

Episodes from Rushbearing at Musgrave and Warcop

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The short film by Derek Mitchell on this year's Rushbearing at Great Musgrave is a gem. Each feature follows the authentic traditions of Rushbearing; a procession from the centre of the village to the parish church, led by girls wearing crowns of flowers with a little dancing on the way; music to accompany the procession; a banner held high; the symbolic strewing of rushes. Inside the church an act of worship follows, and then there are plenty of refreshments, and the sports. Later the crowns are hung on the customary pegs. It's all there. The whole event, secular and sacred combined, celebrates the togetherness of a community.

Rushbearing at Warcop, though bigger than at Musgrave, follows the same pattern. In this talk I shall attempt to give a background to Rushbearing, and then follow it in these two villages with a few examples, up to the closing years of the 19th century. We are desperately short of evidence from parish records. Registers of Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials have had to be kept by law since Tudor times, but not Service Registers, which should record Rushbearing Services. The earliest Service Register for Warcop in Kendal Record Office dates from 1918; and yes, there was a Rushbearing service that year.

Rushbearing was/is an integral part of the annual dedication festival of the church, otherwise known as the Wakes. Each parish church had its own patron saint. Rushbearing would take place each year around the time of its saint's day, St Theobald for Musgrave, St Columba for Warcop. However, for some reason Warcop Rushbearing takes place on St Peter's day and Musgrave Rushbearing on the Saturday after St Peter's Day (don't ask me why). No matter, Rush-bearing was tied to the Wakes of the church. It was the occasion of gathering rushes in the meadows, tying them into bundles, and processing with them to the parish church and celebrating its dedication.

In the old days the sweet-smelling rushes, often with flowers added too, were then strewn across the floor to freshen up the church building. Bear in mind that until the 18th century most churches, like most houses, had earthen floors, trampled on, beaten down, and smoothed over. The rushes provided a measure of warmth if you managed to shuffle your boots under them.

The only seating in church would be wooden forms. These would have to be moved out of the way each time the floor was dug up for a burial. Then the earth would be smoothed over again before the forms could be reset. Strewing rushes in church was hard work and could be a messy business, especially if no one had troubled to replace or refresh the old rushes from time to time. On one occasion the Bishop of Chester, on seeing the state of the old rushes festering on the floor of Saddleworth Parish Church declared to the churchwardens 'I would not lodge my horse in this place'.

Since before the Reformation in England Rushbearing took its place in the calendar of rural life alongside all manner of other activities. There were Rogation ceremonies, which involved going through the fields and blessing the crops; perambulations of the parish boundaries to check that there had been no encroachment of land by neighbouring parishes; maypoles and May games and Sunday dancing, Rushbearing was the most important. It celebrated better

than anything else the village as a community, combining spiritual and social elements of life together. It was an occasion for eating and drinking together, and dancing and singing and having games, of resolving grudges and renewing friendships.

At the time of the upheaval of the English Reformation in the Tudor era many of these ancient customs, once taken for granted, became the subject of public dispute. The Puritan wing of the Church of England sought simplicity of worship and purity of life. As a consequence they opposed ceremonies and processions as popish. They opposed, too, recreational activities on Sundays like maypoles and May Games and Sunday dancing. This, naturally, gave them a reputation, not entirely deserved, for being kill-joys. Rushbearing was one of their targets on the grounds that it was a procession and therefore popish.

Puritans laid another accusation against Rushbearing; that it was notorious for drinking and immoral behaviour. There was truth in that, but a glance at what life was like in Tudor and Stuart England might help explain why. Poverty, sickness and sudden disaster were familiar features the village landscape. Men and women were fully accustomed to disease and low expectation of life. How did they cope? By an attitude to life of 'careless stoicism' is how Keith Thomas describes it in his masterpiece, 'Religion and the Decline of Magic'.

Drink was a narcotic to ease the pain of daily toil. Beer was cheap and it played a part in every social occasion. Church ales and barrels of strong beer were sold in the churchyard or in the church itself as a means of raising money for church repairs. A regular, though unintended, consequence of the drink culture was, in the words of the historian Owen Chadwick, "the number of illicit children begotten from village maidens in the May games". The same consequence was well known at Rushbearing too. Commenting in 1626 on a Rushbearing at Ringley, outside Bolton, a Puritan remarked, perhaps more in sorrow than in anger, "all the recompense I can make those maids that brought rushes, is to wish them good husbands". The twin charges of popery and immorality pursued Rushbearing well into Victorian times, as we shall see.

