

Folklore and Traditional Customs in Botley and the surrounding area

Shrove Tuesday was widely celebrated here as elsewhere around the country by feasting on pancakes. A rather sinister song about Poor Jack from around the Vale of White Horse, or with variations from other areas of southern England, went as follows:

Shrove Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday,	The host baked them, she tossed them,
Poor Jack came from the sea,	She turned them all black,
His mother made pancakes	She put in some pepper,
And fried them for tea.	And poisoned poor Jack.

Another Shrove Tuesday song of this region relates to the widespread custom of children begging for either money or ingredients to make their pancakes. Failure to provide something usually resulted in stones being thrown against the offender's door. This song also gives an idea of the local accent in use at the time amongst country folk:

Snick-snock, the pan's hot,
We be come a-shrovin',
Plaze to gie us zummat,
Summat's better n' nothin',
A bit o' bread, a bit o' chaze,
A bit o' apple dumplin' plaze.

May day was no doubt celebrated here with dancing around the maypole, but nothing specific appears to have been recorded. May garlands were definitely produced by children in line with traditions around the country, however in North Hinksey they appear to have used it as another excuse to go begging for money as the following song noted in the book 'Memories of a Country Childhood in North Hinksey Village' by Alice M. Harvey shows:

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,
We wish you a happy morn,
We've come to show you our May garlands,
Because it is May morn.
Our shoes are very dusty
They're also very thin,
We've got a little pocket
To put a penny in.

Guy Fawkes night was celebrated in North Hinksey in the early 20th century with a bonfire (set up in a field well away from the thatched houses), a guy and a few fireworks. Although most villages had a long standing tradition of bonfires it was unusual for fireworks to be set off in those days because of the expense. An earlier rhyme from the Vale of White Horse connected with Guy Fawkes (and yet again begging for money) runs as follows:

Guy Fawkes, Guy – 'twas his intent
To blow up the Houses of Parliament;
By God's mercy he got caught,
Wi' his dark lantern and lighted match.
Guy Fawkes, Guy, - zet up high,
A pound o' chaze to chawke un,
A pint o' beer to wash ut down,
And a jolly vire to roast un.
Up wi' the pitcher an' down wi' the prong,
Give us a penny an' we'll be gone.

The 'dark lantern' shown below is the one which Guy Fawkes was apparently caught with under the Houses of Parliament, although some have questioned its authenticity. It was donated to the University of Oxford in 1641 some 36 years after the Gunpowder Plot was foiled and is today held by the Ashmolean Museum.



Mummer's plays were commonly performed from medieval times onwards in many villages around Christmas time, and it is known that one took place in Cumnor in the early 20th century which also toured around the area. In their version there were seven characters – the Foreman, the Doctor, King William, Jack Finney, Bold Slasher, Beelzebub and his donkey (a non-speaking role). A description of this version together with the full text as related by Fred Costar can be found in the 'Remembrances' section of the Cumnor Parish Record website. Morris dancing was another popular custom, particularly in Oxfordshire and the surrounding areas. There is no known record of Morris sides based around the Botley area before the twentieth century; however Abingdon can boast a team which has been in existence since at least 1560 when the purchase of bells for the Morris men was recorded in the Churchwarden's Accounts. More recently a resurgence of interest in Morris dancing has led to two Morris sides being formed in this area – Cry Havoc in 1993, and more recently their offshoot Armaleggan.

The last two customs to be covered in this section bear strong similarities but they have different origins and take place at different times of the year. The customs in question are 'Beating the Bounds' and 'Riding the Franchise'.

Beating the Bounds involved perambulating round the parish boundaries on foot or when necessary by boat to ensure that any boundary markers were still in place combined with the blessing of crops. This was an established church ritual by the fifth century and it took place during Rogantide (the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday following Rogation Sunday – the fifth Sunday after Easter). Following the Reformation rules were laid down that it should take place on the Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday of Ascension Week when the curate and the important men of the parish would circumnavigate the parish boundaries. Subsequently it has taken place on other days as well such as Ascension Day (Holy Thursday) or Whit Monday and in most villages it became more focussed on either the crop blessing, or more frequently the boundary marking nature of the event. The custom took on the name 'Beating the Bounds' because of the introduction of sticks used to physically beat each boundary mark. This custom still continues today although the date is not always the same.

Riding the Franchise involves the city rather than parish boundaries and is a civic ceremony involving the Mayor and Sheriff, rather than one involving the church. It has taken place since at least 1391, and was held regularly, usually in late summer or early autumn, until 1901,

particularly whenever a mayor of Oxford held office for the first time. By Victorian times the event took a whole day and consisted of visiting each boundary stone and marking it with the City Mace following which part of the National Anthem was played. The musical accompaniment usually involved military bands, the City Waits or fifers and drummers. At traditional halting places refreshments of beer, cheese and cakes were taken on board by the participants much as they were in the Beating the Bounds ceremony (see the 1892 photo below). From 1901 the event only took place every 3 years, thereby making it less useful for the original purpose of familiarising a new mayor with the city boundaries, and in recent times has only involved parts of the city boundaries, generally nowhere near to Botley.

The last known time that the Riding the Franchise entourage visited this area was June 30th 1984 when they processed through North Hinksey (partly by boat) stopping at both The Fishes and The George for refreshments (see photos below). Post 1900 boundary stones exist near to The Fishes (in the garden beyond the car park inscribed 1984 Dr. F.A. Garside, Mayor, B.G. Standingford, Sheriff) and near the allotments in North Hinksey (in the garden of 'Willowbank' opposite no.144 North Hinksey Lane inscribed 1901 G.C. Druce, Mayor, J. Dom, Sheriff, but there are no older stones in this vicinity).

Beating the Bounds in 1892:
Stopping for refreshments at The George



Riding the Franchise in 1872:
On the river at North Hinksey



Riding the Franchise June 30th 1984:
Processing through North Hinksey



Riding the Franchise June 30th 1984:
Dignitaries take to the water



North Hinksey also boasts a story relating to witches and the devil which goes as follows. A man named John Scarve or Scoure sold his soul to the devil in exchange for wealth on condition that he provided for the local witches. He then drew an enchanted circle to

protect himself and restrain the witches but when he stepped outside it the Devil pounced on him and tried to drag him out through the chimney. The chimney was too narrow so when the body was twisted around with ever increasing force it finally caused the whole cottage to explode allowing the Devil to fly off with his soul and the witches to escape. The body itself was buried under the wall of the church, neither inside nor outside leaving his ghost to search for his soul for all eternity around Hinksey Manor.

A Witches Elm stood near the village green and was photographed by Henry Taunt in 1895 and again in 1910 when it was in a rather worse condition as shown below. It could be connected to the above story, but is more likely to simply be a distortion of the name Witch or Wych Elm, a particular species of that type of tree and nothing to do with witches.

The Witches Elm – 1895



The Village Green with Witches Elm 1910

