

‘Unite and unite, and let us all unite’: the social role of the calendar custom in English communities

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Abstract:

Many communities in England are home to a calendar custom, a recurring folkloric seasonal event performed by local people. Though some calendar customs, such as well dressing and rushbearing, are found in multiple places and regions, some are unique to the place in which they occur and are subsequently difficult to extricate from the identity of the place. This is useful for those communities seeking to develop their visitor economy, and a number showcase their customs as part of their placemaking communications.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted with the organisers of three calendar customs – Derbyshire’s Castleton Garland Ceremony, which has a long history of performance (Boyes, 1993, p. 106); the Saddleworth Rushcart festival, revived in the 1970s and based on an older tradition; and the Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival, conceived in the 1990s – this chapter explores how calendar customs

can foster a sense of belonging in their host communities and prove a draw to visitors, developing identity, which is key to placemaking and tourism.

England is home to a diverse calendar of vernacular traditions taking place in communities which continue to be performed today even though their original purpose may be unknown or has fallen out of use. Yet historian Ronald Hutton tells us that contemporary society typically favours the ‘celebration of private relationships and the individual lifecycle’ (1996, pp. 426-427), rather than collective, society-wide holidays that our ancestors might have enjoyed. What, then, is the social role of the calendar custom in contemporary English communities, and what do customs contribute to the lives of the people living there and visiting? Do calendar customs have the power to unite our communities and strengthen their tourism appeal? If so, how?

Though there is some discrepancy about what constitutes a calendar custom (Shuel, 1985, p. 6), folklorist Steve Roud’s approach, as outlined in his book, *The English Year*, is adhered to here: the “‘traditional” customs and festivals that take place within communities and are organized by members of that community, and have been around long enough to have been passed on to successive generations’ (2006, p. xiii). This intangible cultural heritage is significant, UNESCO maintains, because it enables and promotes ‘cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization’ ... [encouraging] mutual respect for other ways of life’ (2021). Intangible cultural heritage can also appeal to tourist bodies that wish to promote their places as culturally significant, though it is worth observing that the United Kingdom is not one of the 180 States to have ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003 (*The States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)*, 2021).

An excellent introduction to the nature, content and proliferation of England's calendar customs and, more widely, Britain, can be found at CalendarCustoms.com, an online directory to which users can document their experiences of such events. This contributes to the website's purpose to 'celebrate the diversity of British culture and tradition and to encourage others to support events so that they can continue in perpetuity for future generations to enjoy', but also for practical reasons. CalendarCustoms.com seeks to crowdsource information to enable visitors to 'get to the right place at the right time on the right day and to know what to expect when they arrive' (Shepherd, 2019).

In 1985, photographer, Brian Shuel, in the introduction to his collection of photographs of British calendar customs, noted that one of his motivations for photographing these events was to make them visible to readers, because these 'hotbeds of tradition and ritual ... like to keep it to themselves' (Shuel, 1985, p. 6). But with online interventions, such as CalendarCustoms.com and groups such as 'Traditional Calendar customs and Ceremonies' hosted by Facebook, to which users can also ask questions and disseminate related information to a like-minded community of users (Facebook, 2021), twenty-first century communities may have little opportunity to 'keep it to themselves'.

In making this shared information publicly available and inviting contributions, CalendarCustoms.com actively encourages calendar custom tourism: for interested individuals from outside the host communities to spectate. Given Roud's observation that calendar customs are organised locally, the internet, and in particular social media, has become a vital tool in discovering calendar customs.

The title of this chapter is derived from the traditional 'Cornish May Carol', sung every year at the Padstow May Day celebrations where, according to the local tourist board, 30,000 people gather to welcome the onset of summer, including many former Padstonians who return home for the purpose, (Visit Cornwall, 2020). In 2020, immediately after the

cancellation of the town's celebrations due to the national outbreak of COVID-19, an interview was conducted with a Padstonian heavily involved in the orchestration of May Day despite his permanent residency in Maine, United States. He felt the absence of the custom deeply, and described his and his peers' attempts to observe the day and generate the kind of camaraderie usually experienced during the festivities:

Everybody either sat around and played music and watched old May Day videos or tried to get themselves out of the doldrums, so to speak, by doing something similar to what we would have done normally. I had a lot of video calls with friends and a virtual pint over the video (pers. comm., 5 May 2020).