Back in 1617 James I, that most underrated of monarchs, had intervened in the tussle over which sports and ceremonies should be permitted, and which banned. On his way back to London after a royal progress to Scotland he and his retinue stopped at Hoghton Tower in Lancashire. There he issued a Declaration of Sports, listing the sports and recreations to be permitted on Sundays and other holy days. The Declaration included Rushbearing: I quote, "women shall have leave to array rushes to the church for the decorating of it, according to their old custom." And the first event offered on James's visit was a Rushbearing. The Declaration in 1617 was limited to Lancashire, that most loyal of counties. The next year it was extended to the whole of the kingdom.

The Civil War and the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell put a stop to all such customs. With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 Rushbearing resumed in parishes. Yet the custom of strewing church floors with rushes was becoming unnecessary. In 1831 the antiquarian Norrison Scatcherd, looking back on his childhood, observed 'wherever our churches are paved or flagged, . . .there has been no necessity to strew the churches'. He could have added that putting in pews and floorboards made strewing rushes even more difficult. According to this print (show) pews were put in Musgrave church as early as 1633. Note, by the way, the pegs for the rush bearing crowns. At Warcop, box pews began to be put in from 1716.

From the 18th century there are bits and pieces of evidence that Rushbearing was continuing. The 1706 churchwardens' accounts of Asby show refreshments for rush bearers 3/-. Similar payments were made until 1731. So Asby kept its Rushbearing at least until then. Mark

Blackett-Ord has one for the Brough churchwardens in 1713: '24th June paid at the Rushbearing 3d'. (Big spenders the Brough churchwardens).

By the time we reach the 19th century I think the question to be asked is not why Rushbearing largely ceased in rural England, but why it managed to survive at all in four villages in Westmoreland. I believe it was due to the initiative of certain specific individuals and families who were determined to keep it going. At Grasmere the influence of the Wordsworth family and the Romantic Movement was overwhelming. Early 19th century tourists flocked to the Rushbearing, much to Wordsworth's displeasure; he loathed tourism and had vehemently opposed the opening of the railway line to Windemere in 1847. Ambleside has had a more chequered history. Rushbearing was revived there and championed by the great Canon Rawnsley, one of whose many achievements was the founding of the Keswick School of Industrial Design. He was also a founder member of the National Trust.

Here in the folds of the Eden Valley there are two names to be conjured with: Collinson and Preston. It was through the influence of Septimus Collinson that Rushbearing revived in Musgrave after some lapse of time. Born in Cumberland in 1739 and brought up at Langrigg, he, like so many bright lads from these parts, proceeded to Queen's College Oxford via Appleby Grammar School. He never left, becoming Provost of the college and Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. He died in the Provost's Lodging in 1827 at the age of 88. The College record describes him as having a strong northern dialect, and a very decided but good-humoured obliquity of vision. Obliquity of vision; what a wonderful expression. That seems to indicate a man who approached issues from an unexpected angle. He must have been interesting company.

The Prestons, a clergy family who came from Brougham, lived at Warcop Hall from the mid-late 1700s until the beginning of the 20th century. At no stage did they allow Rushbearing to lapse. Indeed they reformed it, strengthened it, and defended it, at times against determined opposition, as we shall see.

I would like now to look at Rushbearing in these two villages under the headings of **The Procession**, **The Sports**, and in the case of Warcop alone, **Temperance**.

The Procession

Parson and White's directory of 1829 says of Musgrave Rushbearing, 'an ancient custom of old Midsummer-day, had been discontinued, but on Dr Collinson expressing a desire for this rural amusement (which he had often witnessed here in his youth) to be revived, the parishioners complied with the wish of their liberal benefactor'. And Septimus made sure that the project was supported by a generous bequest.

