



BRIDGE & DISTRICT HISTORY SOCIETY

BEATING THE BOUNDS

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The rituals and their origins

The custom of 'beating the bounds' has existed in Britain for well over 2000 years. Precise origins are unclear although it can be found as part of ritual celebration within many different cultures across Europe and beyond. In simple terms it involves people in the locality perambulating their farm, manorial, church or civil boundaries pausing as they pass certain trees, walls and hedges that denote the extent of the boundary to exclaim, pray and ritually 'beat' particular landmarks with sticks.

These sticks would originally have been of birch or willow, both being of significance to pre-Christian tribes. Birch has connection with besoms, which have ancient connections with pagan festivals however the willow possessing a close association with water appears to have predominated in medieval times. The sticks were known as rods or wands. The bark was removed exposing the white wood beneath. The English folk-song "Stripping The Willow" is a relatively modern record of these practices.

Such processions would typically occur every seven or ten years. Apart from any religious significance in a time when literacy or map-reading were not widespread skills these inspections served to ensure boundaries remained intact, were known by local people and had not been sequestered by neighbouring landowners.

Other activities associated with these processional, religious or secular rituals have also survived. Most frequently, at certain points on the boundary, young boys were held upside down and had their heads bumped on a marker stone. In past times adolescent boys might also be 'switched' (i.e. hit with the willow wands), thrown over hedges, into brambles or ponds or required to climb up chimneys or over roofs. These actions may have originally had a darker antecedence but in more recent times ensured the imprinting of the exact location of a boundary by successive generations of that community.

Before the Roman invasion of Britain rituals connected with spring were performed each year as part of the pagan festival of Beltane. Birch twigs or Besoms were struck against the boundary marks as part of the ritual. (Modern-day Pagans still perform a form of beating the bounds ceremony when occupying a house for the first time).

The Romans who settled in Britain brought with customs and the worship of gods such as Pan or Faunus to ensure fertility and purification of the land. This often involved sacrifice of a goat the blood of which was smeared on the foreheads of young boys who would also parade around the boundaries and whipped, walls or trees with sticks as well as any bystanders foolish enough to be in their path.

Similar Viking traditions and festivals involved the worship of gods such as Frigga, Freya and Eostre goddess of Spring and became incorporated within Anglo-Saxon laws and customs.

Beating the Bounds played an important part in reinforcing Anglo Saxon charters and the royal and baronial charters of the later medieval period. Being legal documents that recorded rights over property and people, the assertion of these rights was of crucial importance to the landowner who would define the extent of their territory and ensure corrections or repairs were instigated where there had been an encroachment.

In medieval times the ceremonial processing around the land also served to reinforce the power and influence the holder of the charter had over tenants and serfs and was an important means of asserting the primacy of the law in defining the rights of tenants. Where all but a very few would be illiterate it was essential that no disputes arose over the ownership of land or rights over tithes. Regular perambulation at least every seven to ten years ensured each succeeding generation understood to whom they owed their allegiance.

The early Christian ceremonies

In Britain at least, 'beating' of a parish boundary for both the Christian and legal ceremonies have become woven together as church jurisdiction succeeded that of the manorial estates.

Christianity, which probably arrived in Britain by the 4th or 5th century AD, incorporated a number of pagan, roman and Anglo-Saxon festivals and customs. Beating the bounds was not originally been part of religious celebration but became gradually integrated. Remember in many cases early Christian churches were built on sites considered sacred by ancient Britons.

The celebration of Spring (Rogantide) as part of the Roman Church's litany reached England from Italy via Gaul around the 8th Century. The name 'Rogantide' derives from the Latin *rogatio* to intercede, ask or beseech. The Rogation days being the time of the year when God's blessing was asked for the seeds sown in the Spring. The perambulation is thought to derive from the 'Gang Days' of the Anglo Saxon / Viking traditions (from the Norse *gangen* 'to walk'.)

The Christian event evolved into a procession with banners depicting the saints, chanting from the Scriptures and erecting of stone crosses at intersections with other parishes. Occasionally such processions would meet and disputes over precise boundaries might erupt.

During the reign of Elizabeth I the incorporation of church and state led to the event becoming a more subdued affair and part of the formalised liturgical calendar known as Rogantide. Cromwell banned all such celebrations and the use of colourful banners.

Incorporation into modern Christianity

The modern feast of Rogantide (originally a period of fasting) is celebrated during

the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday ahead of Ascension Day, being part of the fifth week after Easter. In fact the name Easter derives from an incorporation of the pre-Christian worship each Spring of Éostre.

Following the re-establishment of the Christian festivals the priest led the congregation during Rogantide in ceremonial procession from the church around the lands falling within ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

During each pause at a boundary mark the priest would give a blessing thanking the Lord for the bountiful earth and to for the seeds, which they had recently sown, might grow and flourish. In some cases this gave names to specific marking points such as *Gospel Oak* and *Amen Corner*. "We plough the fields and scatter" is a Rogationtide hymn.

Beating the Bounds today

Pagan superstitions persist through the centuries to today surviving the adoption of customs by both Christian and civil authorities. For example, around the boundary markers it was believed evil spirits or ghosts resided that would wreak havoc on anyone who removed or tampered with them. Thus in certain parts of the country those present might be heard reciting: -" We declare this is the boundary of the parish of cursed be he who moveth our boundary."

Other ceremonies such as dancing around a May Pole, 'Clipping' (which is holding hands around the church) and even the beating of the Hobby Horse in Padstow are all obliquely connected to the 'beating of the bounds'. In Scotland the perambulations are known as 'Riding the Marshes'.

Such events are not confined to rural communities. At the Tower of London where every third year on Ascension Day boys whose families have connections with the Tower take an active and enthusiastic part. They begin by assembling on Tower Green, where they are given white wands. As they walk the boundaries the Tower Chaplain proclaims at each boundary mark: "Cursed is he who removeth his neighbour's landmark. The Chief Warder directs: "Whack it, boys, whack it" - and the boys duly pound the boundary with their wands. By following this ancient custom the boys retain a clear memory of the boundary marks and one generation after another can rely on the evidence so provided.

Elsewhere other customs exist such as in Poole where children were encouraged to prick their fingers with thorns or were even beaten with wands and thrown into the water to reaffirm the harbour limits. Eating bread and drinking ale and throwing or coins to children would also accompany all such events.

Parish Maps

Today modern maps show the parish boundary and it is no longer crucial to remind people through beating the bounds of their local boundaries however, reliance on definitive maps may still result in ancient rights of way being forgotten. Maps sometimes fail to accurately reflect the extent of the boundaries of commons and village greens or precise route of footpaths and bridleways. Often these are unfenced, and local people may not only be unsure about the boundaries, but totally unaware that this land has any special status.