

## **The History of Beating The Bounds of South Brent.**

This essay was written during 1996, hence some of the old names. Its contents may be of interest to anybody deciding to beat the Parish boundary this Autumn, also to any Parishioner interested in the history of the Parish of South Brent. The proclamation at the start of the essay was an invention of a past Parish Council Chairman, renamed "The Loyal Address", by another more recent incumbent. Being a religious ceremony I believe a Rogation prayer given by a member of St. Petros Church would be more in keeping and more appropriate for this particular rite.

### **Beating the Bounds.**

*"Let all men know that we, parishioners of South Brent, in whom are vested the title, rights and privileges of Lord of the Manor, will this day, the 16<sup>th</sup>. Of September in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and ninety nine, beat the bounds of our ancient parish in accordance with precedent and time honoured custom. Thus demonstrating to all men for a further term of seven years, the limits and boundaries of our parish, God save the Queen".*

This proclamation is issued by the chairman of South Brent Parish Council at the commencement of every beating the bounds ceremony. I would guess that similar statements are made throughout the country in those few parishes who still honour the right to perambulate their boundary. What is the need for this ceremony, why is it done? The answer is simple, there is no need whatever to perambulate a parish boundary in this day and age, unless of course it's being walked for pleasure.

Current Parish boundaries were established with the introduction of the Local Government Act of 1888 and updated by a similar Act in 1972. The parish boundary of South Brent was determined or "mered," by the Ordnance Survey during 1883. A boundary change on the 1<sup>st</sup>. April 1950 altered the original Parish by excluding a large area at Avonwick and placing it within the Parish of North Huish. Apart from this alteration the South Brent parish boundary has remained unchanged since 1883.

If there is no longer any requirement for a parish to establish its limits then its back to the question, why beat the bounds. Well, this is an ancient ceremony that has lasted for over two and a half thousand years, and in its own way conveys a story about certain aspects in the development of rural parishes. As with all folklore and legend, this old custom carries with it elements of truth about our forefathers and the life they led, and as such I firmly believe that it should be preserved and understood.

I began to research this subject by asking members of well known archive departments throughout the County of Devon, what they considered to be the origins of "Beating the Bounds". Much to my surprise, nobody knew. Certain archives contain records of considerable violence taking place when members of neighbouring parishes came together and disputes broke out over the ownership of various tracts of land. As to the exact purpose of this particular ceremony, they considered it "Lost in the mists of time", and doubted very much if I would ever find its origins. So much for my first excursion into this subject. I must say that every archivist I had dealings with was very helpful indeed, nevertheless, I had drawn a complete blank from an area that I had least expected.

I then turned to just about every text book on boundaries that I could lay my hands on, searched through my small library of Dartmoor authors, all to no avail. There are many books that describe boundary perambulations with very precise information regarding date and time, number of participants, distance and even weather conditions. Unfortunately nothing I read gave me any precise information on the origin of this ceremony or why it is performed.

The Chairman of South Brent Parish Council, Peter Moore, kindly gave me access to the parish files on this subject. Within them I found comprehensive details of the perambulation ceremonies dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup>. August 1919. I must say that it gave me great pleasure searching these records. So many young faces in the old photographs. Village characters, many of them sadly no longer with us. To me this was more than just a file on boundary beating. Within is an excellent record of the way that a village progresses or evolves and what a community does on its day off. Landlord, farmer, shopkeeper and poacher, all mixing together with a common cause of setting their boundaries for the coming years. Some on horseback, most on foot, hound and hare together in harmony. Nowadays this ceremony is usually terminated with a ram roast and cider for the participants. Years ago there are records of the usual feasting and drinking coupled with showground activities, a village fair.

While reading these files I came across a scrap of information from an old parish magazine. It was difficult to put a date on, but I believe it to have been printed during the sixties. Its contents are as follows:

*“This ancient custom was done as a duty before the days of ordnance maps. It is said that at each important landmark a boy would be beaten, so as to impress upon his mind the position of the boundary between Brent Parish and those adjoining it. Presumably it was a different boy at each landmark! And if some had a ducking when crossing a stream, it only helped to memorise the route”.*

Could this be the reason for beating the bounds? It sounds plausible. We shall soon see.

