

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Kate Jewell, Bonfires and Bells – Festivals and the Landscape in Medieval Suffolk**

Kate Jewell gave a very interesting, well researched talk entitled *Bonfires and Bells* when she spoke to the October meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. Kate explored medieval festivals and celebrations. She emphasized the importance for medieval people of protecting the landscape as it gave them their livelihood. Festivals and celebrations were linked to the church and religion but often had pagan origins. They tended to be adapted to meet the priority of safeguarding the land.

In pre-Christian times, people thought that places of beauty with water and trees were where the gods lived or visited. They became religious sites as it was possible to communicate with the gods and leave gifts of food or light candles to please them so as to ensure a successful harvest. These practices continued into the Christian era and were a cause of concern for the clergy. However, there are many instances of the use of water for healing in the Bible. Stories of martyred saints, such as St Winefride, often had springs appear at the place where they died. These often attracted many pilgrims seeking help from the saint.

The first festival of the farming year was Plough Sunday which followed the feast of the Epiphany on 6<sup>th</sup> January. Medieval villages often had a communal plough and this would be taken into the church to be blessed so that the ploughing season could be successful. An enormous candle, the plough light, would be lit and placed in a shrine on the road out to the communal fields. This was followed by May Day, a festival celebrating the abundance of nature which has distinctly pagan origins. Young people would go out into the woods to collect flowers, branches and herbs. The girls made garlands for their heads and necks. A maypole was decorated and then danced around. Puritans in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries condemned the festival for the immorality they claimed occurred during it.

Rogationtide is on the Monday to Wednesday before Ascension Day. It began as a period of fasting and praying to ask for good weather to produce an abundant harvest but evolved into the ceremony of beating the bounds where the local vicar would lead men and boys around the parish boundary where bells and sticks would drive away evil spirits from the fields and ensure that everyone knew the parameters of the parish boundary. This knowledge proved to be very important in a legal case in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when a major landowner enclosed the village common of Walberswick. Villagers proved the enclosure was illegal as their fathers and grandfathers had grazed their animals on specific areas of land. Rogationtide was also an opportunity to resolve disputes between parishes who would beat the bounds together and join in prayer. Unfortunately, these events often ended in fights between villages as there was rowdy behaviour and a lot of drinking on these days.

There were festivals linked to the harvests of hay and grain. The feast of St John the Baptist was on 24<sup>th</sup> June. The date, mid-summer's day, shows its pagan origins. Bonfires were lit to purge the air of evil and dried bones were often added to create a stench to drive away demons in the hope of good weather. Lamps and candles were lit, and flowers and herbs were gathered in a celebration of light and nature.

All of these festivals were intended to protect the agricultural landscape and the livelihood of medieval people. The rituals often had pre-Christian elements. They celebrated nature, and evil spirits were scared away by light and noise. This ensured the land would be healthy and the weather favourable.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 24 November at Rickinghall Village Hall when Geoffrey Kay will give a talk about the Festival of Britain of 1951. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at [www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy