

Marling in the Mouldsworth District

By S. JACKSON

TWO the man from the industrial areas the word 'pit' conveys the idea of a coal mine, just as to the actor it signifies the body of the theatre. In most parts of England a pond of water is . . . just a pond. But in Cheshire, where salt-mining has caused subsidence the ponds so-formed are called 'flashes,' and further west where there is no salt, but where every other field has its pond, these ponds are designated 'pits.' Originally they were marl pits which in course of time have filled with water. Before the days of artificial manure, this marl was dug and spread over the fields, and a good farmer, particularly on the light sandy soils, was keen on marling his land. For hundreds of years this custom prevailed, and as far back as the reign of Edward I in the 13th century, leases of land contained clauses obliging farmers to spread marl over their land.

The marl beds round Manley and Mouldsworth are in detached pockets, some small, some many yards in extent and in depth. The marl is a kind of clay containing calcium carbonate, potash, and phosphoric acid in varying proportions. Cases are on record where whole farms have been marled and the letting value of the land, as a consequence, has increased sometimes by as much as six-fold. As a general rule marl was spread over the fields in the immediate vicinity of the pit, but in some instances it has been carried for long distances.

Long ago marling was carried out by special gangs, generally about five in a gang, and these marlers had a most curious custom. One of the gang would be chosen as "Lord of the Pit" and he acted not only as leader but also in the capacity of treasurer. Visitors to the field in which they were working, or any passers-by, were expected to contribute something to the marlers. Holland, in his "Glossary" says that they did not ask for money and if that statement is correct, the marling custom was so well known that there was no need to ask; passers-by would know they were expected to give. But if they did not ask for money, they did the next best thing, for Dr. J. C. Bridge describes how when a passer-by made his appearance, the Lord of the Pit, carrying a marl hod on his shoulder, would approach the visitor, and usually he would receive sixpence or a shilling and in some cases even half-a-crown. Returning to the gang, the Lord of the Pit would then summon them together and they would form a ring. With great solemnity and in a loud voice the "Lord" would then announce the gift thus: "O Yes! O Yes! O Yes! This is to give notice that Mr. — has given us marlers part of a thousand pounds, and to whosoever

will do the same we will return thanks and shout." The men would then join hands and shout "Largesse! Largesse!" four times, and on the fourth shout they would give a lengthened and much louder shout letting the sound die away gradually. If the gift were sixpence the Lord would proclaim it part of a hundred pounds; if a shilling, part of a thousand pounds; and if half-a-crown should be given as long and as loud a shout as ever their breath would hold out. The Lord of the Pit kept the money until the next Saturday evening, when the gang would assemble in the nearest ale-house, drinking the healths in turn of all those who had given them money, when they once again renewed their ceremony of shouting.

Clearing the surface of a pit was known as "feying the pit," and the top layer thus cleared was termed the "fey." Spreading the marl was known as setting," and clearing out the mud and water from a pit was "ladling and slutching."

With the gradual but steady rise in wages and with the coming of comparatively cheap artificial manures, marling has gone out of fashion. There are still living a few of the older generation who can remember marl pits being worked, but some years ago I talked with one old man who had actually been a marler. He came of a marling stock, his father and his grandfather before him having been marlers. Over eighty years old at the time of our conversation, he told me he could remember how as a boy he had worked for his father who was foreman of the big government marling operation carried out at Organsdale, Houndslow, and the New and Old Pales, and for seven years at the Dark Ark Pit at Mouldsworth. He said his father had told him how many of the small pits dotted about in surrounding fields were dug out at the time of the French wars in "Boney's days." He knew all the details of the marling of over 248 acres of the Houndslow Farm and stated that nearly thirty thousand cubic yards were taken from the pit at the north corner of Castle Hill Wood.

Particularly interesting was his story of the origin of the Dark Ark Pit. When Mr. St. John Vigior Fox came to the Manley Estate, he was intrigued, one hot summer, to see on Peter Turner's farm a field where clover was growing. On this particular field the tenants of Manley Common Farm had previously never been able to grow clover.

"Then if that is marling," said he, "I'll marl the whole estate," and forthwith set to work. A large red and green marl patch was located at Dark Ark and in the next seven years or so, thousands of cubic feet of good marl were taken from this pit. When it was decided to marl Sunny Bank Farm, on Simond's Hill, a light railway track was laid down. At first the wagons were pulled by horses, but as the work proceeded these were superseded by a little engine called the "Firefly." Two enginemen worked the locomotive and several men were employed in "feying" and "getting" and "filling."

The man who gave me this information was a fine example of the hard-working, independent, self-reliant countryman of his day. I can see him now . . . his corduroy trousers tied with string at ankle and knee, his sun-browned face crowned with a well-worn picturesque old hat, his lips cleanshaven but his whiskers meeting under the point of his chin. When past his four score years he was still able to put in a full days work on a farm, and spend the long summer's evening scything his own little croft. When asked if he had ever heard any stories of the old-time marling gangs who used to elect one of their number as "Lord of the Pit," the old man beamed. "Why," said he in broad Cheshire dialect, "my grandfather was a Lord." Then he went on to tell details of his grandfather's life as a "Lord of the Pit." The old marlers were evidently a type of navy who prided themselves on their strength and their fighting ability. All their arguments and differences were settled by fierce battles and the Lord of the Pit was lord by virtue of brute force.

"You had to be careful," went on the old man, "what you said when you were working with a marling gang, or you would have to climb out and do battle on the top till one or other of you was beaten."

"And how did your grandfather get on in these fights?" I asked.

He gave me a look that plainly told me that I wouldn't have thought of asking such a question had I known his grandfather.

"Eh!" said he, "my grandfather was a big powerful man. Once Lord of the Pit he stayed Lord of the Pit and no one dare call him out." Then, ruminating a little, he struck another note with: "But they were big powerful men in those days, not like they are now, brought up on white bread." He attributed the "big powerful men" of his grandfather's day to the bread they ate, when, as he expressed it, there was "nowt taken out of it."

One of the last marling operations in the Mouldsworth district was carried out by the late Mr. Edwin Wright at Stone House Farm, now in the occupation of his son Mr. Bert Wright. At that time on the opposite side of the road, just below where the West Cheshire Water Works now stands, there was a common marl pit for use by anyone in the parish. Some seventy years ago Mr. Wright carted marl from this pit to spread on the Broad Oak Field and the Rose Meadow and we are given to understand that this was the last occasion on which marl was taken from this pit or from any pit in the district.