Though only the viewpoint of one organiser, volunteered for the interview by his community, this insight goes some way to demonstrate the social role a calendar custom can have for its host community. It is thanks to May Day that he, a man living over three thousand miles away, maintains close connections with friends and neighbours and has the occasion to return to his hometown each year. 'I'd skip Christmas and New Year; there's nothing else in the calendar but May Day' (pers. comm., 5 May 2020), he says. The social role of May Day from his perspective, then, is to bring together those with a connection to the town to renew relationships. May Day becomes a 'communal pace-maker [that] recharges the community and the good fellowship of the people of Padstow' (Rowe, 2006, p. 40).

Outsiders are not unwelcome, however: the archivist, collector and documentarian of calendar customs, Doc Rowe, has famously been visiting Padstow's May Day since the 1960s (Rowe, 2006) and as Padstow is known for its tourism, local people understand that tourists will be present. The organiser told me that local people feel 'the contrast of it being such a local custom and a local tradition, and also having so many visitors come to the place', but the significance of the event for the townspeople is such that 'It wouldn't matter if

nobody showed up. I mean, if we could block the entire town off for the day and have it as our day we would' (pers. comm., 5 May 2020). And, as already outlined above, Visit Cornwall makes available May Day information to tourists, recognising the value of the event to the visitor economy: a 'huge and remarkable' (Rowe, 2006, p. 6) custom that is integral to the town's calendric cycle, and a curious, colourful draw.

With qualitative data gleaned from organisers only, not from other residents or spectators, or those that abstain from participation, and from only three customs amid many more, there is much work to be done in ascertaining a representative perception regarding the calendar custom's social role in England. However, by assessing the organisers' intentions in planning and performing their custom, we can begin to understand their perceptions of their communities; synthesise the reported reception to their activities; and understand the reasons behind their compulsion to undertake responsibility, accountability, and significant amounts of unpaid work to organise these customs, or as John Widdowson acknowledges, 'the individual who participates in a given custom for such praiseworthy reasons as his realization that somebody must carry on the tradition, and who therefore unselfishly volunteers to do so' (Widdowson, 1994, p. 25). The diversity of the case studies – one with a long performance history, one revival, and one created more recently – also goes a little towards ameliorating the representation question.

It is also worth noting that although there is not sufficient scope here to interrogate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the three case studies, interviews informing this chapter came at a time when all three customs were unable to take place in their usual guise, or at all. Absence gave the organisers additional time and space to consider the social role of their customs, but at the time of writing it is unclear how the pandemic will affect their future.

The Castleton Garland Ceremony

Each year on 29 May, Royal Oak Day, the streets of Castleton in Derbyshire are crowded with people observing a King and Consort parading on horseback, the King's body obscured by a 'garland', a heavy cage decorated with flowers. Royal Oak Day typically commemorates 1660's restoration of Charles II, but, like the history of many English customs, the origins of the Castleton Garland Ceremony are unclear: whether it is a direct celebration of Royal Oak Day or an amalgam of May garland or even rushbearing traditions continues to be a point of speculation (Roud, 2006, p. 279).

Historically, village bell ringers were responsible for the co-ordination of the event, but later a Garland Committee was formed for this purpose (Hole, 1979, p. 115). An interview with a key organiser about his lifelong involvement in the custom found him keen to stress his village roots. For example, his wife was:

born on her mother's front room carpet in Castleton ... When people say "well, what do you know about Castleton?", I can say [we], together, have lived here 129 years between us (pers. comm., 2 June 2021).

