

Beating the Bounds of the Parish: Order, Memory, and Identity in the English Local Community, c. 1500–1700*

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In 1581, the vicar of the Oxfordshire parish of Beckley gave evidence in a church court case over the collection of tithes. John Foxleye remembered that “abowte xxiiij yeares agoe” [i.e. c. 1557], the parishioners of Stanton St John

in their perambulacions ... when they came to a certen meares ende ... wich ... was sayed to be betwene the parishes of Stanton and Woodperie dyd then putt downe their crosse, folde uppe their banners, [and] shutte up their bookes withoute singing or readinge in token that they weare then in Woodperie, [the] parishioners [there] ... commanding [them] so to doe for that they weare oute of their [own] parische.¹

Foxleye was describing a Rogationtide procession, a ceremony popularly known by the later sixteenth century as the “beating of the bounds,” in which the territorial boundaries of the parish were sanctified by a ritual perambulation combining the idioms of custom and religion to make a powerful statement of communal identity and spiritual unity.² Foxleye’s account is especially interesting both for its vivid references to the performance of the ritual—crosses lowered and lifted; banners folded and unfurled; books closed and opened; voices hushed and raised;

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¹ *Oxford Church Courts: Depositions, 1581–1586*, ed. Jack Howard-Drake (Oxford, 1994), pp. 8–9.

² Oxford English Dictionary [OED] s.v. “beat” (*v.*¹ 41) cites Barnaby Googe (1570) as the earliest reference to the idiom of “bounds” being “beaten” during “procession week.”

gospels silenced and spoken—and for its implication that the participants recognized the spatial limits of their collectivity. Although Rogationtide processions were merely “one part of a complex mnemonic system” that perpetuated local customs, perambulations like that at Stanton St John were the principal means by which the local community, in both the geographical and the sociological senses of that problematic term, was defined in early modern England. As a symbolic affirmation of the community of the parish, they had a “truly Durkheimian significance,” representing one of those fleeting moments when society might be observed in the act of describing itself.³

It was customary to perambulate the parish bounds at Rogationtide, the penitential phase of the Easter cycle that included the fifth Sunday after Easter and the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day.⁴ These perambulations, known as “gang days” or “cross days,” had been performed since before the Norman Conquest, and were by the late medieval period firmly entrenched in the culture of corporate Christianity.⁵ Their purpose was to expel from the community those evil spirits thought to be responsible for both contention and sickness; and to propitiate good weather. Those who processed behind the parish cross held aloft by the priest carried hand-bells and banners; chanted passages from the psalms and gospels; stopped at wayside crosses to say prayers for the crops; and sang the litany of the saints. Even in the late medieval period, however, this was not merely a ritual of incorporation, uniting the living and the dead through the authority of intercessory prayer. It also implied exclusion, for the demons which infested earth and air were banished by the objective power of holy words and gestures. Rogationtide perambulation was, furthermore, a ritual of demarcation in which the identity of the parish was defined over against its neighbors and the solidarity of the parishioners was symbolized. There was, accordingly, a strong element of charity and

³ Nicola Whyte, “Landscape, Memory and Custom: Parish identities, c.1550–1700,” *Social History*, 32/2 (2007): 186; Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1979), p. 109. Cf. Phil Withington and Alexandra Shepard, “Introduction: Communities in Early Modern England,” in Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (eds), *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 1–15. For Durkheim, see John Bossy, “Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim,” *Past and Present*, 95 (1982): 3–18; and Patrick Collinson, “Religion, Society and the Historian,” *Journal of Religious History*, 23/2 (1999): 149–67.

⁴ Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 277–87. For the European context, see Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 66–7.

⁵ Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 34–6, 52; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 136–9.

commensality, with food and drink being provided for all those who perambulated. One of the principal symbolic themes of perambulation, moreover, was the restoration of communal harmony and Rogationtide was therefore a traditional time for the settlement of parish disputes.

