

## SECRETS OF THE NINE COVENS

The following article was written by a member of the Pickingill Craft. It explains for the first time some of the ritual workings of the Nine Covens founded by the hereditary magister George Pickingill in East Anglia and southern England during the last century, and the differences between the Nine and modern Wicca.

There are three distinct old style 'Pickingill' traditions, apart from the so-called 'Nine Covens' which were established in the 19th century. These three traditions are the Danish-inspired old style Craft, which has perpetuated some beliefs and practices of the Vanir cult; the 'traditional' companies which perpetuate the Luciferian myth and some Saracen sex magic, which supposedly transforms dross into divinity; and the French-inspired companies, which adore the Goat God and are concerned with the carnal pleasures of the world as well as the spiritual.

George Pickingill selected nine women to launch his own version of witchcraft. He 'passed the power' to each of these women over a period of years and provided them with innovative rituals. Each of these women returned to her own village and formed the nucleus of a coven. Pickingill carefully selected his nine 'ladies'. Each supposedly had 'witch blood'. So far as I am aware, 'Old George' went outside the Pickingill groups in his search for female leaders. Some he would have encountered in his travels as a horse dealer. Others may have visited him as his fame was mooted abroad. Each had to have had acceptable training in the Old Craft.

Each of the Nine Covens was completely autonomous. Pickingill had no control or jurisdiction over them. He carefully selected the nine suitable women. These were sexually inducted and given the 'Black Manual'. This explains ways of erecting the circle, how to consecrate elements, to dominate spirits and elementals, brief essays on astrology, geomancy and mediumship, and a handful of rules for the successful administration of 'companies' and their personnel. There were no written rituals for the Rites as Hereditary Craft customs decreed. The Black Manual was only presented to an initiate of Second Rite rank if she or he desired to found a company ('covine'). The leaders copied this Manual themselves and presented it to the initiate of Second Rite status.

The rites of the Pickingill Nine are directly at variance with the old style 'traditional' practices. The traditional Pickingill covens do NOT describe the

circle; they do NOT work naked; they do NOT observe watchtowers; they do NOT use a Book of Shadows; they do NOT have a Charge; they do NOT have a Legend; they do NOT adopt Craft names; and they do NOT take the measure in the Wiccan manner at initiations.

The Pickingill Nine do 'describe the circle'. The Magister delineates the physical circle with the staff or- wand. Only one circle is used, but it is 'sealed' thrice against evil or baneful influences. The assembly dance widdershins around the circle to banish negative influences, The Magister circumnambulates deosil with fire, and the Lady circumnambulates deosil to purify with water. (N.B. the titles of 'High Priest' and 'High Priestess' originated with Wicca).

The Magister enters the circle from the south-west and stands in the south. The Lady enters the circle also from the south-west and stands in the west. The assembly enter at the southwest in single file, with males alternating with females. The Magister places his hand on each female's head to bless her on entry. (He moves forward to greet each female). The Lady places her hand on each male's head to bless him on entry (She moves forward to greet each male). The assembly position themselves around the circle by alternating males and females. They dance deosil a specified number of times and cease when the Magister mans the east. The Maid mans the south, and the Lady is in the west. Nobody is ever permitted to man the north because this is the domain of the Powers!

Wicca was strongly influenced by druidic thought. Gerald Gardner himself was a Druid and selected his circle entry point in accordance with modern druidic beliefs. The mediaeval French Craft and the Canewdon coven [in Essex] always had neophytes enter from the south-west. Very few traditional covens ever described the circle so this issue could not have arisen before the 19th century! Both the French Craft and the notorious Canewdon coven stationed the Maid in the south to invoke the God who would manifest in the north. Only three cardinal points were manned. There is a Masonic parallel here!

The Magister stands in the east facing the Lady in the west. He 'calls down the moon' on the Lady. She reciprocates by 'calling down the sun' on the Magister. The Maid and the Lady move deosil to exchange positions. The Lady calls on the Powers to hallow their holy ground. She is now in sole charge of all the proceedings! The Lady is the dominant coven leader. There is a drastic divergence at this point between the basic concepts of the Old Craft and Wicca .. Anybody can enter or exit the circle without the need to 'open' or 'close'.

