

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Brenda Willison, Tales of a Lady Town Crier

Brenda Willison gave a very entertaining presentation to the September meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about her experiences as a Lady Town Crier.

Brenda became a town crier in 1987 when a local newspaper in Peterborough invited applications for the role. Her daughters applied on her behalf as she had always had a loud voice. She was one of 20 people competing for the role, but there was only one other woman. She was selected as a deputy town crier for Peterborough before soon being adopted for the full post by Market Deeping.

Brenda explained that town criers originated in Ancient Greece about 850 BCE when heralds were used to announce the events of the day. Since then, they have been important in all pre-literate societies. For example, in England King Harold used heralds in 1066 to rally troops to face the Norman invasion. Subsequently, William the Conqueror used heralds to collect taxes and to undertake other duties. They were rewarded with land but they were not always popular with local people. The expression, 'Don't shoot the messenger' suggests that they could be attacked and so later harming a herald was regarded as treason. By the eighteenth century, town criers often acted as watchmen informing people that 'all was well' after curfew. They also rang their bells when leading local men to deal with fires that might break out. However, their main function was to deliver news or important information in towns. The town crier had to be literate. They often wore a tricorne hat with a feather which could be used as a pen to write messages. These could then be put into a fold in the hat if the town crier had to ride from one town to another. They tended to attract attention by ringing a bell but in Ripon a horn was blown and in Belgium drums were used. The phrase, 'Oyez, oyez' is derived from the Old French verb 'oir' which means 'listen.'

There are two town crier guilds in Britain, the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Town Criers and the Loyal Company of Town Criers. Brenda belongs to both. They organise national competitions for town criers, in addition to the world championships that Brenda has frequently taken part in. Judges use a number of criteria to score the performance of competitors. These include diction, inflection, content, sustained volume, confidence and bearing. Town criers are given topics to speak about such as 'my home town' or 'when I was young.' Brenda read out some examples which were written as rhymes.

Brenda was town crier for Bakewell in 2012 when she welcomed the arrival of the Olympic torch into the town. Now she represents Newmarket. She is one of 26 women out of about 250 town criers in Britain. Her duties are unpaid. She announces the local carnival, takes part in Christmas events, and is called upon for some other occasions during the year but there is not a specific programme. She has never been trained but has learned from experience. It is a role that she enjoys and it has furnished her with many amusing anecdotes for the presentations that she gives.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 October when Geoffrey Robinson will give a talk entitled *Misery and Misfortune – sudden deaths in Suffolk 1800-1850*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy

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