

## THE WOOD EAVES

*Jane Cowling*

In the course of my researches for the *Hampshire* volume of drama records for REED, I have been investigating the archives on the Isle of Wight. Although there is still more work to be done there, a number of interesting records, which seem to have escaped the notice of earlier drama historians, have already surfaced, and are therefore presented here *in extenso*. These pertain more to folk customs and gentry entertainment than to early plays, although there is no doubting the dramatic nature of the material. While attention is focussed, and rightly so, on the location of urban drama and theatres, more attention needs to be paid to rural activities, whether in the churchyards or not.

The County Record Office in Newport has in its possession a handsomely bound book, known locally as the *Ligger Book*.<sup>1</sup> In 1567 two of Newport's bailiffs, William Porter and John Serle, copied into this book items of interest or importance from various sources. They finished their work in 1569, and later bailiffs followed their example, although in a somewhat more haphazard fashion, until 1799. The early pages of the volume include a list of town officials and the form of their oaths; a number of line drawings; and several pages detailing ancient usage and custom. In the latter category, on fol. 17<sup>v</sup>, we find accounts of processions at Maytime occurring, not in a casual way as a simple maying, a common riding, or a perambulation of bounds (both of which latter activities would not attract the attention of a REED editor), but as part of the means of affirming rights to common pasture and fee wood. These processions were inextricably bound up with the royal forest of Parkhurst.

Each year, on the Saturday after May Day, the bailiffs appointed a Lord who, with a minstrel and a Vice,<sup>2</sup> rode round Newport, 'a pretie companie of yowthe folowinge them',<sup>3</sup> calling on every burgess to attend the bailiffs the following morning at the 'wood oveis ['eaves, the edge or border of a wood', MED] of Parckhurst the next morninge to fetche some maye. & to obbey olde custome & vsadge of ye towne'. If any burgess had not complied before sunrise on the Sunday morning they were to forfeit a green, that is, a young goose, and a gallon of wine.

The form of the ceremony at the wood eaves, the procession back to Newport, and the rest of the day's activities are laid out very precisely:

... When ye sayd bailives with their companie comburgesses be come to ye wood oveis yen commeth forthe ye keepers of fforest meetinge & salutinge them & offeringe smawle greene bowes to euery of them. signifieng thereby yt ye said bailives and comburges hathe free commen of pasture for all maner their livinge thinges in all ye landes of Parckhurst vnto ye said wood oveis for euer accordinge to their Charter. After ye bowes so deliuered to ye burgesses presentlie (accordinge to auncient custome) ye commen people of ye towne entereth into parckhurst woodes with their hatchettes Sarpes ['pruning hooks', OED] & other edge tooles cuttinge greene bowes to refresh ye streetes placinge them at their doors to give a commodios & pleasant vmbrage to ye howses & comfort to ye people passinge bie. And assone as ye said commen people ar spedde competentlie with greene bowes they retorne home in marchinge arraye the commoners before the keepers folowinge them: next ye minstrell vice & morisse daunceres after ye Sergeantes with their maces. then the bailives & comburges cooples in their degré<sup>4</sup> ye gonnes and chambers goinge off after a triumphant maner. vntill they come to ye towne marckett where they showeth suche pastyme as ye leeke to make & after castinge them selffes in a ringe all departeth except only ye burgesses which with the keepers bringethe ye bailives home where of custome ye keepers breaketh their fast prepared for them. eche of the bailives and burgesses with speede preparinge them selffes to morninge prayer & from thence with ther wifes to ye elder bailives dynner ...

