

**WARCOP RUSHBEARING AS
RECORDED IN THE 19TH CENTURY
collected by Anne Taylor**

Rosa Nouchette Carey (1840–1909), sister-in-law to the Revd James Simpson, was a prolific London novelist, and set one of her books in Kirkby Stephen – *Heriot's Choice* published in 1879. The main character is Mildred Lambert, a visitor to this 'remote' little town, who is invited to a rushbearing ceremony at Castlesteads, Carey's fictional name for Warcop. The following descriptions in the novel (pp122-128) are fascinating for their detail, surely drawn from Carey's personal experience, when accompanying her sister and brother-in-law. Carey describes the may-pole, church and vicarage, and the old Hall with its park, *trimly kept gardens, its parterres blazing with scarlet geraniums, and verbenas, and heliotropes, and its shady winding walks.*

The loud inspiring blare of brazen trumpets was heard outside the park gates. There was a burst of joyous music, and a faint sound of cheering, and then came the procession of children, with their white frocks and triumphant crowns. The real garland used for the rush-bearing is of the shape of the old coronation crowns, and was formerly so large that it was borne by each child on a cushion; and even at the present time it was too weighty an ornament to be worn with comfort. One little maiden had recourse to her mother's support, and many a little hand went up to steady the uneasy diadem.

Mildred, who had never seen such a sight, was struck with the beauty and variety of the crowns. Some were of a brilliant scarlet and white [...] others were of a softer violet. One was beautifully-shaped roses; and another and humbler one of heliotrope and large-eyed pansies. Even the cottage garlands were woven with taste and fancy. One of the poorest children, gleaning in lanes and fields, had formed her crown wholly of buttercups and ox-eyed daisies, and wore it proudly. A lame boy, who had joined the procession, carried his garland in the shape of a large cross, which he held aloft.

By and by, they came to a little strip of lawn, pleasantly shaded by trees, and here they found the rush-bearers drawn up in a line, with the crowns at their feet [...] they are going to have lemonade and cake, and then they will "trip on the light fantastic toe" [...].

There was an orderly procession into the church, accompanied by a processional hymn and: *during a pause in the service, the church-wardens collected the garlands from the children, which were placed by the officiating priest and the assistant clergy on the altar-steps, or on the sloping sills of the chancel windows, or even on the floor of the*

sanctuary itself, the sunshine lighting up with vivid hues the many-coloured crowns.

These were left until the following day, when they were placed on a wooden frame made for the purpose at the other end of the church, and there they hung until the next rush-bearing day; the brown drooping leaves and faded flowers bearing a solemn witness of the mutability and decay of all earthly things.

Then, after lunch:

on the lawn before the Hall the band was playing, and rustic couples were already arranging themselves for the dance, tea was brewing in the great white tent, with its long tables groaning with good cheer, children were playing amongst the trees; in the meadow below the sports were held—the hound trail, pole-leaping, long-leaping, trotting matches and wrestling filling up the afternoon.



RUSHBEARING CAKE

originally published by
Helene Nicholson (n.d.) in *A Taste of Cumbria*, and
reproduced by
Peter Brears (2017) in *Traditional Food in Cumbria*

The custom of giving gingerbreads to the children who made floral trophies and garlands for the annual Church of England rushbearings had certainly started by 1818, if not earlier. The recipe for making this is of particular interest since it is a sweetened, special oatmeal 'flapjack' of the oldest kind; the use of margarine for butter, golden syrup for treacle and a variety of raising agents to lighten its texture all being obvious modern introductions to a much earlier original gingerbread.

450g medium oatmeal	½ tsp ground cinnamon
½ tsp bicarb. of soda	1 tbsp syrup or treacle
½ tsp cream of tartar	100g margarine
1 tsp ground ginger	175g brown sugar

Mix the dry ingredients together in a bowl. Melt together the syrup or treacle, margarine and sugar, add to the dry ingredients, mix thoroughly, then spread evenly across a 33cm x 23cm greased and lined baking dish/tray, press down and smooth over. Bake at 150°C/300°F/Gas 2 for 30-35 minutes. Mark into squares or fingers while still hot, only removing from the tray when perfectly cold. These will be crisp when fresh, but go softer and stickier after being left out unwrapped for a few days (Brears, pp 183-184).

Note from the Editor: I used 350g medium oatmeal + 100g wholemeal flour. Spread out in a Swiss roll tin and pressed down firmly with the back of a spoon, this bakes to a very crisp, thin biscuit, very much like Grasmere gingerbread.



Above: the rushbearers, wearing their crowns, enter Warcup Church and take their seats – by Ken Martin.

Below: a series of Ken's sketches made on the same day (29.06.19), showing the banners and piper as well as the girls with their crowns and the boys carrying rush crosses.