Rogationtide perambulations, like many other forms of procession, fell foul of the Protestant reformers. As early as 1531, William Tyndale condemned the “saying of the gospels to the corn in the field in the procession week, that it should the better grow;” and in 1540, Richard Taverner fulminated against “the rage and furour of those uplandyshe processions and gangynges about” spent “in ryottinge and in bely chere,” during which “the banners and badges of the crosse” were “unreverently handled and abused;” and complained that parishioners took part “rather to set out and shew themselves and to passe the tyme wyth vayne & vnprofytable tales and mery fables than to make generall supplication to God.” By 1564, John Goose of West Tilbury (Essex) could point to a boundary stone and rhetorically ask those who beat it whether there was “an idol here to be worshipped that you have a drinking here?” In 1571, the Dorset minister William Kethe criticized the traditional belief that any sins committed between Easter and Whitsuntide could be “fullye discharged by the pleasaunt walkes and processions in the rogyng, I should say, Rogation Weeke.” By 1634, the separatist John Canne was arguing that “the observation of Gang days” was “wholly popish, invented by Hillarius the great Antichrist, in the year 444.”⁶ To the reformers then, Rogationtide “cross days” were both archaic and superstitious.

It is accordingly surprising that the Edwardian reforms of 1547 did not explicitly outlaw perambulations, especially since they might easily be associated with those other processions condemned because they had ostensibly caused “contention and strife” among the people “by reason of fond courtesy and challenging of places;” and prevented the “edifying” of parishioners who could not hear what was said or sung.⁷ On the contrary, the long-term survival of the ceremony was assured by the inclusion of a Rogationtide sermon in the Elizabethan book of homilies of 1563, though it had been conspicuous by its absence from

⁶ William Tyndale, *Answer to Thomas More's Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1850), pp. 61–2; [Richard Taverner,] *Epistles and Gospelles with a Brief Postil ... from Easter tyll Advent* (London, 1540), fol. xxxii; E.G. Emmison, “Tithes, Perambulations and Sabbath-Breach in Elizabethan Essex,” in Frederick Emmison and Roy Stephens (eds), *Tribute to an Antiquary: Essays Presented to Marc Fitch By Some of His Friends* (London, 1976), p. 186; William Kethe, *A Sermon Made at Blanford Foru[m]* (London, 1571), p. 19; John Canne, *A Necessitie of Separation from the Church of England* (London, 1634), p. 111.

⁷ *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, eds W.H. Frere and W.M. Kennedy (3 vols, London, 1908–10), 2:116, 3:14.

the Edwardian volume of 1547.⁸ The Elizabethan Injunctions “for the suppression of superstition and the planting of true religion,” issued in 1559, offered a rationale for its continuation. The Eighteenth Injunction stipulated that Rogationtide perambulation was to be retained in order that parishioners might give thanks to God and preserve knowledge of their boundaries.⁹ The bounds were only to be walked, however, by the curate and by “the substantialest men of the parish” who, without the use of banners or bells, were to stop at “certain convenient places;” to “admonish the people” to thank God “for the increase and abundance of His fruits upon the face of the earth;” to implore divine mercy; and to ask for a blessing on the fields. By 1560, Edmund Grindal, Bishop of London, was declaring that his fellow reformers had radically transformed the Rogationtide ritual so that it was no longer “a procession, but a perambulation,” a distinction which implied a far greater difference than might at first be appreciated.¹⁰

It was once thought that although it was the only procession to survive the Reformation, Rogationtide perambulation experienced a long, slow period of decline from the mid-sixteenth century onward. Stripped of its sacred associations, it was argued, the ritual was overwhelmed by processes of agrarian change, and especially by the obstruction of the traditional route around the boundaries which was often caused by the enclosure of open fields and common wastes.¹¹ More detailed research, especially in the accounts of the churchwardens who often funded perambulations, has, however, revealed a more complex pattern, in which continuity is the dominant motif. In the short term, the destruction (under the terms of episcopal instructions of February 1548) of those churchyard and wayside crosses which had been the locus for the blessing of crops and the exorcising of demons did severely curtail the number and nature of perambulations.¹² The Marian counter-reformation encouraged their revival, however, and payments for Rogationtide hospitality and for the

⁸ “An Homely for the Dayes of Rogation Weke,” in *The Seconde Tome of Homelyes* (London, 1563), sigs. 233v–55r. Cf. *Certayne Sermons, or Homelies Appoynted by the Kynges Maiestie, to bee Declared and Redde, by all Persons, Vicars, or Curates, euery Sodaye in their Churches, where they haue cure* (London, 1547).

