

ROYAL OAK DAY

by Hamish Hendry

In your English history-book you will find some account of Oliver Cromwell and the many battles he fought against the royal house of Stuart and the cavaliers. One of the most famous of these was the battle of Worcester, fought near the town of that name on the 3rd September, 1651, in which the army of King Charles II. was utterly defeated. As the result of this defeat by Cromwell, all the followers of the King were placed in danger, and the King's life was in great jeopardy. The only thing he could do was to flee out of England, but that was no easy matter because his enemies were numerous, and they searched for him with great diligence. His first plan was to try to reach London before the news of his defeat, and by proceeding from there in disguise he hoped to get a ship on the south coast that would carry him to France. This plan was in part successful, but before he embarked at Shoreham, near Brighton, the fugitive king had many strange adventures and hair-breadth escapes.

One of the most notable of these was connected with a large country house called Boscobel, situated in Shropshire, and about thirty-seven miles from Worcester, where the great battle was fought. In fleeing northward after the fight Charles was accompanied by many of his followers, but in order to give him a better chance to escape the king was advised to leave all the others and make his way to Boscobel where the folk were all friendly. This he did, with trusty Richard Penderel for his guide; and as the house was a lonely place set among woods, the king hoped that he would not be disturbed. But the pursuit after him was very hot, and the soldiers of Cromwell arrived in the neighbourhood. So the king had to seek a hiding-place somewhere out of doors, and one of his friends, Colonel William Careless, suggested that they should conceal themselves among the branches of a large bushy oak-tree that stood near the house. There the two remained for a whole day, with little to eat except bread and cheese, and with the constant fear of being discovered. From where they sat among the branches they could peep through the leaves and see the soldiers searching the woods around. But they were not discovered, and at length the king escaped from that neighbourhood dressed like a countryman in leathern doublet and green jerkin.

After many years, as you all know, the man who hid in the oak-tree was invited to return to England, where he reigned as Charles II. It was on the 29th May, 1660, and the king's thirtieth birthday, that he entered London in triumph. The story of his adventure in the oak-tree having become known, garlands of oak-branches, and the Royal Oak used as a symbol, were prominent in the coronation ceremonies; while from thenceforth the 29th May was established as Royal Oak Day, or Oak-Apple Day. During the Restoration Period, and for long afterwards, it was the custom to go forth into the woods on the morning of that day and gather branches of oak. In town and village the houses were decorated with the woodland spoil, and thus did the people of England exhibit their loyalty to the House of Stuart. Even now the old custom lingers in out-of-the-way hamlets, and the sign of the Royal Oak may still be seen on many an old inn, but the oak-leaf and the acorn have lost all their significance in the world of politics. Oak-Apple Day, I fear, will never again become a general holiday.

Source:

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