The organiser believes that the Castleton Garland Ceremony is most important to 'the old village families', those who have been resident for many generations. When Garland Day could not take place in its usual guise in 2020 and 2021, the organiser organised a COVID-compliant observation of the event for these old village families as he felt the absence of the custom would be experienced more significantly, 'really deep down'. He struggled to articulate why this might be, saying 'it's something inside, you know, and people get incredibly emotional about it ... I can't describe why it's emotional. It just is' (pers. comm., 2 June 2021). Dorothy Noyes, in her study of La Patum festival in Berga, Catalonia, was told much the same by her

informants during her fieldwork: ‘The Patum was ineffable: there was no one who did not say this...the important thing was the way it made them feel’ (Noyes, 2002, p. 31). This is typical of intangible cultural heritage, where the ‘untouchable, such as knowledge, memories and feelings’ comes into play, meaning that ‘since human activity of the past exists only as tangible evidence, intangible cultural heritage must be tied, in whatever form it takes, to the present’ (Stefano et al, 2012, p. 1).

From the organiser’s comments, it is clear that he, too, believes that the significance of the Garland Ceremony is the way it makes him, and other long-resident families, feel. By opening up this small ceremony to these families only, he equates the resonance of the custom with the longevity of village residence: that continuity and repetition of performance across generations results in a deeper significance than for those families that may have moved to the village more recently. This is unsurprising given the organiser’s own personal connection with the custom, but his description of the changing nature of the village also influences this perception and has affected the performance of the custom itself. Recently, he explained, the constitution was amended so that Castleton boys as well as girls could participate; it has since changed again to enable children from neighbouring villages to take part. These changes have been made to accommodate the fact that the village is home to far fewer young families due to a lack of affordable family housing, and the proliferation of holiday lets and ‘party houses’. For the organiser, then, the custom provides the opportunity for the old village families and for those with direct, familial connection to the village but living elsewhere, the occasion to reunite (pers. comm., 2 June 2021), much like the social role that Padstow’s May Day festivities fulfils.

There is also the apparent popularity of the custom with tourists to consider. Castleton itself has long been a tourist destination, with Georgina Boyes noting the growth of the railway in the late nineteenth century resulting in development of local amenities to better

accommodate greater numbers of visitors (1993, p. 112), a trend which has continued today, illustrated by the organiser's observations of the abundant holiday homes and at least one pub dubbed 'the tourist pub', the one frequented not by residents but only by visitors (pers. comm., 2 June 2021).

Though May customs involving garlands have been widespread across England (Rowe, 2006, p. 36), the Ceremony's status as 'deservedly well known, and very photogenic' (Roud, 2006, p. 278) makes Garland Day an attractive tourist proposition: the opportunity to see something unusual and with a long, documented but not concrete heritage, allowing for speculation and (re)interpretation, in a festive landscape: 'The end of the day often sees visitors and villagers alike dancing a spirited impromptu dance through the streets' (Rowe, 2006, p. 64).

Much like Visit Cornwall disseminating May Day information to prospective visitors, a wealth of promotional material about the Castleton Garland Ceremony is found on Peak District tourism websites (a selection include: DerbyshireUK, 2017; The Peak Hotel, 2021; Peak District National Park, 2021; Peak District Online, 2021), while Marketing Peak District and Derbyshire include events 'as part of our tourism strategy to increase visitor spend in the area' (pers. comm., November 2021). Castleton Visitor Centre, at the epicentre of the village, hosts two exhibition cabinets about the Ceremony. Placed towards the back of the Visitor Centre among other exhibits depicting local agricultural and educational history, the Stuart-style costumes used in the custom are the focus of the displays, while an interpretation panel proffers theories regarding its origins.

In making exhibition material available, the Visitor Centre curators show that the Castleton Garland Ceremony, as performed today and in the past (the interpretation panel is titled 'The Ancient Castleton Garland Ceremony'), is part of village life: that to live in Castleton is to recognise the custom. Boyes states that the cultural shift in appreciation for

calendar customs in the latter part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely courtesy of the rise in folkloristics, has helped to cement the reputation of the Castleton Garland Ceremony as an authentic, and therefore important, survival of old village life. This ‘re-styling’, Boyes confirms, ‘satisfied both local critics and visitors’ (Boyes, 1993, p. 118), and, as a result, the Castleton Garland Ceremony gives credence to the notion that Castleton is a special place, a place which is lived in by generations of dedicated village families with their own expression of village identity *and* one which has tourist worth.