As anybody who lives in a small village community will tell you, news travels fast. No need for the Internet, email or faxes. Just take the dog for a walk; pop into the local for a pint, and when someone asks you what you've been doing all day, you quite simply tell them. Within seconds the drums start beating. Comments on your activities start coming in from all sides. By the next morning the whole world and his dog know what you are up to. What's more this form of communication really works. I very soon had many interpretations of why boundary beating is done. So many in fact that I had to start sorting the wheat from the chaff. I've decided to include a few versions of locally grown concepts on this subject because in all of them there is an element of truth. As stated earlier, this ceremony has evolved over a period of two and a half thousand years. During this time parts of the original have been deleted while others have been added. Their inclusion may also dispel a few myths on the subject and maybe prompt the odd parish council into reintroducing the ceremony before it disappears from the green fields of this country altogether.

One local gentleman informed me that the reason for Beating the Bounds originated in the dark ages. Villagers gathered all the broomsticks they could lay their hands on. They then proceeded around the village shouting at the tops of their voices beating the ground, shrubs and just about anything that got in their way. They slowly moved to the outskirts of the village kicking up one hell of a racket. The purpose of this was to scare away evil spirits; (It would also scare away rats if plague were about). The spirits would leave the village in peace for a year or so and then it would all have to be done again. Who would have instigated this noisy ceremony? The local priest, Lord of the Manor or perhaps a witch or village midwife after to many infant deaths? A good idea but how do you prove it to be correct? Something like this may have taken place but was it anything to do with today's ceremony?

Another similar suggestion was that on certain days during the year villagers would again gather broomsticks. This time they would perambulate the village or manor boundary. They would beat down all vegetation so that nothing could overgrow it, thus making a pathway all the way round. This exercise would ensure that the inhabitants of an area would all know where the limits of the land held by their Saxon or Norman Lord and Master extended. Quite an important matter if your life depended on it, as we shall see in the next version

During the late Saxon period penalties for a slave or bondsman were very harsh indeed if it were proved that they had strayed onto another mans land without permission. Worse still, if a herdsman allowed animals in his care to stray, the animals would become the property of the Lord's ground that they had strayed onto. In those days farm animals were worth much more than a human life. It was therefore of the utmost importance that everyone knew precisely where various boundaries were.

Every year the youth of a village or manor were taken by their elders and shown the limits of their Lordships land. The elders would beat the young boys and girls at every prominent landmark such as a tree, river or bridge. This would instil from a very young age, and in an unforgettable manner the limits of, for want of another word, freedom, for these lowly peasants. The Saxons preferred to maim as a punishment instead of killing. The reason for this being that if they took the life of a servant or slave they would have to pay the local chieftain for the loss. In today's terms killing a servant was a bit like causing damage to a combine harvester or plough. Just chop off an arm, poke out the odd eye here and there, be careful not to damage him too much or he would be no good for feeding the pigs or ploughing. Again this could be a very plausible reason for the bounds ceremony, but was it the right one?

One morning I bumped into the local curate in the village. He informed me that the vicar, Father John Harper, had recently performed a ceremony called "Rogation". This ceremony consisted of a priest walking round the perimeter boundaries of a farm blessing the crops and other produce to ensure a good harvest. This conversation was starting to get very interesting. A group of people in procession around a boundary for a set purpose. At last something that could be proved. When I got home I made straight for the dictionary.

*Rogation Day. In the Christian calendar, one of the three days before Ascension Day, Which used to be marked by processions round the parish boundaries,(Beating the Bounds), and blessing of crops; now only rarely observed.*

Was this what I was looking for, had I found the answer? I decided that a meeting with Father John was in order. John was his usual helpful self. He copied an extract from the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church regarding Rogation. He also put me in contact with several church scholars who could greatly assist my research into the subject.

I will go a little deeper into the Rogation connection in a short while, suffice it to say that I managed to trace this Christian ceremony back to about 400A.D. At this point I got a bit of a surprise when I found out that Rogation was a Christianised version of the pagan observance of a ceremony called "Robiglia". Oh dear, was I back to square one? I contacted the scholarly advisors of the church.

