

**NEWSLETTER NUMBER 2 – August 2020** Edited by Anne Taylor

Welcome to our second newsletter, on the theme of **rushbearing**. Many thanks to these UEHS members for their contributions: Ken Martin, Richard Willcock (former chairman), Carol Staley, and non-member Garry Stringfellow. A copy of Garry's excellent book is now in UEHS archives. Of course, in this year of Covid-19 the rushbearing ceremonies have been cancelled – but not forgotten. Warcop schoolchildren, for example, made lovely rushbearing pictures which were hung outside the school on 29th June.

Anne Taylor, Chairman and Editor, UEHS



Rushbearing in Warcop 2019, sketch by Ken Martin



**WRITING LOCAL HISTORY**  
**by Garry Stringfellow**

Ten years ago, almost to the day from writing this article, I received a delivery of books I had just written, about rushbearing in Calderdale. Back in 1977, it being the Queen's Silver Jubilee year, a friend and I decided to hold a rushcart procession through our own town. There was a precedent for this because in 1906 there had been a similar procession at the celebration of fifty years of local government and fifty years before that a rushcart was paraded when the repeal of the Corn Laws was celebrated. The 1977 event was enjoyed so much that it was

decided to do the same the following year and so it has become an annual event that is now carried on by a new generation of rushbearers.

For very personal reasons, I had decided that I needed to write something about this ancient custom that in 2009 was on the 'must attend' list for many people in the town and Calderdale as a whole. Now my books had arrived and all I had to do was sell them.

Through my interest in folk customs and local history, I had known something about rushbearing in my locality for many years and with this knowledge and a little more research I produced a small book for the further interest of anyone who came to see our rushbearing in Sowerby Bridge. Whilst it was important to me that the book should be published as soon as possible, the process of collating the information and writing it made me aware that there was much more to be gleaned from the writings of others on this subject, including newspaper reports and from the vast resources of our national and regional archives. So, over the winter of 2010/11, I started my research in earnest without any expectation that after seven years I would be embarking on the task of preparing a second publication. This book however, was to include every town or village across six northern counties, where I could find a reference to rushbearing or where it was recorded that rushes had been strewn in their local church.

It was soon evident that rushbearing at one location could differ significantly from a similarly named event at another, and I set about identifying those common, often regional elements of rushbearing, that gave each rushbearing its own character. These, together with the early history and later decline of the custom, are encapsulated in *Rushbearing & Rush Strewing in Churches across the Northern Counties* (available from [gandjs300@gmail.com](mailto:gandjs300@gmail.com) – price including post and packing £12).

**RUSHES** – *Juncus effusus* (Common or Soft Rush) and *Acorus calamus* (Sweet Flag) were both used for strewing over church floors. At Great Urswick (Furness) sedges were cut from a nearby tarn. Other materials are recorded in Derbyshire – rushes, heather and bracken at Ashover and hay cut from 'church close' at Whitwell.



Warcop Rushbearing procession 2019  
sketch by Ken Martin



**At UEHS Local History Day in 2015 Richard Willcock gave a talk on rushbearing**, written up in 'The Record' of that year. Here are a few more details from his otherwise unpublished notes.

Originally rushbearing was an integral part of the annual dedication festival of a parish church. It was the occasion of gathering rushes in the meadows, tying them into bundles, processing with them to the church and celebrating its dedication. The sweet-smelling rushes were then strewn across the floor. Bear in mind that until the 18th century most churches, like most houses, had earthen floors, beaten down and smoothed over; the rushes formed a sort of natural carpet.

Rushbearing was one of the most important church activities, celebrating better than anything else the village as a community – an occasion for eating and drinking together, dancing and singing and having games, of resolving grudges and renewing friendships.

During the Reformation this custom was seen as Popish and was frowned upon, then banned completely during Cromwell's Commonwealth. With the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 rushbearing resumed, but by then many church floors were paved or flagged, and pews had replaced the old benches, so actual strewing with rushes became difficult. Some parishes however kept up the custom, as is known from churchwardens' accounts.

By the 19th century rushbearing still survived in four Westmorland villages: Grasmere, Ambleside,

Musgrave and Warcop. These survivals seem to have occurred due to the initiative of certain specific individuals and families: Wordsworth and the Romantic Movement for Grasmere, Canon Rawnsley for Ambleside, Septimus Collinson for Musgrave, and the Preston family for Warcop. Collinson made a bequest to the church at Musgrave to keep the ceremony going, and the Prestons (a clergy family at Warcop Hall) reformed, strengthened and defended the ceremony in Warcop.



Garry Stringfellow mentions various features of different rushbearing ceremonies in his book, many of which can be seen in Ken Martin's Warcop sketches of last year: a bagpipe player, the procession, banners, and elaborate floral crowns.



**Answers to the dialect quiz** in the July issue:

1. a) bullock; heifer; ram  
b) young female sheep; sheep in its first winter; sheep in its second winter
2. oak; birch; alder; holly; elder
3. badger; mole; toad



**MORE DIALECT – RHYMES AND SAYINGS**  
**contributed by Carol Staley**

*He wez as brossen as a harvest toad* (describing someone who has seriously overeaten).

A well-know nursery rhyme with a northern twist:

*Mary had a little lamb,  
The lamb was quite a sprinter.  
She wandered off for near a year,  
And came home with a Twinter\**

(\*a two-shear tup, i.e. in its second winter)

*Thou munt as weel lig i' bed an' spit upwards* (describing something that is unlikely to work).

And these two need no translation:  
*A've med monny a mistak', but niver med t' mistak  
ev saying A've niver med a mistak.*

*It taks three generations to mek munny and just yan  
ti spend it.*

A farmer, complaining to his neighbour about the poor progress of the young lad he'd taken on as a farm worker, was heard to exclaim:

*Wey A've telt him a' I knaw and he still knaws nowt!*