However, the organiser understands that not all local people welcome the event, saying:

There are people who are against it, don’t like it. About 10 days in advance, we put the [road closure orders] up around the village...and people will still come to the barriers and argue (pers. comm., 2 June 2021).

He does not indicate whether these people are the old village families or whether they are more likely to be holidaymakers and newer residents, and there are further questions to be asked here: does the organiser believe that residents without a deep familial connection to the village are unable to make a link between their own contemporary life in the village and the cultural heritage that preceded it? Do newer residents feel excluded from village life because of this apparent focus on longevity? Further research would be required to understand the reasons behind this apparent lack of enthusiasm from some quarters, and whether there are established patterns of engagement that correlate with the demographics of the subjects.

The Saddleworth Rushcart

Greater Manchester’s Saddleworth Rushcart also has its roots in documented history.

Rushbearing is not unique to Saddleworth; numerous other festivals occur across England

today, and historically, it was commonplace (Hole, 1976, p. 172), although how it was conducted differed from region to region. Saddleworth hamlets saw multiple carts built during Wakes celebrations until the tradition was outlawed by police in the early twentieth century due to a fatal accident (Ashworth, 1995; pers. comm., 11 January 2021).

Today's event was revived in 1974-5 by Saddleworth Morris Men in the image of its historical predecessor (Ashworth, 1995). That this is a tradition with a documented history in Saddleworth is of utmost importance to the organisers. One of the organisers elaborates:

When we bring out that cart on Saturday morning, all those guys in those sepia photographs are watching us ... It crackles as we bring it out because we're doing the same thing at the same time of year at the same place that's been done for 200 years (pers. comm., 11 January 2021).

All aspects of the event – cutting the rushes, building the rushcart, riding the cart as the 'jockey', its route around the Saddleworth villages, the dancing – are presided over by the Saddleworth Morris Men, while morris dance sides from across the country are invited to process the cart on the day. It is also often an official event of the Morris Ring (2021), illustrating its significance to the morris dance world. To be involved in the event in a role other than spectator, then, the individual must be part of the morris community. As such, the Saddleworth Rushcart could, therefore, be considered exclusive, its social role designed to satisfy the singular group that governs it, performing an enactment of Saddleworth identity which Saddleworth people can only observe. Put plainly: the custom is performed *for* and *by* the morris dance community, only some of whom will be Saddleworth people.

It is undeniable to the organisers, however, that the audience contributes greatly to the perceived success of the event: 'The warmth you get from the locals, that's what does it for

me' (pers. comm., 11 January 2021). This support from local people, though, the organisers believe, has taken time to establish:

I seem to remember a spell, maybe early nineties, mid-nineties, where I don't think we felt that appreciation. I think to some people we were a bit of a thorn in their side – stopping the traffic in Uppermill, how dare we do that? – but I think there's been a change in recent years (pers. comm., 11 January 2021).

Organisers cite recent, local social media activity to demonstrate the strength of support for the event in light of its absence due to COVID-19, but they are also aware that there is a contingent of local people who do not necessarily feel at home at such an event and leave the area when it takes place (pers. comm., 11 January 2021). The current Rushcart Secretary feels that the Saddleworth Rushcart is not as well attended as other local events, believing morris dance to have less of a 'broad appeal' and local people not knowing, understanding or valuing the event's history and its significance to the area (pers. comm., 5 June 2021).

The organisers indicate that for an individual outside of the morris community to feel part of this custom is to recognise and place value on Saddleworth's history and intangible cultural heritage, stating 'It's in their history. It's part of the fabric of Saddleworth' (pers. comm., 11 January 2021). The social role of the Saddleworth Rushcart, therefore, is to bring the morris community together through the act of reminding Saddleworth people of that heritage. Like the organiser of the Castleton Garland Ceremony, the organisers of the Saddleworth Rushcart find significance in their own connection to the custom, either through familial relationship and living in the area, or simply from participating every year, in their own unbroken tradition (pers. comm., 11 January and 5 June 2021).