Many traditional covens perpetuated the practice whereby the Magister 'called down the moon' on the Lady, and the Lady 'called down the sun' on the Magister. The expression 'Drawing down the Moon' was not popularised until the 19th century, and then only after the publication of *Endymion the Shepherd*. The magical fraternity at Cambridge university [The so-called 'Cambridge Coven' of academics who allegedly revived classical paganism and witchcraft in the 1800s] exploited the popular appeal of Keats and Shelley who furthered the dons' preoccupation with Greece.

Most traditional covens recognised either a male or a female leader who alternated the rule, or else two dominant male leaders supported by a female leader. The male leader always had the edge on the female leader in English covens! However, the French Craft and the Canewdon coven had two female leaders and a Master. The women initiated male candidates and the Master initiated female candidates. The Master dominated both La Reine and La Pucelle in the French Craft and the Canewdon coven. However, the Magister in English traditional covens always initiated candidates of both sexes! George Pickingill adopted the French practice which insisted that a man initiate a woman and a woman initiate a man.

The old style Craft never bothered with circles. The old witches were not concerned with raising or subordinating demons. They were not ceremonial magicians. The old witches danced around hill-forts, standing stones, burial mounds, sacred trees, at crossroads, and recognised 'ley centres'. Few of the old witches worked in a coven situation, but they met together by bright moonlight at certain seasons. They returned as a group to the old power zones to recharge their energies! Old style witches could turn and bend the forces of nature because they knew how to manipulate and direct natural energies! They danced in circles or other patterns in imitation of the energy swirls emanating from the sacred sites. The positive 'ley' energy was tapped and stored in the individual's magnetic aura. The polluted energy from the 'dark streams' could also be tapped and stored.

The Gardnerian method of bringing a neophyte into the circle was prompted by Gardner's sense of histrionics. There are no precedents in the Traditional Craft. The passwords are a Masonic parallel and are direct borrowings from Aleister Crowley's writings! (Gardner's own invention!).

The Pickingill Nine use bound scourging, but differences are important and need to be stressed. The neophyte is hoodwinked, but the hands rest on the buttocks. The wrists are loosely tied, but remain uncrossed. There is no cabletow and no restriction is placed on one of the feet. Scourging is only used at an initiation: The scourge is lightly applied to the buttocks and across the shoulders. The object is to kick-start certain 'centres' in the spine and to impress upon the neophyte the need for disciplined living. The Magister scourges females and the Lady male neophytes.

The Traditional Craft in England never hoodwinked or scourged neophytes. The 'Danish' Pickingill tradition does hoodwink neophytes brought before the Powers. However, no record of scourging can be discerned before the 19th century. The 'excessive' scourging in Wicca was prompted by Gardner's need to be punished by a dominant woman. The Welsh and West Country covens have no Pickingill heritage. I suspect that scourging elements in these covens were introduced by contact with the Cambridge Coven. I can find no evidence of scourging before the 19th century. There were some great landowners in Wales and their sons would have gone to Cambridge. My maternal grandmother was Welsh. I was assured by her relatives that scourging was known in South Wales and the Marcher counties, but that it was a modern innovation. The Cambridge rituals emphasised that Greek initiatory rites included ritual scourging. This is where George Pickingill derived his scourging from. I see no alternative. Some groups in the West also took this concept on board from the same Cambridge fraternity.

The Wiccan 'five-fold kiss' is yet another travesty of Pickingill's Nine rites which Gardner modified because he genuinely needed to abase himself before a powerful female. The Nine use the five salutes only at initiations. There is no physical contact between the mouth of the initiator and the neophyte's body. The Magister 'breathes' on certain areas of a female's body and the Lady does the same for the male. This is intended to stimulate the major 'centres' in the neophyte's body. This practice derived from the techniques of the 'Saracen' initiates. Some Berber and Saracen initiates did introduce sex magic into England in the Middle Ages. However, these techniques were not widespread. Indeed, these practices were jealously guarded and were largely unknown to the Traditional Craft. Some of these practices obtained in East Anglia. The 'traditional' segment of the Pickingill Craft perpetuates the Luciferian context and the breathing techniques of the Saracen mystery schools. Gardner adapted the 'five-fold kiss' to titillate the physical senses.

The Nine do NOT renounce Christianity. All the People were (and many still are) regular church-goers. It is a good cover! The Old Crafters know many churches are on former sacred sites. They also have their own understanding and

perception of Christianity. The Old Craft is not anti-Christian. It recognises that dogmas are perverted truths. In rural villages the People are pillars of respectability and punctillious church-goers. Nothing is said or done to attract attention to themselves. Old style Crafters are paranoid about protecting their identity and masking their beliefs.