The significance of the Forest of Parkhurst in the lives of the ordinary citizens of the Isle of Wight, as well as those of the gentry, is apparent from many records found in the County Record Office. In the sixteenth century, the Forest was much more extensive than it is now, and one of the reasons for its depletion was the illegal exploitation of the custom and right of the citizens of Newport to take 'sere and broken' wood from the forest at any time of the year, except in May, as granted by successive royal Charters. As the above record goes on to show, the 'vse of cuttyngre greene bowes indureth for ye holie daye eves & mornynge only ye maye moneth & people of custome owght to goe but once a daye'. They also had the right to 'firses and other fewell' from roughly thirty acres of land outside the forest at all times of the year. The trouble arose when the forest keepers employed Newport's

carpenters and cleavers to cut wood in the royal forest, which the keepers then sold locally. They paid the carpenters by allowing them to keep some of the wood which they too sold for their own profit. This illegal practice was made punishable by whipping in 1621. An investigation undertaken by the Mayor and burgesses in this year uncovered a very lucrative trade.<sup>5</sup> The confessions of a number of woodcutters show that, in the summer of 1621 alone, well over one hundred loads of wood and several whole trees had been cut and sold at the instigation of the keepers. Four 'stubbie' trees alone realised the sum of eleven shillings, and a single, more substantial, tree was sold for ten shillings.

This conflation of two customs, in this case a maying and a ritual ceremony asserting local rights, although unusual, is not unique to the Isle of Wight. A similar practice was in operation in two neighbouring Wiltshire villages, Great Wishford and Barford St Martin, where there was an early-seventeenth-century charter giving the inhabitants rights to wood gathering in the nearby Grovely woods from May Day to Whit Monday. The reaffirmation of these rights was celebrated by Great Wishford's inhabitants on Whit Tuesday when they went 'in a daunce' to the Cathedral in Salisbury to make their claim for the following year.<sup>6</sup> In Shaftesbury, Dorset, in the sixteenth century, the water supply came from a spring in Motcombe, which was in the neighbouring Manor of Gillingham. Each year, Shaftesbury's citizens acknowledged their right to use the water by payment of a 'penny loffe, a gallon of ale, and a calve's head, with a pair of gloves' to the bailiff of the manor. They also went to the spring 'with their mynstralls and myrth of game' and danced there.<sup>7</sup>

In Newport there was a separate May Day procession for the ladies, a custom which appears to be unique to the Island. This may have been dictated by the local terrain. The steep journey up Hunny Hill to the outskirts of Parkhurst Forest may have been considered too arduous for the wives to undertake. The alternative destination of Buckbury was much nearer to Newport, albeit still uphill.

Item the custome ys & hathe been owt of mynde after dynner ye said daie ye bailives wifes *with* their sisters ye comburges wifes orderlie in their degree by cooples to walke foorthe to Bugge berie [Buckbury] for custome & pleasure onlye ye Lorde ye morisse daunceres ye vice & mynstrell plainge before them with other pastyme for ye daye prepared. & so to retorne in leeke maner somwhat before eveninge prayer to ye elder bailives howse. Where they bancketeth & so

repaireth to evening prayer & from thence to supper passinge the hole daie in good companie myrthe & honest pleasure ...<sup>8</sup>

The route taken to the wood eaves and brief details of the ceremony and its eventual abolition are all recorded by Sir John Oglander, the deputy Captain of the Island in the 1620s and 1630s, in his Commonplace Books.<sup>9</sup> He notes how depleted the forest had become. In the past, he says, 'it was so thicke a wood that a man myght goe from tree to tree almost 2 miles in lenght'. He also recalls an elaborate feast which took place in the forest in August, 1596. This was on the occasion of the departure for the Royal Court of the then Captain of the Island, Lord Hunsdon, to take up his office as Lord Chamberlain in Queen Elizabeth's household. His guests at the feast included all the gentlemen of the Island, with their wives, who, unlike the participants in Newport's May-games, would not have gone to the forest on foot.

