

HERITAGE CIRCLE

David Berwick, Beating the Bounds of Georgian Norwich

The Heritage Circle held its September meeting at Rickinghall Village Hall when David Berwick gave a talk entitled *Beating the Bounds of Georgian Norwich*. This well attended meeting was the first for the group since February 2020.

David has been researching parish boundary markers for many years and a number of these are still visible on buildings in Norwich. In the past defining the boundary of a parish was very significant. It indicated where people should worship but, more importantly where births, marriages and deaths should be recorded. For the church, it was vital to know who should be paying the parish rate which financed its work which included support for the poor until the middle of the 19th Century.

The boundary of a parish was marked by the ceremony of beating the bounds or perambulation. Local men and boys would each have a willow stick or osier which they used to hit various markers, such as stones, trees, walls, farm buildings and streams, on the edge of the parish. Beating the bounds had its origins in pagan times. The Romans had a festival called 'Robigalia' which was later adopted by Christians who organised 'Rogation Days' between the fifth Sunday after Easter and Ascension Day when people would call upon God to give them good weather for their crops. The willow stick was thought to have mystic qualities which would beat the devil out of the parish. This was often quite a raucous event. Parish records indicate that significant sums of money were spent on hospitality for the beaters. The beaters would be given food and beer as they progressed around the boundary. In 1821, 30 men spent two days beating the bounds of a small parish in Norwich while consuming 775 pints of beer!

The local vicar and parish clerk would identify a date for the ceremony and lead the group around the edge of the parish. Choir boys accompanying the beaters were often picked up and banged on the boundary markers, thrown over hedges or dropped into streams. It was intended to be a memorable experience so that the boundary would be known by a pre-literate society which did not possess maps.

Beating the bounds was very important in Norwich as there were 40 parishes in 1800 which had complex boundaries. During the 18th Century engraved stones or metal plaques were put up on buildings and walls to mark parish boundaries. The oldest in Norwich dates from 1710 and is on the Coach and Horses pub in Bethell Street. The metal plaques were either made of cast iron or lead, and frequently contained quite elaborate designs. They have the initials of the church, such as SG for St Giles, the date put in place, and often a design linked to saint the church was named after. St Clement was drowned in a river weighed down by an anchor and so the plaque of the church also has an anchor symbol. The beating of the bounds checked that there had been no encroachment on the parish boundaries by moving these plaques.

During the 19th Century responsibility for care of the poor and the registration of births and deaths was progressively taken over by the state, and so the practice of beating the bounds became less common. The most recent boundary maker in Norwich dates to 1854. The ceremony of beating the bounds has gradually become less common. However, it was revived for a fun, symbolic event for St Clement's Church in 2018.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 27 October at Rickinghall Village Hall when Kate Jewell will give a talk entitled *Bonfires and Bells –Medieval celebrations*. New members

and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net.
Gerry Gurhy