⁹ *Visitation Articles*, Frere and Kennedy, 3:164, 264.

¹⁰ *The Remaines of Edmund Grindal*, ed. William Nicholson (Cambridge, 1859), p. 240.

¹¹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* ([1971] London, 1997 edn), pp. 62–5; David Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 77–81, 90–91, 96–97.

¹² Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, Volume I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford, 1988), p. 263 fn. 25.

restoring of parish banners appear in the records of cities, market towns, and villages alike during the mid-1550s. The records of Elizabethan and Stuart Episcopal visitations, and in particular the frequency with which parishioners complained about the failure of their clergy or churchwardens to organize the beating of the bounds, suggest that Rogationtide customs were widely respected well into the seventeenth century.

This positive impression is confirmed by late Elizabethan and early Stuart churchwardens' accounts which show the increasing frequency of payments associated with Rogationtide, especially for feasting, for bell-ringing, and even for re-painting boundary markers. The puritans who dominated the republican regime of the 1650s, furthermore, seem to have been ambivalent about perambulations, not least because even they could see the utility of teaching youngsters the location of the parish boundaries. The extant financial records of parishes during the interregnum accordingly show the continuation of Rogationtide payments in towns and villages alike. After the Restoration, the ritual became more elaborate still, with urban parishes paying for white sticks with which boundary stones, and perhaps also the children who were expected to remember their whereabouts, could be beaten, and rural parishes even providing pipes and tobacco for those who walked.¹³ Reports of the death of Rogationtide seem, therefore, to have been exaggerated, since the financial records of the early modern parish demonstrate the gradual evolution of the early Tudor "cross-days" into the late Stuart "beating of the bounds" which were to prove so fundamental to the legitimation of parish identities into the eighteenth century and beyond.¹⁴

Rogationtide perambulations therefore continued throughout the early modern period, and their place in the ritual year both before and after the Reformation has been convincingly demonstrated.¹⁵ It is remarkable, however, that the social and cultural significance of the beating of the bounds has not been analyzed.¹⁶ This essay therefore represents a

¹³ Hutton, *Merry England*, pp. 85, 99, 142–3, 175–6, 217–18, 247.

¹⁴ Bob Bushaway, "Rite, Legitimation and Community in Southern England, 1700–1850: The Ideology of Custom," in Barry Stapleton (ed.), *Conflict and Community in Southern England: Essays in the History of Rural and Urban Labour From Medieval to Modern Times* (Gloucester, 1992), pp. 110–34; David Fletcher, "The Parish Boundary: A Social Phenomenon in Hanoverian England," *Rural History*, 14/2 (2003): 184–6; K.D.M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Belonging in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 37–40.

¹⁵ David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (Berkeley, 1989), pp. 23–4, 40, 42, 47, 90, 197; Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, pp. 277–87.

¹⁶ Although Edwin Davenport, "Elizabethan England's Other Reformation of Manners," *English Literary History*, 63/2 (1996): 260–67 discusses early Elizabethan

preliminary attempt to tease out the changing meaning of Rogationtide perambulations for those who participated in them. It seeks to answer three sets of questions, grouped together under the general themes of order, memory and identity: first, who perambulated, and at whose expense?; second, why did they perambulate?; and third, what were the implications of perambulation for the definition of community?

Order

How were Rogationtide perambulations organized? This question in itself begs others about the nature and scale of participation; about the allocation of resources; and about hierarchies of power and authority in the local community.¹⁷ To turn first to the issue of participation, it is clear that before the Reformation all the parishioners—both men and women—were expected to process, and that those who absented themselves were regarded as unneighborly.¹⁸ Participation was sometimes subsidized at parish expense, since nominal payments to those prestigious parishioners who carried banners during the perambulation, as at St Michael's Bath, All Saints Bristol, St Peter and Paul Bassingbourn (Cambridgeshire), St Mary's Dover, or St Edmund's Salisbury, were not unusual.¹⁹ As we have seen, all this changed at the Reformation. The Elizabethan injunctions of 1559 circumscribed the ritual: the bounds were to be walked only by "the substantialest men of the parish," an exclusive formula which indicated the chief *male* inhabitants.²⁰ The ecclesiastical hierarchy accordingly attempted to police participation. Archbishop Grindal's 1571 articles for

Rogationtide in some detail.