Apparently the early English Church took quite a lenient view of pagan ceremonies, perhaps because it was still gathering strength and lacked the terrifying power gained by the Church of Rome in later centuries. In those days it was quite common for Christianity to adopt a pagan ceremony, Christianise it and carry on as before, with perhaps the only difference being in the name of the God being worshipped. It was probably a great deal easier to adopt this procedure than to try and put some kind of ban on pagan worship. After all, in those days Christianity was a very new concept with relatively few followers. It was a way of converting the masses without causing too much friction or bloodshed.

So now to find the origin of a pagan ceremony called Robiglia. Was it Roman or Celtic? Rogation comes from the Latin word Rogare, which means to ask or beseech, and this ceremony was adopted and practised by the Church of Rome so there was strong Latin influence. However the Celts were around at the same point in time, were the Druids practising a form of this ceremony?

Druids have been around since at least 500B.C. They were the spiritual wing of the Celtic nations, not just priests but teachers, judges and administrators. I contacted a Chief Druid and asked if this ancient Celtic religion had any form of ceremony that coincided with the Christian practice of Rogation.

The ancient ceremony of Beltane, still practised by modern day Druids, traditionally held on the 1<sup>st</sup>. May each year, celebrates a union between Goddess (Earth), and God (Sun). Originally animals were driven between fires to purify them before placing them in summer pastures. Crops would have been blessed during this time, as was the union between man and woman. It was a time of purification and fertility. It is believed that the ancient ceremony of Beltane would have been celebrated at the first new or full moon after the Vernal Equinox, placing it between the later half of April to the first half of May. It is therefore quite possible that this Druid ritual has some bearing on the pagan ceremony of Robiglia, however this is an assumption and must be treated as such.

I again contacted a church scholar in order to cross check the report from the Chief Druid. Apparently modern day Druid ceremonies cannot be compared in any way to those of the ancient Celts. Today they are strongly influenced by Saxon and Viking ceremonies, and as a rule cannot be trusted as being a totally reliable source for those requiring accurate information. Although there is a distinct lack of proof regarding a connection between the Celtic ceremony of Beltane and the pagan ceremony of Robiglia adopted by the early Church of Rome, I feel that the similarities are so striking that they must be taken into account when the truth is finally unveiled.

Now to the Roman connection, it turned out to be as straight and undeviating as most of their roads, getting you to your destination in the quickest possible time. Here I found that the ceremony we know as Beating the Bounds would never have got started if it hadn't have been for a small boy tying a piece of straw to a foxes tail! This young lad, whoever he was, began something that would still be remembered two thousand seven hundred years later.

Puccinia Graminis, more commonly known as wheat rust, has been a great problem to farmers for several thousand years. Spores of the disease have been found at archaeological workings in Israel dating back to about 1300B.C. The Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle wrote about the devastation caused by the "Brown Rust", somewhere between 322 and 384B.C. It is even mentioned in the Bible. With these facts in mind we can start putting the pieces of this jigsaw together.

Legend has it that at some time before 700B.C. in Italy, a 12 year old boy caught a fox in his fathers chicken coop. In order to stop the fox returning and killing more chickens, the boy tied straw to it. He then set light to the straw and released the fox into his fathers fields. By this time the young lad had gathered quite an audience of local folk coming to see what the noise was all about. They all witnessed the terrified fox escaping and running through the fields of wheat surrounding the farmstead. Within days, the wheat fields that the stricken fox had run through had all turned a reddish brown colour, the same colour as the fox. The crops were actually infected with wheat rust, and it quickly spread throughout the neighbouring farmsteads. The harvest was ruined. The colour of the infected crops reminded the superstitious Romans of the red fox and of fire. The boy's dreadful deed had caught up with him and he was blamed for causing the crop failures that occurred during that year.

Romans being Romans they decided to create a pair of Gods to protect them from this terrible blight. They named them Robigus(Male), and Robigo(Female), and called the ceremony of worship Robiglia. This ceremony took the form of a procession around the boundaries of cornfields, prayers were offered up and sacrifices made. As time passed the ceremony held in the spring of each year became more refined. A shrine to these Gods was created in a grove located at the 5<sup>th</sup>. milestone outside Rome, on the Via Claudia, where sacrificial animals were slaughtered. The animals were usually brown in colour so as to appease the death of the fox. Some accounts say that a sucking puppy was also sacrificed. The Roman poet Ovid in his work *Fasti*, gives us

part of the following prayer offered to the Gods during the Robiglia ceremony; *“Spare the herbage of the cereals without we pray, your roughening hand”*. Robiglia ceremonies were also coupled with offerings to the Roman Goddess Flora, the Goddess of Spring flowers and fertility. From Flora we get the modern day Maypole Dance and the Floral Dance.