Comparable to Castleton's Visitor Centre, information about the Saddleworth Rushcart is housed at Saddleworth Museum but with greater prominence: a replica rushcart, complete with a manikin in full Saddleworth Morris Men kit, occupies the main window of the Museum's ground level on Uppermill High Street. This display is kept up to date with the most recent rushcart banner (at the time of writing, in late 2021, the banner commemorates the life of the Duke of Edinburgh) while inside, interpretation panels offer greater detail about the tradition's history and revival. This exhibition was curated independently of the Saddleworth Morris Men, although the side were informed of its development (pers. comm. 8 October 2021).

Organisers acknowledge that it is the cart itself that audiences like to engage with best, saying, 'They want to see it and they want to touch it. They want to ask about it and they want to nick a rush out of it' (pers. comm. 11 January 2021), and Museum curators have appealed to this curiosity by placing the cart at the centre of Saddleworth's most bustling village. Both the historic tradition and the contemporary event, Museum curators seem to say, is at the very heart of the community.

The Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival

In contrast to both the Castleton Garland Ceremony and the Saddleworth Rushcart, there is no historical precept for the Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival, which occurs every two years on the first Saturday in February. Created in the 1990s, the festival's organisers had a social role in mind for its inception: to bring together the community during the winter months, to counteract 'the most depressing time of year', and to appreciate the local landscape (pers. comm., 25 February 2021). Like calendar customs with a lengthier record of performance, the main event follows a programme established over the years: a noisy, torch-led procession through the village culminates in a nearby arena where a giant Jack Frost puppet,

representing the hardship of winter, goes to battle with the Green Man, the bountiful spring, in a display of ‘iconography that was more accessible to people’, the organisers felt, than real, documented folklore (pers. comm., 25 February 2021).

The organisers have not tried to hide their invention, but the custom has still been ascribed folkloric and even religious meaning by its audience, and it could be the very lack of historical evidence – unlike the documentation that underpins the Castleton Garland Ceremony and the Saddleworth Rushcart – that enables these personal interpretations to flourish. The organisers explained how they have been told of babies born to women who had touched the Green Man the preceding year, or subsequent weather patterns influenced by the event (pers. comm., 25 February 2021). Pagans have observed the festival from a religious perspective and although the organisers are not pagan themselves, they have been invited to reciprocal pagan events (pers. comm., 25 February 2021). This desire to ‘bring a supernatural element to our festival’, the organisers believe, is the need for local people to make a connection to the place in which they live, and to celebrate its uniqueness as the event helps people ‘get a sense of being rooted in a place’ (pers. comm., 25 February 2021). Certainly, with the event held in darkness at the mercy of early February weather, the event fosters an atmosphere of reverence.

In its early days, the organisers sought to involve residents more closely:

I didn’t like the idea of [the custom] being totally imposed upon the community, so we wanted to get more community involvement. I then organised to do workshops in schools and public workshops, which we’ve done ever since (pers. comm., 25 February 2021).

Over the subsequent years, the festival has been adapted in an attempt to nurture an environment in which all residents, regardless of background, skills, or interest, can

contribute and participate. This might be as simple as a family attending a lantern making workshop, or more integral to the organisation of the event itself, with performers, stewards, fundraisers and workshop facilitators sourced directly from the community. Organisers have also set out to welcome individuals that might ordinarily be excluded from taking on responsibility, such as people with learning difficulties or ex-offenders, and are also open to ideas brought forward by the community: when the festival was besieged by heavy snow, for instance, the organisers were delighted when one family created small snow sculptures along the procession route. As such, the organisers believe their inclusive intentions give the festival its essence, stating ‘The festival can embody the people that manage it’ (pers. comm., 25 February 2021).