¹⁷ Keith Wrightson, "The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England," in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle (eds), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996), pp. 10–46; R.W. Scribner, "Communities and the Nature of Power," in R.W. Scribner (ed.), *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. I: 1450–1630* (London, 1996), pp. 291–325.

¹⁸ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985), p. 73; *The Kentish Visitation of Archbishop William Warham and His Deputies, 1511–12*, ed. K.L. Wood-Legh (Kent Archaeological Society: Kent Records 24, 1984), p. 207.

¹⁹ Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, 2001), p. 190; Beat Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400–1560* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 98; *The Churchwardens' Book of Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire 1496–c. 1540*, ed. David Dymond (Cambridgeshire Record Society 17, 2004), pp. 37, 47, 58, 87; *Churchwardens' Accounts from the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J.C. Cox (London, 1913), pp. 71–2, 263.

²⁰ *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Volume II, 1553–1587*, eds P.L. Hughes and J.F. Larkin (New Haven, 1969), p. 122.

the province of York used the standard rubric by specifying that only “the parson, vicar or curate, churchwardens and certain of the substantial men of the parish” were to perambulate.²¹ Other visitation articles elaborated on the terms of the 1559 injunction and consequently revealed additional official priorities about Rogationtide. The most important of these related to age. The archdeacon of Berkshire insisted in 1615 that boundaries be walked by ministers “with a sufficient number of the parishioners of all sorts, aswel of the elder as younger sort, for the better knowledge of the circuits and bounds of the parish.”²² In requiring that both young and old were to participate, the archdeacon emphasized the pedagogical function of perambulation in perpetuating knowledge of boundaries from one generation to the next. Other bishops were, moreover, concerned that those very boundaries should be strengthened in the interest of controlling the costs of Rogationtide hospitality. Thus Bishop Howson of Oxford stipulated in 1628 that the numbers walking be “restrained and limited by the minister and the church-wardens and some other substantial men of your parish,” in order that perambulations “be not overburthensome,” “especially with out-commers from other parishes.”²³ Like wakes and church-ales, it was feared that Rogationtide festivities might tempt the poor of adjacent parishes to take advantage of hospitality.²⁴ If parish elites were increasingly reluctant “to pay for the riff-raff of the village to drink themselves into a frenzy,” they were even more hostile to the prospect of strangers getting drunk at their expense.²⁵ By definition, therefore, perambulations were designed to promote spatial awareness of the boundaries of the parish community, and were exclusive occasions.

Restrictions on participation were not, moreover, merely social-structural; they were also geographical and (most of all) gendered. In contrast to the pre-Reformation inclusion of both men and women, several Elizabethan bishops explicitly excluded women from perambulations. Bishop Bentham of Coventry insisted in 1561, for instance, that no “wemen [were] to go abowte but men” only; and in 1575 Archbishop Parker was asking the clergy of the diocese of Winchester whether they still allowed

²¹ *Visitation Articles*, Frere and Kennedy, 3:264.

²² *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Early Stuart Church*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (2 vols, Church of England Record Society 1 and 5, 1994, 1998), 1:132.

²³ *Visitation Articles*, Fincham, 1:197–8.

²⁴ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses: Contayninge a Discoverie of Vices in a Verie Famous Island Called Ailgnia, Made Dialogue-wise* (London, 1583), sigs. M6r– M7v; and cf. Steve Hindle, “Custom, Festival and Protest in Early Modern England: The Little Budworth Wakes, St Peter’s Day, 1596,” *Rural History*, 6/2 (1995): 155–78.

²⁵ Thomas, *Religion*, p. 65.

women to “go about with them” at Rogationtide.²⁶ In descriptions of post-Reformation perambulations, indeed, women are almost invisible, and where they were present, their activities provoked concern. Thus the minister of Stisted (Essex) fell foul of the ecclesiastical authorities in 1561 because he “suffre[d] women to pray in the fields in the rogacion weke,” though it is unclear whether greater offence was caused by their gender or by their devotion.²⁷

