow he sat upon an oak,
Fol the rol, the rol, the rol, the rido.
And he saw a saucy tailor cutting out a coat,
With heigho, the old carrion crow cried caa, caa,
Fol the rol, &c.

Wife, go and fetch me my arrow and my bow,
Fol the rol, &c.
That I may shoot this old carrion crow
That cries caa, caa, caa,"
Fol the rol, &c.

The tailor he shot, but he missed his mark;
Fol the rol, &c.
And he shot his neighbour' s old sow through and through the heart,
With heigho, the old carrion crow cried caa, caa,
Fol the rol, &c.

Wife, go and fetch me some treacle in a spoon;
Fol the rol, &c.
For our neighbour's old sow is gone into a swoon;
With heigho, the old carrion crow cried caa, caa,
Fol the rol, &c.

Oh dang it, cried the tailor, I don't care a louse,
Fol the rol, &c.
For we shall have chitterlings, black puddings, and souse;
With heigho, the old carrion crow cried caa, caa,
Fol the rol, &c.
Oh, the bells they did ring, and the bells they did toll;
Fol the rol, &c.
And the little pigs squeak for the old sow's soul;
With heigho, the old carrion crow cried caa, caa,
Fol the rol, &c.

We have here the arrow and the bow; the treacle (probably the theriac composition so extolled as a curative); and the satirical finale, which claim for the song a far higher antiquity than other versions.

Roach-Smith notes that he had heard, in his boyish days, on rural festive occasions in the Isle of Wight, songs quite as ancient, but of which he only retains the tunes and a few words; and others of later date, but old, such as “Twas on a misty morning, and cloudy was the weather, I met an old man clothed all in leather”. Another one, the story of a husband journeying from Lancashire to London to be examined by a legal board "to see whether he was a witch or no, beginning, “As I was searching the records of noblemen, both dukes and lords”. Also how “Moss the Miller caught his mare”.
A dialogue between two ravens as spoken on the Island print.
First Raven. Mare dead ! mare dead !
Second Raven. Where ? Where ?
First Raven. Down in Quarr Copse. Down in Quarr Copse.
Second Raven. Is she fat? Is she fat?
First Raven. Bare bones. Bare bones.
Second Raven. Let her rot. Let her rot.

Seed sowing and sheep shearing had their festivals; but the chief was the home- harvest, when a substantial hot supper was provided for all and this was followed by beer-drinking, smoking, and singing. The following was the song of the evening, in which all joined: -
Here's a health unto our Master,
The founder of the feast;
And we pray to God in heaven,
His soul may be at rest;
That everything may prosper,
Whatever he takes in hand,
For we are all his servants,
And all at his command.
So drink, boys, drink, and see that you do not spill;
For if you do, you shall drink two,
For it is our Master's will.

Here's a health unto our Mistress,
Who brews for us good beer;
She is an honest woman, and giveth us good cheer;
For she's a good provider, abroad as well as at home.
Fill it up to the brim, and toss it off clean,
For this is our Harvest-home.
So drink, boys, drink, etc.

If the entire families of the men-folk did not attend the feast, they were not forgotten. The remnants, ever substantial, were sent to their homes. Home-harvest, or Harvest-Home, is now a custom of the past. There is knowledge of the song being sung at Arreton, Landguard and Apse in the Isle of Wight.

At Christmas, a variant unique to the Island, of the popular carol “Hark”, affectionately known by the Newchurch Male Voice Choir as “The Newchurch Carol” was sung with great enthusiasm each year.