The intended social role of the Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival, then, appears further reaching and more active than the Castleton Garland Ceremony or the Saddleworth Rushcart: it has a social agenda in mind, and finds ways to include local people through different opportunities. Though there is a practical side to this – the size of the organising team is small at just three people, so it is necessary to bulk up with volunteers – there is also the hope, on the organisers’ part, that community involvement will result in community ownership and resilience of the event.

The festival has also attracted visitors, people ‘that are interested in folklore that will travel’ (pers. comm., 25 February 2021), and audience numbers have swollen from several hundred to over five thousand during the custom’s lifetime. Much like the Castleton Garland Ceremony and the Saddleworth Rushcart, the custom is seen by the organisers to be integral to life in the village, citing two high profile pieces of evidence: the amount of festival memories shared on Marsden social media pages, including by those that no longer live in the village; and the people that have ‘come to live in Marsden virtually on the strength of [the festival]’, including the incumbent Jack Frost puppeteer (pers. comm., 25 February 2021).

‘The fun, the freedom, the families, the fame’ (Shuel, 1985, p. 11): in conclusion

Though the fieldwork sample here is small, these three case studies are different in nature: the village-wide custom with a long performance history; the morris dance community reviving a previously moribund tradition; and a new custom consciously created by residents. As such, the intended social role of the custom differs, too.

For all three customs, promoted public performance encourages local people to have a meaningful, collective experience by witnessing something on their doorstep which does not take place in the same way anywhere else. Organisers of all three customs are keen to stress the uniqueness of their custom, and how this might contribute to place identity: impetus to stay resident in a village, move there in the first place, or appreciate what it means to live there. In the case of the Castleton Garland Ceremony and the Saddleworth Rushcart, this performance has occurred for generations, and the organisers therefore place value on both continuity and a direct connection to the past; that to live in this place is to engage with this custom, as people have done through time. Scott McCabe observed the same in his research into Ashbourne’s Shrovetide football game, stating:

a sense of place is made not through legend or recreation of events, but in a determined effort to continue the event as a means to provide a symbolic system of continuity to the past ... The game is played in the full knowledge that people have for centuries visited the event and the town and will continue to do so for centuries to come (McCabe, 2006 p. 116).

The significance of the past to the contemporary practice is reiterated by the appearance of both customs in local exhibits at Visitor Centres and Museums, demonstrating to visitors the strength of the cultural heritage of the area.

Similarly, those that have a direct connection to the custom but no longer live in its host community may use the custom as an anchor in the calendar to return and reunite with old friends, neighbours and relatives. This is another method of valuing the past, albeit a relatively recent past belonging to an individual or a family unit, and this is certainly not unique to the customs featured here. McCabe, for instance, observed the same in Ashbourne, with “ex-pat” Ashburnians’ returning not to participate or follow the game explicitly, but to catch up with former acquaintances (McCabe, 2006 p. 108), while the Kirkwall Ba’ custom ‘helps to reaffirm social networks’ in the same way, drawing people into the environment and ‘physically displaying the local community’ (Fournier, 2009, p. 194).

Though the Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival is in its infancy in comparison, organiser insights demonstrate that the festival may go on to enjoy similar status and that this process is already underway as people who have left the area share their memories of the festival online and children that attended the first workshops in the 1990s are now returning with their own children (pers. comm., 25 February 2021).

Further research is required to understand whether those that do not know or value the heritage of their home community, or do not equate the activities of forebears as having any relevance to their own contemporary existence, are less likely to find the custom significant.

The Marsden Imbolc Fire Festival’s lack of historical emphasis offers local people freedom to explore what the custom means to them: through folklore, and by contributing their own ideas and skills. This has the potential to broaden the appeal of the custom and its social role while widening active participation, meaning that diverse experiences of living in a place may be considered and valued; inclusivity acknowledged by UNESCO that ‘contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large’ (UNESCO 2021). For a custom to last beyond an ageing committee or singular group, and to

remain a genuine reflection of the contemporary experience of a place, organisers should consider their custom's social role – or risk a custom becoming customary for a select few before relinquishing to the history books.

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