Measuring the social status of those who perambulated is similarly fraught with difficulty, not least because participation lists are relatively rare. Where certificates of attendance do survive, as at Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire) for 1672, they have been correlated with taxation records to suggest that the propertyless were excluded in practice as well as in theory.²⁸ The rate of participation among the better sort of the parish seems to have varied considerably. Those who perambulated the bounds of St Oswalds Chester in the 1610s, for example, included not only the mayor and the aldermen, but even the cathedral clergy and choir. At Brackley (Northamptonshire) in 1656, the procession included “the vicar, the mayor, the deputy steward of the Ellesmere estate, the late mayor and others.” In early seventeenth-century St Martin’s-in-the-Fields (Westminster), by contrast, none of the gentry residents seem to have participated.²⁹ The ministers of numerous west-country parishes complained in the 1620s and 1630s that they could not get their parishioners to perambulate with them, a tendency which might well imply the withdrawal of the middling sort. More impressionistic evidence suggests that householders of middle rank were active in perambulations at Tredington (Gloucestershire) as late as 1714.³⁰ The enormous range of local variation therefore militates against easy generalization about trends in the social profile of participation.

Rogationtide was, nonetheless, clearly an occasion on which hierarchies of status and (especially) of age were insisted upon. When the minister of Christon (Somerset) noted the names of those (exclusively male) inhabitants who had perambulated in 1718, for example, he

²⁶ Rosemary O’Day, “Thomas Bentham: A Case-Study of the Problems of the Early Elizabethan Episcopate,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 23/2 (1972): 145; *Visitation Articles*, Frere and Kennedy, 3:378.

²⁷ Brett Usher, “The Deanery of Bocking and the Demise of the Vestiarian Controversy,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 52/3 (2001): 441.

²⁸ Daniel C. Beaver, *Parish Communities and Religious Conflict in the Vale of Gloucester, 1590–1690* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 33–4, 355, 441.

²⁹ Carl Estabrook, “Ritual, Space and Authority in Seventeenth-Century English Cathedral Cities,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32/4 (2002): 604; Northamptonshire Record Office, Northampton, E(B) 647; Julia F. Merritt, *The Social World of Early Modern Westminster: Abbey, Court and Community, 1525–1640* (Manchester, 2005), p. 211.

³⁰ Underdown, *Revel*, p. 81.

arranged his list in age groups.³¹ Children, especially older boys, seem to have played a particularly prominent role almost everywhere. In 1619, as many as 150 boys were expected to perambulate the boundaries of St Martin's-in-the-Fields.³² Although perambulation was supposed to be an educational experience, inculcating knowledge of parish bounds in the young, the presence of large numbers of lads might create an atmosphere of boisterousness, perhaps even violence. This probably explains Bishop Grindal's concern, expressed in 1560, about the unnecessary perambulation of a "multitude of light young folks."³³ Correlation of the stated age of deponents in tithe disputes with their estimates of how far back in time they could remember Rogationtide festivities suggests, in fact, that boys tended to be youths (in their teens) rather than mere children when they first joined the perambulation, which itself constituted a rite of passage toward full adult membership of the community.³⁴

Walking the entire length of the parish boundary might take up to three days, and it could be thirsty work. Trudging round the 11-mile boundary of Bassingbourn took two days, and ale was invariably provided on the second day. The distance covered at Purton (Wiltshire) was almost 20 miles, punctuated by no fewer than 27 readings from the gospel. Those who completed it certainly deserved the cakes and ale they got along the way.³⁵ So how was such Rogationtide commensality financed? In the early sixteenth century, refreshment was provided either by the parish; or by the farmers who owned properties on the boundary; or by some combination of the two. Thus from the late 1470s, the churchwardens of Tilney (Norfolk) spent up to two shillings a year "for bread and dryncke in the perambulacion days." At Clare (Suffolk) in the 1520s, the parish provided "ale or drinkings" after the vicar read a gospel at a tree at the "utrtermoste parte of their bounds." Those participating in the three-day tramp round the 21-mile boundary of nearby Long Melford in the 1540s had not only a "drinking and a dinner" at parish expense on the village green, but also "a breakfast with butter & cheese" at the parsonage, "a drinking at Mr Clopton's by Kentwell," and "a drinking at Melford Hall." John Shonke, a 68-year-old turner from Havering (Essex) was able to recall in 1604 all the places where the company of which he had been part as a boy had paused

³¹ Somerset Archives and Record Service, Taunton, D/Pchris/2/1/2, unfol.