... There wase all ye magnificent expressions that arte Could devyse, The youth of ye Island had framed a stage play which wase ther acted before them all ye Trayned Bandes wayghted on them. Ye fyld peeces wanted not theyre vterance to euery health of which there weare not ffewe there weare ye Cheyfe youth of ye yeomandrye that dawnced ye morreyce (then in request) all kind of musike, and Dawncinge and want of no provisions, in grate abundance was all kinde of wyne, and Cakes. but one thinge is remarkable, the trees weare then exceedinge spredinge and thicke, and euery Seuerall Arme and bodyes of the trees were all stucke ouer with Gilliflowers, in ye Toppe of my Ladye Oake was bifore hand placed obscurely one John Barbor of Nuporte whose office wase after Grace was sayd to power downe sweete walter in to a yewor | There beinge all thinges for it prepared, as If ye Tree in thankfulnes, woold haue sent downe his sape for to wasch withall and so Bleed himselue to death to doo them Service, but this John Barbor of Nuporte ffell fast a sleepe, and Grace beinge sayd ye tree was Barren no waltor Came they stoode vppe expectinge waltor to wasch but none Came, whereupon one with a picke thrust him into ye Briche he then beinge Sensible and suddenly wakinge instead of lettinge ye waltor descend Guttatim ['drop by drop'] fitt for them to wasche he threwe it all downe hastily on theyre hedes So all this fayre shewe ended in a Commerdy with great laughter ...

Oglander adds, at the end of this record, his own account of the reasons for discontinuing Newport's seasonal rituals, so far as they affected Parkhurst Forest:

... One thinge I am willinge to recorde here to futor Adges, which is yat from ye first rysinge of ye hill which is next beyond Honye hill Commonly called ye wood Oues, the trees then grewe so thicke there all alonge ye forrest euen to Gournord Gate and so to ye westward of ye fforrest where ye powd [*pound?*] now standeth, that a Good Climber mygght safely Goe all alonge ye forest from bough to Bowgh. And all this for ye Greatest parte wase destroyed by ye poore of Nuporte and the knauery of ye kepers, for they sowld mutch and wood waxinge deare at Nuporte ye poore at first ffotte [*'fetched?', OED*] for theyre owne vse, then to sell to ye richer sorte insomutch as it now without ye face of a fforrest ...

These ceremonies in, or on the edge of, Parkhurst Forest show how wood, either felled or standing, retained a significance which harks back to the pagan past. In that part of the account concerning the unfortunate John Barbor, we read that 'the tree in thankfullnes, woold haue sent downe his sape for to wasch withall and so Bleed himselfe to death to do them Service'. This notion of the forest as the servant of the local people sits paradoxically with the relationship of the islanders to their master, the King, as owner of the forest. Even the gentry of the Island had appropriated to their own use some of the clumps of trees in the forest at the time of their feast, enclosing some for use as a buttery and a k' itchen and some others of twenty oaks each as spaces for dining. The latter were given names, such as 'My Lady's Oak' and 'Lady Elizabeth's Oak', which seem to have endured in local parlance, according to Oglander. The difference in the use of the forest by the gentry contrasts with that of the local people in that the trees were not damaged or removed by the former, as far as one can tell.

The processions to the wood eaves formally defined the space between Newport and the forest, linking the two locations by ceremony. The formality of the procession, with the civic dignitaries proceeding in couples according to their degree, as even their wives did in their own procession, is an affirmation of status, emphasising the importance placed on rank at the local level. The boundary of the royal forest also marked the limits of the Corporation's authority. It appears that the Captain of the Island, as the monarch's representative, had no role to play in this annual event and hence the symbiotic relationship of the royal forest itself with the townspeople was of

added significance. Eventually, the keepers and woodcutters upset this balance, and retribution followed.

