

Holly as a Winter Feed

By JEFFREY RADLEY

“THERE is a curious way of feeding sheep in Derbyshire,” says Sydney O. Addy in 1893.¹ This curious way is the providing of holly leaves and branches for sheep, and often cattle, as a principal winter feed. The use of holly has become obsolete in the present century, to the point that several farmers expressed amazement to the writer when informed of this custom. The custom, however, was an ancient one, and appears to have been of great importance in the years before hay and turnip winter feed.

BOTANICAL ASPECTS

Immediately the question arises: what about the prickles on the holly leaves? Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire historian, records in 1697 that smooth-leaved holly was used as fodder.² In 1893 Sir Herbert Maxwell recorded that “No matter what the age of the holly, so long as the twigs are within reach of being cropped by cattle, so long will the leaves on them remain armed with protective spines, but as soon as they attain a safe height their leaves become as smooth as a camellia.”³

Bean, the silviculturist, delimits the Common Holly (*Ilex aquifolium* L.) as a tree which may attain eighty feet in height. It is of a very leafy, much-branched habit, and trees propagated from seed lose their spininess as height increases; and he concludes from this that the spines on the lower branches are no doubt a protection against browsing animals.⁴ An examination of almost any tall holly tree will substantiate this.

DISTRIBUTION

The practice of feeding animals on holly seems to have been confined primarily to the grits and sandstones of the southern Pennines. De la Pryme relates that “In the South West of Yorkshire, at and about Bradfield and in Darbshire, they feed all their sheep in winter with holly leaves and bark.”⁵ Other evidence is available to confirm this distribution, the most important being place-name evidence. The holly grove was important enough to warrant a name, and locally ‘hollin’ is the dialect word for holly, from Old

¹ S. O. Addy, *Hall of Waltheof*, 1893, p. 168.

² Abraham de la Pryme, *Diary. Trans. Surtees Society*, LIV, 1870, p. 165.

³ H. Maxwell in *Notes and Queries*, 8th Ser., I, 1892, p. 462.

⁴ W. J. Bean, *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*, I, 1914, p. 642.

⁵ Abraham de la Pryme, *loc. cit.*

English 'holyn', or 'holegn', but not 'holm',¹ while the plural 'hollins' refers often to a group of trees. Sometimes the term 'a hag of hollins' is found, meaning a pasture of holly trees.

Village names containing 'hollin' as a component are rare, but there is a Hollinsend, Sheffield, and Hollingworth, Cheshire. On the high moors trees grow best in the entrenched cloughs, and there are several indicative names such as Holling Dale on Bradfield Moors; Hollingworth Clough, Hayfield; and Hollins Clough, Dovedale. Near Bolsterstone, Yorkshire, there is Hollin Busk and Hollin Edge Height.

More significant, but more difficult to trace, are field-names. De la Pryme says: "To every farm there are so many holly trees, and the more there is the farm is dearer, but care is taken to plant great numbers thereabouts." Hunter defines a 'hag' as "the holly trees growing upon a certain portion of ground in the Commons of the Manor of Sheffield. The lord was accustomed to let or sell them by the hag."² In Derbyshire's High Peak Hundred some twenty-one villages are shown by Cameron to have at least one field-name containing the component 'hollin', usually indicative of the pre-enclosure location of the 'hag of hollins' on a particular farm.³ For example, at Chapel-en-le-Frith there is a Holling Flatt and a Hob Hollin; at Edale, Hollin Knoll; and at Stanton in the Peak a Holly Wood. Hathersage Enclosure Award shows Fields 785, 787, 788, and 789 as Far Hollins, Near Hollins, Hollin Meadow, and Hollin Pingle.⁴ Similar evidence exists in South Yorkshire villages, for example in Ulley and Aughton.⁵

Another approach to the distribution problem, that of recording pure stands of holly trees, as indicators of surviving hags, might be an answer to Tansley, who says: "Occasionally it [the holly tree] forms pure local woods whose origin and status are not known."⁶ Perhaps few stands of holly in our village woods are natural.

HOW HOLLY WAS USED

In the seventeenth century Evelyn remarked that holly branches were "lopped or broused by cattle,"⁷ and as late as 1906 it is noted that "the leaves and small branches are sometimes used for feeding sheep in severe winters."⁸

¹ K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 1951-2, p. 685.

² *Notes and Queries*, 8th Series, 1, 1892, p. 431.

³ Cameron, *op. cit.*, pp. 30, 38, 67, 79, 89, et al.

⁴ Hathersage Enclosure Award, 1830. Sheffield City Lib. Dept. of Local History and Archives.

⁵ Ulley Enclosure Award, 1798. County Record Office, Wakefield.

⁶ A. G. Tansley, *The British Isles and their Vegetation*, 1939, p. 257.

⁷ *Silva*, 1825 edit., p. 269, footnote. ⁸ *Chambers Encyclopaedia*, 1906, v, p. 747.

Apparently the shepherd or cattle herder lopped a few upper branches from each tree, and this careful pollarding did not hurt the tree. The sheep appear to have been especially fond of the holly bark.