We do not know in which year the custom at Musgrave was revived, but I want to quote an extract from a remarkable account of Musgrave Rushbearing published on May 3rd, 1828 in a London weekly periodical with the ponderous title, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*. This is, I believe, the original version of accounts which appeared in various publications over the years. Given the unfortunate reputation of Rushbearing for drink and bad behaviour, it is interesting to note how much the writer emphasises the care being taken of the maidens. Later editions and summaries leave out certain parts the original which might have suggested otherwise. A cynic might see this as careful editing; others might take it as evidence that things were getting better all the time. The original author goes by the initials W.H.H. He concludes by observing that he himself has witnessed the occasion four times,

“and formed one of the merry group more than once”. W.H.H. was definitely a Brough man who wrote further articles about Brough in the same magazine. We still haven't managed to identify him, though. Here goes:-

*'On the first day of May in every year (This is quite a disconcerting start, because the ceremony is definitely a Rushbearing: perhaps at times the two ceremonies were conflated) there is a custom observed at Musgrave, in Westmoreland, which deserves to be recorded. The young maidens of Brough make a procession to Musgrave, decorated with 'the fairest flowers of the field, 'and attired in white dresses, ornamented with ribands and other finery. Great preparations are made against the joyful day; and the young maidens, who are to become the rush bearers, **apply to the vicar of Musgrave for his consent**. The flowers are presented from the neighbouring gardeners the day previous to the first of May. Twelve sprightly young damsels **are selected by the vicar** belonging to the town of Brough, who have offered their services on the occasion.*

'At ten o'clock in the morning the young lasses assemble at the foot of Brough bridge in their dresses, decorated with flowers, &c.; a garland is displayed on their heads in the shape of a crown, formed of rushes, with flowers entwined on the outside, and a bunch of blue ribands on the top, and others interspersed here and there.

*'They are immediately joined by the Brough band (**so important to have the band**), who strike up the national anthem, and the whole procession march down the town, followed by an immense crowd of spectators, who greet them with continued applause. Thus they move on through the fields to Musgrave, which is distant one mile from Brough. The band play frequently as they proceed, and sometimes the rush bearers dance. At about three quarters of a mile from Brough is a small charity-school belonging to Musgrave, situated on a hill, which is the first place they halt at. They dance up the hill, waving their garlands in the air, till they reach its summit. The master comes out of the school-door, bearing a small cake decorated with flowers, and leads the rush-bearers into the school, who cut up the cake and distribute a piece to each boy. This cake is given by the vicar of Musgrave. When they leave the school, the band strike up, and the whole body moves on down the hill (strewing flowers as they descend) to the village of Musgrave; and as they approach it, they are hailed by the inhabitants, who hasten to join the procession... The village bells ring a merry peal, if such it may be called, for there are only two of them, and they are cracked.'*

At this point the Vicar joins the procession and they enter the church. *'The Vicarage is the next place they stop at, and there they dance for some time, and at intervals greet the worthy pastor with repeated huzzas! The vicar appears and acknowledges their gratitude, and conducts them to the church, which is filled immediately by persons anxious to get a sight of the ceremony. The vicar is immediately followed by the clerk, bearing on his head a fine large "twelfth cake" (**associated with Twelfth Night, Eve of Epiphany**) on a silver dish, surmounted with flowers; they both have bunches of flowers in their hands. The rush-bearers are led up to the north aisles of the church and they hang up their garlands on the side of the church. The Gospel is read by the clergyman, and some prayers offered and psalms sung; after which the clerk and vicar retire. A space is then cleared near the altar, and a fiddle procured, when dancing commences, and continues till about three or four o'clock in the afternoon...*

*'At intervals the cake... is, with wine, handed round the company, who drink health to the vicar. No other liquor is allowed to be consumed in the church besides **the four bottles of wine given by the vicar**. Any one is at liberty to dance with the rushbearers; but they (i.e. the rushbearers) are the only females who are allowed to do so. After the dancing is over, and*

the cake and wine that are allowed by the vicar are consumed, the young females, escorted by their lovers, (later editions swains), depart, as do the crowd who have been present at the



Garlands in Musgrave Church, *Gentlemen's Magazine*, 1845

ceremony, and the church doors are then closed.

Here now is a brief extract from an account of the Rushbearing in Warcop. It is from William Whellan's *History and Topography of Cumberland and Westmoreland*, published in 1860:-



'The young girls of the parish collect flowers in the village and neighbourhood for some days beforehand. These are arranged in tasteful upright garlands, and fixed in a white cushion decorated with green, and adorned with bunches of flowers at each corner. The members of the village reading-room have lately shown a great interest in the old festival, and have added greatly to the appearance of the procession by the different flags belonging to them.'

