

Grasmere District Rushbearing – Geoff Doel

The Grasmere Rushbearing Ceremony, usually held in mid July, is likely to be yet one more calendar custom cancelled this year because of the virus. Fortunately visual accounts of previous years' ceremonies can be viewed online .

The strewing of rushes on church floors is probably one of the most ancient rituals in the Christian Church, perhaps even derived from the pagan Roman festival of Floralia. In Cumbria rushbearing is celebrated at Warcop, Musgrave, Ambleside, Grasmere and Urswick. It once fulfilled a practical purpose, but is now mainly a flower festival. Usually in high Summer, when the rushes were fully grown and the two main harvests, wool and hay, had been gathered in. It was considered a 'boon service' for the church and therefore the parishioners expected no reward. However, as early as 1680 the Grasmere Churchwardens' accounts show: 'For Ale bestowed on those who brought rushes and repaired the Church. 1s. Four years later the amount spent on ale had increased to two shillings and in 1685 it had reached the prodigious sum of 5 shillings and 6 pence, but from then on the amount remained constant at 2 shillings and six pence until 1774.

In 1819 the Churchwardens accounts records for the first time the expenditure of 3s 9d for 'Rushbearers' Gingerbread' and it seems by then they were mostly children, who received for their reward a piece of 'rushbearers' cake'. Apart from a lapse of 13 years in mid c19, the gingerbread tradition has continued to the present and is still baked and sold in the small shop – once the village school – in the corner of the churchyard.

James Clarke witnesses the Grasmere Rushbearing in late c18:

I happened once to be at Grasmere, at what they call a 'Rushbearing'. This is an ancient custom, formerly pretty universal here, but now generally disused. About the end of September, a number of young women and girls (generally the whole parish) go together to the tops of the hills to gather rushes. These they carry to the church, headed by one of the smartest girls in the company. She who leads the procession is styled the Queen, and carries in her hand a large garland, and the rest usually have nosegays. The Queen then goes and places her garland upon the pulpit, where it remains till after the next Sunday, the rest then strew their rushes upon the bottom of the pews, and at the church door they are met by a fiddler who plays before them to the public house, where the evening is spent in all kinds of rustic merriment.

Folklorist William Rollinson comments thar Clarke is mistaken about the month; before 1845 the Grasmere ceremony was held on the Saturday nearest to St Oswalds Day, 5th August.

Wordsworth and his family were regular attenders and he described the event in his poem 'Rural Ceremony':

The village Children, while the sky is red
With evening lights, advance in long array
Through the still churchyard, each with garland gay,
That, carried sceptre-like, o'ertops the head
Of the proud bearer.

In 1887 the rushbearings were described as 'tall poles decked with rushes and flowers' carried by boys and girls up to the age of 15. Crosses of rushes would be laid on the altar and would remain there for a week after the ceremony.

It was formerly held on the Saturday nearest to August the 5th, but is now usually held on the 2nd Saturday in July, following the Ambleside ceremony on the first Saturday. Currently a colourful procession passes through the village streets with bearings made from rushes and flowers. In this procession are six Maids of Honour, dressed in matching green costumes, carrying a white sheet holding the strewing rushes, while the rest of the procession carry rush-based flower-covered 'Bearings' in a variety of shapes including harps and crosses. A brass band and the church choir also contribute and those who wish can join the procession with their own rushbearings. The procession starts at the school at 3.30pm and after a short church service the children are given the famous Grasmere gingerbread. The village hall has a painting of the Rushbearing by Frank Bramley RA.