Evidence of the age of the practice of using holly is scant but the documents found are impressive. In Derbyshire the first reference is to the destruction of the Hollingwood at Hope in 1216-22,¹ while in Yorkshire at Heeley a 1320 deed records a grant of five acres in the field of "Heele holis."² Hollinlough, Derwent, is mentioned in 1381, and Hollywood in 1433 at Ludworth, Cheshire.³

Several fines occur in the Eyre Rolls for the illegal lopping of holly. At Tideswell Court in the Royal Forest of the High Peak ten people were fined for lopping 'green-wood' in 1524, twenty-four were subsequently fined in 1559, and twenty-one in 1567. In 1531 William Pycroft denied felling the King's Woods in Edale, Derbyshire, "or lopping the same for his cattle."⁴ At Holmesfield, Yorkshire, where there is a Holly Gate Farm, several fines were entered in the court rolls for cutting holly too often or illegally; Henry Elliott, for example, was fined "for carrying holly ("bowes") out of the lordship."⁵

Deeds, accounts, and rentals containing references to 'hollins' are infrequent but useful. In 1441-2, the duke of Norfolk's bailiff in Sheffield returned that "For holly sold here for fodder of the animals in winter time nothing is charged, because no sale took place this year."⁶ In 1359 a sale of land at Fulwood "of all his wood growing in Fullewod in Hallumch'r except le Holyn," showed that it was a thing to be considered apart.⁷ About 1550 Sir William del Holyns granted to Beauchief Abbey a place in "Le Holyns or Les Holyns" in "the soke of Eccleshall."⁸ A Sheffield Rental for 1624 lists the rents of "Hollen." A total of twenty-three rents, each for a separate "hagge" of holly, principally in "Loxley" and "Rivelling," realized the considerable sum of £19 3s. 10d.⁹ One could wish for more detailed evidence on this sale or leasing of individual stands of holly, and how the holly fitted into the general farm economy. Another use, the feeding of deer, is recorded in the 1652 lease of Wentworth Castle by William, earl of Strafford, to Sir Richard

¹ G. H. B. Ward, *Sheffield Clarion Ramblers Handbook*, 1949-50, p. 143.

² *Trans. Hunter Arch. Soc.*, II, p. 201. ³ K. Cameron, *op. cit.*, pp. 85, 143.

⁴ *Victoria County History of Derby*, I, 1905, pp. 409, 410, 411.

⁵ Court Rolls of Holmesfield, in *Journal of the Derbys. Arch. and Natural History Soc.*, XX, 1898, pp. 101, 115, 119.

⁶ Sheffield City Libraries, Dept. of Local History and Archives, MD. 150.

⁷ *Yorks. Arch. Journal*, XII, p. 249.

⁸ S. Pegge, *An Historical Account of Beauchief Abbey*, 1801, p. 168.

⁹ Sheffield City Libraries, Dept. of Local History and Archives, MD. 177.

Fanshawe, in which it is stipulated that the deer should be fed "For their better maintainance and support, by serving them with holley to be cutt therein in winter, and likewise with hay."¹ In 1811 that excellent observer John Farey noted that "At Rowlee in Hope Woodlands (Derbyshire), the sides of the hills were formerly scattered with Holly Pollards which they used to lop in severe winters for the sheep, with good effect."²

THE END OF THE PRACTICE

The decline of the practice was probably gradual, and only one reference has been found to the abandoning and destruction of holly hags. In 1711 the bailiff of the duke of Norfolk recorded sixteen entries of hollins with rent paid. He notes: "more Hags of Hollin unlett but most of them destroyed," and a list enumerates several places west of Sheffield:

"Dungworth Wood late George Gillott.
Ughill Wood for which Mr. Marriott one paid 3od.
Some in Stannington Wood.
Some in Rivelin but most Cutt.
The best is to cutt and sell the above Hags."³

It seems probable that holly was used as a supplement to, or in place of, hay, being cut when other feed was all used or when snow prevented the sheep and cattle from eating the poor moorland grasses. It would be particularly useful in the period immediately prior to the new grass crop and lambing time, and before the 'spring' wood could be cut. This latter was one of the uses of deciduous saplings as fodder, and perhaps it contributed to the development of the name Spring Wood—still a common name for local woods.

There is evidence in scattered place-names that the use of holly might have been much more widespread than is suggested above. However, it seems to have found its most conspicuous development in south-west Yorkshire and northern Derbyshire, where it contributed to the farm economy in no small measure for seven centuries. It may be that the enclosure of the commons with the removal of many 'hags', and the increased use of root crops for winter feed, were the two main reasons for the practice falling into disuse. Its secondary use as a source of shelter became superfluous with the building of dry stone walls on the enclosed commons.

¹ T. W. Hall, *Incunabula of Sheffield History*, 1937, p. 181.

² J. Farey, *A General View of the Agriculture . . . of Derbyshire*, III, 1811, pp. 89, 90.

³ Sheffield City Libraries, Department of Local History and Archives, Arundel Coll. L.D., 1711. No. 6, p. 32.