The pagan Roman ceremony of Robiglia is so well documented that it is definitely the one adopted by the early Church of Rome and renamed Rogation. However, when we compare the Druid version with that of the Roman, we find striking similarities. Both are held around the time of the Spring Equinox. Both involve Male and Female Gods uniting as one. Both ceremonies involve fire and animals, blessing of crops and the coming harvest. Both were in existence at the same point in time. Although I have found it impossible to prove a link between Beltane and Robiglia I feel sure that it exists. Certain scholars will also recognise a connection with earlier cultures and myths such as the Osiris and Isis legend of the Egyptians and their link to the Greek Hermes. There are also obvious connections with the Male and Female potencies of the Hebrew Kabbala.

Having traced the source, we are now at liberty to follow it with reasonable certainty to the present day. The story can now be laid out in chronological order, giving us a clear overview of the evolution of this old custom. It starts with the problem caused by wheat rust in the Eastern Mediterranean dating back to at least 1300B.C. The early Romans invented Gods to protect them from the brown scourge that was destroying their harvests. The Gods called Robigus and Robigo were worshiped during a ceremony called Robiglia, which was first recorded around 700B.C. Robiglia was performed during the early Spring of each year.

During the early stages of the first millennium Robiglia was adopted by the Church of Rome and renamed Rogation. The Christians removed the pagan Gods from the ceremony and replaced them with their own singular entity. Romanised Christians soon began their missionary work into Western Europe. Whilst in Gaul, Christian and Druid came together, and if any link exists between Beltane and Rogation, this is surely where it was first formed.

Soon the Ancient Britains became converted to this new religion. Their ceremonies took on a strongly Celtic form that in many cases mirrored those of the Druids. The Romans left these shores leaving behind a nation that had developed its own form of Christianity. When St. Augustine was sent to Britain by Pope Gregory I. During 597A.D. he tried to achieve uniformity in the different liturgies and practices that existed between the Celtic and Roman Churches. This fact alone proves that the Celts together with some of the Christianised Anglo Saxons, were reluctant to change.

There are so many old customs in this country, whose origins have been lost. We still perform these old rituals without knowing why. I believe that during the period that Rome was enforcing its will on the Celtic Church, many of these old ceremonies went underground. The Padstow “Obby Orse”, and Green Man ceremonies are but two examples, only to rise again in the modern day.

The Church Council of Clovesho introduced Rogation ceremonies into Britain somewhere between 742-825A.D. By this time, most of the Anglo Saxon invaders had been converted to the new faith and were enforcing their own form of legislature throughout much of the land. The Church also introduced the “Parish”, into these islands from the continent. Each parish priest was entitled to collect taxes amounting to one tenth of the annual wealth of the parish. The taxes were called Tithes, or in some places Church Scot, ( Could be the origin of “Scot Free”?). King Canute in his ordinance of 1027A.D. stated that in the middle of August the Tithe of the fruits of the earth should be paid to the Church of the Parish. The local parish priest was supposed to divide his Tithe into three, part going to the upkeep of the church itself, part to the welfare of the poor, and part to support the priest in the form of a wage.

It is now clear to see why the Rogation ceremony was so important to the early Church. By walking, or beating the boundaries of his parish in the Spring, the priest could not only bless the crops and beasts that lay within, but could see very clearly the contents of his wage packet for the coming year. The Tithes were unfortunately open to corruption from the higher levels of Church leadership. There are many records of Bishops getting fat on the misappropriation of Tithes. We can now start to see the importance of the parish boundary to the early Saxon and Norman cultures. The parish was the unit upon which the wealth of the church was based.