So, in 1621, the annual ceremony at the wood eaves was abolished by an ordinance agreed in the Court of Common Council:<sup>10</sup>

Whearas there hath been great spoiles committed in the Kinges Maiesties fforest of Parkhurst by the poore people of this towne. Who (notwithstanding Honourable Earle of Southampton hath often written and some of them have been punished therefore) doe yet continue in the same disorder / Insomuch that his honor is so highlie displeased with the towne therefore that if the same abuse be not speedilie reformed / the towne is likelie to be much preiudiced therby in their Charter & liberties ffor preventing whereof, and for that the fetching of wood out of the forrest vnder pretence of Custome is found rather to encrease the nomber of idle poore in the towne, then to relieue the poore (they too much relyeng vpon the comfyt thereof, and so breeding vpp their children in ffelenes that they be vnfitt for anie seruice / whoe otherwise might be educated in some honest vocacion to gett their livinges, it is nowe at a Court of Common Counsell holden in the Guildhall of this Burrough this last daie of August Anno Domini 1621 Ordered and decreed by Mr Maior & his whole Companie nowe assembled That the custome and priuiledge of the Maiors going to the wood ovis, and the fetching of boughes & wood out of the forest shalbe vtterlie left off yealded vppe and abolished / And that none of the | Inhabitantes of this Burrough shall from henceforth neither in the moneth of Maye nor at anie other time fetch, or suffer their children or seruautes to fetch anie boughes or wood in the said forrest vnder anie cullor or pretence whatsoeuer without speciall leave of his Maiesties woodwardes and keepers vpon paine to be punished by open whipping according to his Maiesties Lawes /

This order was agreed on and made by vs whose names are heerevnder written and hath been published by open proclamacion in the towne wittnes our handes heervnto sett the daie and yeare aforesaid ...

This ordinance was issued after the Mayor's lengthy investigation earlier the same month, referred to above. No doubt the diligence with which the matter was investigated was due to the representations made by the Earl of Southampton, as Captain of the Island. The proviso that special permission of the King's woodwards and keepers was to be sought for exceptional leave

to cut wood in the forest was probably the Mayor's way of including these Royal servants in the legislation, since it was the keepers themselves who were profiting from the illegal trade, according to the woodcutters' confessions. The keepers had not given evidence at the Mayor's investigation, presumably not coming under his jurisdiction, but under that of the Earl, as the King's representative on the Island. They had consequently avoided the earlier punishments which had been meted out.

In a diocesan letter of May 1585,<sup>11</sup> Bishop Cooper of Winchester had forbidden May-games 'and other vaine pastimes vpon the Sabath Dayes'. He was particularly concerned about the collections made for the repair of churches, only after 'sacrifice to the Devill, with Dronkennes and dauncing, and other vngodly wantonnes', all of which tempted people away from divine service. This letter was addressed not only to churchwardens but to Bailiffs and such-like officers within the diocese. It might be thought that Newport's civic authorities would take an insular attitude to orders emanating from the mainland, but in fact the Borough was not alone in the diocese in taking little or no notice of this prohibition. In Winchester, St John's Church in the Soke was continuing to collect money at Hocktide and at Church Ales and Kingales in the 1590s, during Bishop Cooper's tenure.<sup>12</sup> However, Newport's May-game was a civic rather than a parish occasion. Surviving account records for Newport are scant and no record of money changing hands has survived, although payments were common on such occasions elsewhere. The town's officials and their wives attended both morning and evening prayer after the May-games, although whether the ordinary citizens accompanied them is not recorded. No part of the festivities occurred in the churchyard, another bone of contention with the church authorities. These differences may have led Newport's burgesses to conclude that the Bishop's injunctions did not apply to them. It seems therefore that folk and liturgical elements were not at odds when conducted on a particular social level, although Newport's parish authorities had already been more censorious. In 1573–74 several parishioners were fined for playing unlawful games during divine service,<sup>13</sup> despite other parishioners having actually staged a play inside the church in 1570–71, with resultant damage to the pews.<sup>14</sup>

