

# Tom Bawcock's Eve

From R Morton Nance, Old Cornwall April 1927

At Mousehole this is the eve before Christmas Eve, which was formerly kept as a feast among the fisher-folk there. Its particular feature was the eating at it of seven different sorts of fish, salt or fresh, scowled or marinated. boiled, grilled, or fried, with, according to the custom of the old smuggling days, when this was cheap, plenty of "moonshine" to wash them down.

There seems to be a little difference of opinion as to the origin of this feast –some say that it commemorates a great catch made by a certain Tom Bawcock, who went fishing that night and caught seven sorts of fish. Some make them nine, even, but this is not the general belief. Another less known legend seems to imply that Tom in fishing that night was flying in the face of custom, and that this eve was already a feast, if under another name, when he flourished at all events he is said, as a punishment, to have "caught nothing but cuttifers—gurries full, gurries full,' and, this; having happened centuries before the invention of "flake," to have come ashore after a wasted night.

"Cuttifers," meaning dogfish, is a word known at Mousehole only in this tale, but the late Mr. J. George of Mousehole, from whom I had it, told me that his father had met with a sailor, either Welsh or French, who recognized it. It is not Welsh, but the Frenchman might have thought of the phrase, *les quatre ters d'un chien*, "the four irons of a dog," which are proverbially worthless. The "irons" of the dog are I suppose, shoes, like the *ters* of a horse, for which it has "no more use than a toad for side-pockets," and for which *a chien demer* would have still less, but cuttifer can hardly be actually connected with *quatre fers*. "Cultifer" is a Possible name for a "picky dog," meaning "knife-bearer."

"The' nearest Cornish to "cuttifer" seems to be *cot e ver*, short-shanked "; or "short-spiked," possibly, for *ber* has both meanings. There is too wide a choice, however, for any of these meanings to be accepted as the true one.

It is quite possible, or even probable, that Tom Bawcock's name (*beau coq.*) has been substituted since the Reformation for that of some local fishermen's saint. St. Rumwo1d was such a patron of Folkestone fishermen, who long had a chapel in his honour, and until quite recent times kept Christmas Eve as "Rumball night," their feast being paid for by the master of the boat out of the sale of eight picked whittings. It is not beside the point to notice that the 'miners' feasts, 'Picrous Day and "Chewidden, "*De Yow Widn*," White 'Thursday," were also held just before Christmas. As for the seven sorts of fish, this prodigality was probably held to ensure a bountiful supply of fish of all kinds during the coming year; here at all events is what looks like a parallel to it and is by no means a solitary instance – in Franche Comte it is held that if on Christmas Day you take *all the different sorts of grain and cook them together*, by eating the resulting porridge you ensure *an abundant crop of them all*. The similarity of the idea and of the season of the feast seems to make it probable that they are of similar origin, and that Tom Bawcock's Eve is the relic of a fishermen's feast once held in many places other than Mousehole. The

vagueness of the legends as to Tom's connection with the founding of the feast seems to point to, them as being explanations of an existing custom rather than traditions of its real origin. The former observance, of Christmas Eve as a fast might explain the mere eating of fish at that time by ordinary people, but it does not explain a fishermen's feast. And here is a little verse about it written years ago, that I have turned out of a drawer.

### Tom Bawcocks Eve

A merry place you may believe,  
Is Mouzel 'pon  
Tom Bawcock's Eve.  
To be there then who wud'n wish,  
To sup of seb'n sorts o'fish.

When morgy broth had cleared the path,  
Comed lances for a fry,  
And then us had a bit scad,  
And starry gazey pie.

Next comed fairmaids,  
Bra' thirsty jades  
And made our uzzles dry,  
And ling an' hake,  
Enough to make  
A raunin' shark to sigh.

As each we'd clunk,  
As health were drunk  
In bumpers brimmin' high,  
An' when up came  
Tom Bawcock's name  
We praised un to the sky.

fairmaids= pilchards; bumpers= glasses; jades= hussies;  
morgy= dogfish; lances= sand eels; scad= horse mackerel;  
rauning= ravenous/hungry

# Star Gazy Pie Recipe



For those of you keen to make your own.

Ingredients: Pastry, 5 or 6 Cornish pilchards,  
2 or 3 boiled eggs (sliced).  
Seasoning. Parsley.

Method: Prepare Pastry.  
Put fish whole, but cleaned in a pie dish.  
Add sliced eggs and seasoning.  
Lay pastry over, pushing pilchards heads through.  
Cook in hot oven until golden brown.  
Place sprig of parsley in each fish's mouth.  
Serve piping hot.