Earlier in this chapter I gave three examples of why people thought that Beating the Bounds was performed. The first was to keep evil spirits away. Well if a priest offers up prayers to ensure that no harm comes to the harvest, it is the same as saying that he is trying to keep evil away. So this one scores, it is part of the reason for Beating the Bounds. The second was to beat a pathway around the parish boundary. This is also in part true. As explained above, it was of the utmost importance for all concerned to know precisely where the boundary was, otherwise Tithes could fall into the wrong hands. The third and most well known explanation can now be added to the evolution of this ceremony. Beating the youth of a village on prominent landmarks did become common practice when Rogation ceremonies were performed. Exactly when these practices and interpretations were added to the original is uncertain. They are but another example of how the inhabitants of these islands have adapted foreign influence to suit their own requirements.

The outdoor Rogation processions were suppressed in England in 1547. The act of suppression must have had an undesirable effect on the Crown in some way, because in 1559 Queen Elizabeth I. Issued a Royal Injunction reordering the perambulation of the Parish at Rogationtide.

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 abolished Tithes and replaced them with redemption annuities payable to the Crown. Exceptions to this act were those tenants still renting church land and property. These poor souls continued to pay tithes to the church until well into the next century. In 1841 the Ordnance Survey Act was passed, directing that the exact line of public boundaries were to be ascertained and mapped. Prior to this date, each individual parish had to employ the services of a local person whose duty was to have an intimate knowledge of the boundary, and to settle any disputes relating to the boundary in his charge. Ascertaining the boundaries of England took many years to complete. The parish boundaries of Dartmoor were not "Mere'd", or ascertained until 1882-3. The work of "Mereing" the parish of Brent was performed by a Sergeant James Ford, (Royal Engineers), on behalf of the Government. He was assisted by a Mr. William Henry Heath, Meresman for the Parish of South Brent. The introduction of the Local Government Act during 1888 finally sounded the death knell for Beating the Bounds. No longer did boundaries have to be stored in peoples heads. Accurate mapping took the place of the village Meresman. Since this time Beating the Bounds has become an obsolete custom, although there are still a few clergymen who will perform a Rogation ceremony if called to do so by the local farming community.

So there we are, we have followed this custom from beginning to end. Or have we? On the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1978 the title deeds for the Lord of the Manor of South Brent were conveyed to the Parish Council to be held by them as trustees on behalf of the parish. The responsibility for maintaining and upholding the ancient customs associated with this title therefore fall squarely upon the shoulders of whoever has been elected to serve on this council. The Council could therefore claim that they have the right, however tenuous, to beat their bounds whenever they please, and that's exactly what they do. Another point to be considered is that I can find no record of the Royal Injunction issued by Elizabeth I. ordering Rogation ceremonies to continue, ever being rescinded. Does this mean that priests are still obliged to Beat the Bounds every Rogationtide? who knows. However when the parishioners of South Brent beat their bounds they have fun! It is still one of those occasions that is treasured by its participants. It's still an occasion for the youngsters of the village to leave their sound systems and T.V.'s at home and learn something they perhaps didn't know about their surroundings. They still get the "Bumps", when crossing a bridge, and dumped into the rivers when they are crossed.

In the interest of conservation, bounds ceremonies are nowadays held in the Autumn so as not to disturb nesting birds, lambing, new growth, etc. Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether or not this ceremony has really become obsolete. I personally think not. I believe that modern man has just added his own interpretation to it, as has happened so many times in the past. The ceremony has evolved and adapted itself to the twenty first century. We have almost cured wheat rust, and tithes no longer exist. Incursion into the Green Belt, conservation, pollution and global warming are now the problems. When parishioners perambulate their boundaries they are observing the countryside from a different perspective to that of our forefathers. To them it was a place where they toiled from dawn to dusk, scratching a terribly hard living from the soil. Most of us have free time and the opportunity to enjoy the tranquillity and beauty of the countryside, whilst at the same time observing, and at times protesting, about the incursion of modern man.

So Beating the Bounds is still alive and well. It has survived many changes, and does it really matter if its origins are out of date? As long as people have fun, enjoy themselves, and remember a bit about its past history, there is every chance that this old custom will continue for many years to come.

Author: Ken Smith.

Note: If any Parishioner still holds a copy of the previous draft, you will note certain changes in this, the final paper. Would advise you destroy previous copies in favour of this one.....thanks, Ken.