Absolutely. It was an inspired move to get the Reading Room on board.

The account continues. *'The procession is now formed near the Reading Room. The members of the society, the children with the garlands, and the flag bearers, march through the village preceded by a*

brass band and the large flag of the society.

'According to old custom, they then come up to the hall...and a spirited dance is commenced. Refreshments are provided for the children by the lady of the hall. In about an hour the processions again formed, and all march down to the church, where the...service for the day is said, and the garlands of flowers (are) fixed up by the churchwarden, in a place arranged for them, where they remain until next year.'



Rushbearing at Warcop Hall

The Sports

We return to the account of Musgrave Rushbearing; *After the ceremony,* our author continues, *'very few retire immediately, for there is pony-racing, to which most resort. About half a dozen ponies are admitted to run for a prize collected by the Musgrave men, and those who contend enter their names the day before. This is immediately followed by wrestling for four prizes, viz. a sovereign, a belt, a new hat, and a new pair of boots, also purchased with voluntary contributions.... They are chiefly young lads who wrestle for the prizes, many of whom are very skilful in the art. These sports, with many others, such as jumping in sacks, grinning through horse-collars, &c. continue till dusk'*.

Whellan's account in 1860 of Warcop Rushbearing tells a different story. He reveals that *'various country sports used to be the order of the day: but these having given occasion for much real evil and more evil report, they are now nearly discontinued'*. Oh dear. Anyway, the ban does not appear to have lasted long. The Sports were soon revived. In Sandford our friend and neighbour, Alan Watson, recently turned 60, recalls the Sports of his childhood. They took place, as they have for many years, on the army field, on the Warcop side of the A66. He remembers the usual races for adults as well as children, and Cumberland Wrestling, and the bicycle races; in some years tea in an army tent on the army field, and an army assault course with soldiers joining in. For many the main attraction was the fell pack coming down off the fell, across the A66 (you could manage it in those days), and into the army field. And the prizes in the sports were, and are still, in coin of the realm; no ribbons, no medals, but spot cash in your hand straightaway.

Temperance

A moment ago I conjectured that the inclusion of the Reading Room society lifted the morale of Rushbearing. This raising of spirits in Warcop was important. During the 18th and early 19th century the Church of England had largely gone to sleep. By contrast, everywhere the Methodist Movement was thriving. Between 1821 and 1848 two Methodist chapels had been built in Warcop, and one in Sandford.



Warcop Temperance Hall

On the heels of Methodism came the Temperance Movement. Temperance, by the way, does not mean total abstinence. It means, well, temperance. The Movement was massive, and very strong in the Eden Valley. The Warcop Temperance Society was founded in 1849 and The Temperance Hall opened in 1865. Across the area its rallies attracted thousands. Well into the 20th century schools around here would empty when there was a Temperance Rally; there was nothing the teachers could do about it. Though allied with the Methodist Church, the Temperance Movement was non- denominational. Together, they harked back to the Puritan ideal of simplicity and sobriety of living.

Their welcome influence and success was a wake-up call to the Established Church. How did St Columba's respond? We may be in for a surprise. Whellan's account of the Rushbearing concludes with an interesting afternoon and evening at the Hall. No Sports; instead, the grounds thrown open to all comers - for a gigantic tea-drinking'. A gigantic tea drinking! That is the language of the Temperance Movement. It had reached Warcop Hall. The vicar and his lady clearly supported Temperance and wanted to be on good terms with the Movement.

Did this gesture, and a possible favourable response (if there was one; you never know) work out? Sadly not. In fact, for some years things got worse. It appears that in the latter years of the century, on St Peter's Day, the day of Rushbearing in Warcop, there took place a rival Temperance Society procession. Two processions in the same village on the same day. And two bands! In 1872, for example, the Brough Brass Band led the procession of 30 girls wearing garlands to the church. On the same day the Ravenstonedale Band led a procession through the village with Band of Hope banners and flags, followed in the evening by a public meeting with speakers, no doubt in the Temperance Hall. Meanwhile on the same evening the Rushbearing Sports offered something else: 'crack wrestlers', of course, a hound trail, foot races, pole leaping and trotting, followed by music and dancing to a string band from Penrith.

As the French would say, 'Vive la difference'.

Richard Willcock

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Note: Further information with photographs and videos of recent Rushbearings can be found at <http://musgravechurchfield.uk/>