The initiates of the Nine do NOT adopt a Craft name. Old George Pickingill was baptized a Christian and so were his children! Gardner's parent New Forest coven may have adopted the procedure of assuming a Craft name from Dr Margaret Murray's books! New Forest was ostensibly a God-centred coven with an alleged Pickingill provenance. This would certainly explain its two female leaders!

The Nine do Not present an initiate to the quarters. This theatrical nonsense was obviously devised by Gardner in collusion with Crowley. Still ..it is good theatre!' It is also borrowed from Masonic rituals.

The Pickingill Nine have communal 'tools'. This term is also borrowed from Freemasonry.

The coven tools are kept at the home of one of the three leaders. None of the old style witches would have owned all the paraphernalia now arranged in Wiccan circles! The Nine do NOT use a sword! None of the old style witches had any use for a sword, which was a principal 'weapon' of ceremonial magicians. The only Craft reference to a sword is found in the 'Craft Laws'. Gardner thoughtfully compiled these after drafting the BoS. There is thus no effective evidence that witches ever used a sword as a coven 'tool'.

The Nine do have eight 'tools'; two knives, a scourge, a cup, a wand, a staff, a broom or besom and a multi-purpose cord. The staff is laid in the east outside the circle; the broom is positioned in the south outside the circle. The French miniature which was featured in *The Pickingill Papers* (Capall Bann 1994) provides the historical precedent for such positioning. However, the Nine have substituted the two knives for the forked agricultural implement in the west.

The wand is placed inside the circle at the east to represent the phallus. The scourge is laid at the south inside the circle to stress the vicissitudes of life. The

cup is inside the circle at the west to represent the cosmic womb from which life comes and to which it returns. The cord is outstretched inside the circle close to the northern-most point to indicate that we are of the Gods, and are protected by Them in this life and those to come.

The Nine do NOT attribute elements to the quarters! This practice stems from ceremonial magic and is widespread in modern witchcraft. It may be presumptuous to dismiss the ascription of 'weapons' to quarters as a direct borrowing from Golden Dawn rituals. Magical grimoires were being circulated as early as the 1830s and 1840s. Ceremonial magic was being incorporated into witchcraft rituals even before the advent of George Pickingill. Modern witchcraft had its genesis in the 19th century.

The Pickingill Nine do extract an oath from the initiate (Another Masonic parallel). They do NOT mark, cut or mutilate, but they employ a technique which leaves a visible spot. They do NOT invoke or banish with a pentagram. This appears to be another practice which the Craft has appropriated from ceremonial magic. They do NOT challenge a neophyte with a naked blade. Wicca derived this from Freemasonry. They do NOT use an altar and do NOT have any sigils on any of their 'tools'.

The Nine take advantage of 'seasonal tides' and usually initiate at the two major 'festivals' of May Eve and Hallows Eve. They take the measure without a cord. The Gardnerian method stems from the New Forest coven which based many of its rites on Margaret Murray's claims. In the Nine Covens the successful neophyte was presented with a cord as an acknowledgement that he or she was now an initiated witch. The French miniature in The Pickingill Papers depicts 15th century witches wearing cords. The Canewdon coven always sported cords because of its French provenance.

At the first initiation, and at no other time, the Nine deliver a 'Charge'. There is again a Masonic parallel here. The Charge is the Visitation of Isis from The Golden Ass. Pickingill borrowed this and the Persephone Legend from the 'Cambridge rituals'. The Isis 'Charge' was read after the neophyte was awarded the First Rite and after the cord had been presented. The Persephone Legend was read after the sexual induction, which was the culmination of the Second Rite. The initiate promised to ponder the great mystery whereby the Love Goddess is none other than the Death Goddess. [A key concept in the Traditional Craft Ed]

The magical fraternity at Cambridge university deserve some kudos for unwittingly overseeing the birth of modern paganism. Some of the dons and their students were obsessed with discovering the origins of Freemasonry and the Rosicrucian mysteries. They diligently searched the literature of classical Greece. The Roman poets and authors were not ignored. The so-called Cambridge Coven hit upon the happy idea of using direct excerpts from classical literature (circa 1805). They first attempted to devise 'higher degrees' of Freemasonry and spurious Rosicrucian bodies. It was believed that the 'guardians' of the ancient Mysteries could be evoked if the original setting and conditions could be emulated.

