

A Chance to Reflect?

Celebration of The Queen's Jubilee can pave the way for a fresh sense of community, writes local historian Peter Chivers, as he recalls some local customs.

Jubilee Celebrations, planned for June, will be a welcome distraction from the difficult economic and social times we currently experience. Major landmarks in our national history, such as the Jubilee, provide reference points when we can reflect on the past and plan for the future. Did the local customs enjoyed by former Bicester residents foster a greater sense of community than the events that take place today. Bicester has changed significantly in the past few decades. A quiet rural market town has evolved into a residential commuter centre with expanding employment opportunities. Local customs firmly rooted in the agricultural tradition of the area have been lost and not necessarily replaced by modern



Rogation Sunday at Bicester Methodist Church 1959

equivalents. The rhythm of the seasons dictated the pattern of life for past generations. As the year progressed a regular calendar of events unfolded in the town.

The promise of spring and the rebirth of life were celebrated as recently as the 1950s with the 'Blessing of the Plough' at the Methodist Church. A disturbing custom in the eighteenth century was to throw sticks at a tethered cockerel on Shrove Tuesday, possibly a forebear to the present Oxfordshire sport of 'Aunt Sally'. Local historian John Dunkin recorded that children were allowed to walk on the lead roof of St Edburg's Church for a small payment on that day. Young ladies in the town could be lifted in a chair and carried around the town on Easter Monday, the young women could reciprocate the custom on the young men the following day! May Garlands were carried around the town by children in Victorian times and

money collected for their efforts. Maypole dancing, Morris Dancers and 'Jack-in-the-Green' visited every part of the town. To keep the crowds back a man dressed as a 'fool' would wield a stick with a cow's tail and bladder on it! At one time Bicester enjoyed as many as seven annual fairs in the town The 'Bicester Feast', 'Sheep Fair' and 'Harvest Home' were all celebrated during the summer and autumn. Side shows, fair stalls and entertainments formed part of the celebration. Climbing the greasy pole ruined many a suit as youngsters attempted to retrieve a joint of lamb from the top of the pole! Winter traditions brought Bonfire Night celebrations to the town. Extra police were drafted in from Oxford to help

contain the revelries as tar barrels and flaming footballs appeared on the streets. Shopkeepers shuttered their shops to protect them from the crowds. Carol singing provided a source of income for many children at Christmas time. The Bicester Hunt met regularly in the Market Square on Boxing Day until a decade ago. The custom of 'Mumping'

enabled poorer residents to visit the gentry on Boxing Day to seek a charity donation. Money collected was often spent quickly with a visit to the local pub!

Former customs undertaken by residents undoubtedly brought people together, provide a sense of continuity and helped to define their place within the community. The modern Carnival celebrations, the switching on of the Christmas lights and Military Parades amongst other celebrations perform a similar function. The expansion in the size of present Bicester and changing social patterns makes it increasingly difficult to engender the sense of community that a much smaller and closer knit community in former times could celebrate. Traditions and customs change over time yet still have an important role to cement community values and a sense of place. Long may they continue!



Morris Dancing on Market Square 1964



Early Aunt Sally Game



Kings End 1909 Sheep Fair



Market Square 1933 Ox roast