

# Beating The Bounds

Patricia Allen

The tradition of Beating the Bounds has been a custom for many centuries in our Parishes of England and Wales. The ritual goes back to Medieval times when the villagers, headed by the local parish priest and the church wardens, would walk around the parish borders as a way of preserving the folk memory of where the boundaries existed. It was once a magnificent ceremony and, from time immemorial, it was generally considered a day's holiday and an occasion of somewhat noisy hilarity. The choir sang hymns, and the parson read the Gospel for the day under the so-called Gospel Tree. The boys carried willow or birch branches which were used to beat the boundary markers such as stones, gate posts, walls or trees. Occasionally the boys were whipped themselves or thrown into a river or bumped against the stones to impress upon their memories the exact position of a boundary. It was all good fun for the lads who were rewarded with pennies. During the procession money and other gifts were handed out to the needy.

The event was usually held on Ascension Day which is thirty-nine days after Easter. Nowadays this ancient tradition has largely



*Beating the Bounds*

died out due to the advent of modern maps and the dwindling number of churchgoers. But fortunately, there are numerous parishes which are keeping this tradition of Beating the Bounds alive, organising an event which brings people together for an exciting day out in their local parish.

Here is an excerpt from the delightful account of a Beating the Bounds ceremony.

## **Beating The Charlton Bounds**

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The ceremony was performed on Wednesday after an interlude of nearly five years. Meeting at the Church were the Churchwarden, the overseers, many influential inhabitants, and several boys holding banners and flags aloft. The procession started by scaling the walls at the back of the edifice and thence onward to Barton Farm along Frith Road. The operation of climbing the hill by the Copt Hill Cemetery to near its top and then on to the extreme Northern stone in the parade ground was a fatiguing task. This is where the first 'bumping' took place, and where it was felt necessary to fix the memory on the chosen boy.

The party then crossed Fort Burgoyne, went through Castle Hill Farm and down the steep Castle Hill. Then it was across the Waterworks and down Maison Dieu Fields to the Roman Catholic Church. The journey continued along Maison Dieu Road passing through number 15 and across the gardens belonging to Mr Pay and Mrs Mummery and into the stream.

Next the journey went into the High Street

and across Mr Finnis's land where about half the party were 'bumped'!

Tower Hill, Fan Edge and Diggles Tower were visited next and then it was on to Chapel Hill where they converged. The inhabitants hearing the noisy masse turned out of their houses thinking that an enemy invasion was imminent.

The mob of Charltonians passed peacefully through their own territory to much relief and merriment and arrived at the Brook where a rough raft was provided by Messrs. Chitty to carry the participants to the end of their journey.

The perambulation was finished by 3.30pm and by 4pm nearly fifty gentlemen were sat down to a substantial repast at the Falcon Inn at the junction of London Road and Bridge Street which was admirably

and generously provided by Mr George Birch the Landlord.



*The Falcon Hotel*



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