The Cambridge fraternity were importuned by landowners to translate various grimoires. The dons and fellows recognised that this was a plausible extension of their chief interest and eventually acquiesced. Some of the landowners doubled as Magisters of local covens. Others merely wanted salacious rituals to enable them 'to worship at the shrine of Venus' with authenticity as well as verve. Several landowners incorporated ceremonial magic and 'barbarous words' into their understanding of the 'witch cult'. The cunning lodges that resulted were ever the exclusive domain of landowners and gentlemen. Class distinctions precluded social inferiors from joining these magical clubs which investigated the hidden secrets of nature and, sometimes, were of a Luciferian type.

Some traditional covens honour Lucifer as the First Cause, the true saviour and redeemer.

Lucifer is viewed by the several surviving 'cunning' lodges as the indwelling divinity in the human mechanism. Only the sacred marriage between' Lucifer and Ishtar, themselves personifications of the Morning Star (i.e. the planet Venus) can implement the alchemy when the human unit is transformed into a self-perfected god. Ishtar, who is both Lucifer and the Path to Heaven, was worshipped as the goddess who confers illumination.

Landowners who were Magisters in their own right joined Masonic and Rosicrucian lodges to impart magical lore. However, those Christians who fondly imagined themselves to be Druids, Rosicrucians or speculative Freemasons were orthodox in their views. Nimrod, the 'mighty hunter' from the Tower of Babel story in the Bible, was hastily substituted for Lucifer as the first Grand Master of Freemasonry, only to be replaced by a more respectable Biblical personage, Hiram Abiff, the architect of King Solomon's temple.

The lower classes who practised as cunning men could never hope to join what were paradoxically called 'cunning lodges'. Most of these lodges died a natural death after the founding of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, an organisation which permitted the gentry to study both the ancient Mysteries and natural magic within a respectable framework. Only two remarkable Magisters, both from East Anglia, are known to have had access to the archives of the cunning lodges - Cunning Shewell and Old George Pickingill. Shewell's father was George Pickingill's teacher and mentor and he had been a Master of the Canewdon coven.

The Wiccan "Charge" has attracted controversy. My Brethren are adamant that Crowley supplied Gardner with a 'new' Charge and legend which were supposedly part-and-parcel of the rituals used by Pickingill's Norfolk coven. Crowley had been initiated into the Pickingill Craft in 1899 by the Lady of that coven. It may have been Crowley or New Forest who interpolated extracts from Charles Leland's *Aradia: the Gospel of the Witches* (1899) into a much-mutilated Charge. Gardner was the likely culprit who added passages from Crowley's writings. Doreen Valiente was quite unable to recognise the Visitation of Isis when she created her version of the Charge after being initiated by Gardner in 1953. The Nine deliver a brief homily based on the Demeter-Persephone myth. This is the culmination of the second initiation. The Wiccan equivalent is a dramatised enactment of a substituted Middle Eastern legend.

The Pickingill Nine observe a tri-gradel system. The French Craft awarded a maximum of three rites and the Canewdon coven borrowed this concept. George Pickingill perpetuated the French system, but made the sexual induction rite obligatory at the 'first initiation' (Second Rite) in lieu of the First Rite. This innovation meant that there were two principal initiations: the first at which the Charge was read and the sacred cord presented; and the second (second Rite) at which the Persephone mystery was briefly lucidated. Not everybody proceeded to the second initiation (i.e. the Second Rite of the Nine). The Third Rite was rarely awarded.

The Nine insisted on a minimum age entrance requirement. Males could not be initiated until the age of eighteen (at least five years after puberty). Females were never initiated until the age of nineteen or twenty (at least seven years after the menstrual onset). Wicca prefers candidates of both sexes to be at least twenty-one before they join the Craft. Gardner also moved the sexual induction concept from Pickingill's Second Rite to the Gardnerian 'third degree'. The concept of three 'degrees' derives from both P. Randolph's Brotherhood of Eulus (a magical group founded by an African-American magician in the late 19th century) and from the Crowley inspired Great Brotherhood of God. Both groups practised sex magic and the GBOG enjoined sexual abstinence for the first and



second degrees, but the third degree entailed ritual copulation. The 'arm movements' in Wicca (e.g. the Osiris position) are direct borrowings from the degree rituals of the GBOG.

E.W. Liddell