

ANCIENT CUSTOMS, LEGENDS,
TRADITIONS &c.

STEPHENING.

An ancient custom existed in the parish of Drayton Beauchamp, called Stephening, a brief notice of which may not only be amusing, but may elicit some evidence as to its origin, which at present is totally unknown in the neighbourhood. On St. Stephen's Day all the inhabitants used to pay a visit to the Rectory, and there assert their right to partake of as much bread and cheese and ale as they chose at the Rector's expense. On one of these occasions, as tradition states, the then Rector, being a penurious old bachelor, determined to put a stop, if possible, to this rather expensive visit from his parishioners. Accordingly, when St. Stephen's Day arrived, he ordered his housekeeper not to open the window-shutters

or unlock the doors of his house, and to be perfectly silent and motionless whenever any person was heard approaching. At the usual time, the parishioners began to cluster about the house. They knocked first at one door, then at the other, then tried to open them, and on finding them fastened, called aloud for admittance. No voice replied; no movement was heard within. "Surely the Rector and his housekeeper must be both dead !" exclaimed several voices at once, and a general awe pervaded the whole group. Eyes were then applied to the key-holes, and to every crevice in the window-shutters, when the Rector was seen beckoning to his old terrified housekeeper to be still and silent. A simultaneous shout convinced him that his design was understood. Still he consoled himself with the hope that his larder and cellar were secure, as the house could not be entered. But his hope was speedily dissipated. Ladders were reared against the roof, tiles hastily thrown off, half a dozen sturdy young men entered, rushed down the stairs, and threw open both the outer doors. In a trice a hundred or two unwelcome visitors rushed into the house, and began unceremoniously to help themselves to such fare as the larder and cellar afforded; for no special stores having been provided for the occasion, there was not, of course, half enough bread and cheese for such a multitude. To the Rector and his housekeeper that festival was converted into the most rigid Fast-day they had ever observed.

After this signal triumph, the parishioners of Drayton regularly exercised their "privilege of Stephening" till the incumbency of the Rev. **BASIL WOODD**, who was presented to the Living A.D., 1808.

Finding that the custom gave rise to much rioting and drunkenness he discontinued it, and distributed instead an annual sum of money in proportion to the number of claimants. But as the population of the parish very greatly increased, and not considering himself bound to continue the practice, he was induced about A.D., 1827 to withhold his annual payments. For some time after, however, the people used to go to the Rectory for the Stephening-money, but were always refused.

In the year 1834, the Commissioners "appointed to inquire concerning Charities," made an investigation into this custom, and several of the inhabitants of Drayton gave evidence on the occasion: but nothing was elicited

to show its origin or duration, nor was any evidence produced to prove that the Rector was legally bound to comply with such a demand*

Some of the present inhabitants have been heard to regret the loss of their "privilege," and say that they have heard their fathers and grand-fathers assert that the custom had continued

" As long as the sun had shone
And the waters had run ;"

and that it was never to be discontinued while things retained their natural properties.

QUERIES.—Is there any similar custom on St. Stephen's Day in any other part of the County?

Why should such a practice be on St. Stephen's Day?

KAPPA.

* See the Report of the Charity Commissioners, Vol. XXVII., p. 83; in the British Museum.