It is evident from the 1621 investigations and eventual legislation that the main preoccupation of Newport's Mayor and burgesses was with the illegal gathering of wood and consequent despoliation of the forest, and not with any irregularities which might or might not have occurred during the May-games, either then or in earlier years. It seems unlikely that the existence of a separate procession for the wives militated against the sort of licentious

behaviour which seems to have been detected in other towns and parishes on these occasions, or that the good citizens of Newport were always particularly well behaved. In any case, it would be unsafe to assume that the two processions were completely divided by gender. The 'commen people' of the first procession almost certainly consisted of both sexes, as occurred in other parts of the country. It is more likely that the annual confirmation of the town's rights to common pasture and fee wood, signified by the ceremony at the wood eaves, was considered of such singular economic and social importance to the citizens of Newport, emphasising as it did the relationship of the local community with the monarchy as neighbouring landlord, that the jollifications which were attendant upon that ceremony were a mere by-product and not considered a matter for local regulation. Only when the custom of the Mayor and his brethren encountering the King's representatives at the wood eaves became an encouragement to illegal encroachment on the King's forest and a consequent threat to the economic and social balances in the town, was it eventually done away with, taking with it the whole of the May-game. Whether the burgesses and bailiffs retained their right to 'free commen of pasture for all maner their living things', after the abolition of the ceremony, is not recorded.

The records I have quoted show that, at least on the Isle of Wight, there were non-Reformation pressures which caused the breakdown of some REED-type activities, at least when these activities took place under civic rather than parish auspices. The survival of a wealth of records evidencing clerical disapproval of may-games and similar activities gives weight to the theory that the eventual disappearance of such customs was because of such strictures. However, the circumstances surrounding the abolition of Newport's May-games show that socio-economic and political influences should not be ignored when studying the loss of folk and other para-dramatic activities.

*Wessex Medieval Centre, University of Southampton*

## NOTES

I am grateful to Dr Tom Pettitt for his comments on the records on which this article is based, and for directing my attention to instances of similar folk customs elsewhere. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the British Academy in the form of a personal grant, for my research on the Isle of Wight and elsewhere in Hampshire.

1. Isle of Wight County Record Office, NBC/45/2.

JANE COWLING

2. The only other record of a Vice taking part in a May-game is at Thatcham, Berkshire, a fact I have courtesy of Professor Johnston of REED. She speculates that he was the lead male in the morris team, sometimes also called Friar or Fool elsewhere.
3. These would be the 'lustie Guttes' referred to by Stubbes in his celebrated diatribe against such practices: Phillip Stubbes *Anatomy of The Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Time* edited Frederick J. Furnivall (N. Trübner, London, 1877-9) 147-150.
4. See *The Everlasting Circle, English Traditional Verse from the Manuscripts of S. Baring-Gould, H.E.D. Hammond and George B. Gardiner* edited James Reeves (Butler & Tanner, London, 1960) 148-49, for reference to couples processing in the Helston Furry Dance.
5. Isle of Wight County Record Office, Convocation Book, NBC/45/160.
6. Bob Bushaway *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880* (Junction Books, London, 1982) 209-10.
7. Bushaway *By Rite* 94-5.
8. Isle of Wight County Record Office, NBC/45/2 fol 17<sup>v</sup>.
9. See Isle of Wight County Record Office, OG/90/3 fol 34<sup>v</sup> for his account of the procession and ceremony at the wood eaves and Isle of Wight County Record Office /OG/90/4 fol 35<sup>v</sup> for the feast in the forest and his concern about the depredations there.
10. Isle of Wight County Record Office, NBC/45/2 fol 53<sup>v</sup>.
11. Guildford Munitment Room, Loseley Manuscript Cor 3/377. I am grateful to Mr John More-Molyneux of Loseley Park for permission to consult this document.
12. Hampshire Record Office 88M81/W/PW1.
13. Isle of Wight County Record Office, Newport Parish Church, Churchwardens' Accounts, NPT/PR/19, fol 44<sup>r</sup>.
14. Isle of Wight County Record Office, Newport Parish Church, Churchwardens' Accounts, NPT/PR/18, fols 8<sup>r</sup>, 9<sup>r</sup> and 9<sup>v</sup>.