³² Merritt, *Early Modern Westminster*, p. 211.

³³ *Remaines of Edmund Grindal*, Nicholson, p. 240.

³⁴ Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), p. 224.

³⁵ *The Churchwardens' Book of Bassingbourn*, Dymond, pp. lviii, 47; T.S. Maskeleyne, "Perambulation of Purton, 1733," *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 40 (1918): 119–28.

to have “a drinking,” occasionally including cheese and cakes. On such occasions, sacramental liturgy must have been very difficult to distinguish from dinner.³⁶ Even so, these locations were remembered precisely because commensality was often provided at contentious points along boundaries. Both before and after the Reformation, churchwardens’ contributions to these refreshments seem to have been more likely in urban areas, whereas in the countryside prosperous parishioners themselves shouldered the burden, perhaps because they were conscious that it was their crops for which prayers were being offered.³⁷

Indeed, parish elites long used the occasion of perambulation to exercise their social responsibilities of charity, hospitality and patronage.³⁸ Those perambulating St Martin’s-in-the-Fields (Westminster) in the early seventeenth century, for instance, seem customarily to have stopped for refreshment at the farm of a wealthy tailor. Down to the early 1620s, a substantial farmer of Yapton (Sussex) was “wont to give a dynner upon every Thursday in the Rogacion Weeke to the gretest number of the people of the parrishe.” The custom in Castle Camps (Cambridge) was that “the company”—42 all told, including both men and boys—was “entertained at Westoe with bread and cheese and ale” and “in Skillet’s Fields with bread and cake and cheese and ale by the Minister.” In 1683, the minister of Ringmer (Sussex) similarly recorded the details of the entertainments which took place at the end of each of the three days it took to perambulate. John Garnett, rector of Sigglethorpe (East Yorkshire), noted in 1714 that Mr Whiting’s farm and Mr Taylor’s farm had contributed 6s 8d and 3s 4d respectively to the costs of hospitality “as by custom they are obliged to when a perambulation is there.”³⁹

So entrenched was the practice of Rogationtide commensality that parishioners came to expect hospitality during and after the perambulation,

³⁶ *The Transcript of the Churchwardens’ Accounts of the Parish of Tilney all All Saints, Norfolk, 1443–1589*, ed. A.D. Stallard (London, 1922), pp. 48, 238; Duffy, *Altars*, p. 137; *The Spoil of Melford Church: The Reformation in a Suffolk Parish*, eds David Dymond and Clive Paine (Ipswich, 1992), pp. 6–7; Marjorie K. McIntosh, *A Community Transformed: the Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–1620* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 202; John Bossy, “The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe,” *Past and Present*, 47 (1970): 61.

³⁷ Hutton, *Merry England*, p. 34; French, *People of the Parish*, p. 190.

³⁸ Felicity Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 369–70.

³⁹ Merritt, *Early Modern Westminster*, p. 210; *Before the Bawdy Court: Selections from Church Court and Other Records Relating to the Correction of Moral offences in England, Scotland and New England, 1300–1800*, ed. Paul Hair (London, 1972), pp. 90–91; Cambridgeshire County Record Office, Cambridge, P34/1/2, unfol.; East Sussex Record Office, Lewes, PAR461/1/1/5, fos 44v–45r; East Riding of Yorkshire Archive Service, Beverley, PE144/T38, unfol.

and complained bitterly when the tradition was abrogated.⁴⁰ Those who perambulated regarded themselves as entitled to the provision of food and drink by the churchwardens and especially by the minister, and the parish officers in turn expected that the chief inhabitants of the parish would help them meet the costs. Thus the churchwardens of Yapton (Sussex) presented one parishioner in 1621 for abdicating his charitable responsibilities so that now there was “nothing given for that farm” at Rogationtide. The Jacobean churchwardens of Cropredy (Oxfordshire) similarly criticized three substantial parishioners for failing to “allow in rogation weeke such charges by drinkings” as had “bene before accustomed.” At Barkham (Wiltshire) in 1623 the minister castigated the substantial residents for refusing to “provide drinkings for them at certain places where the gospels are usually read.”⁴¹

Over time, rising costs provoked the redefinition of the hospitality associated with perambulation. Clergymen were particularly concerned by the inflation of Rogationtide expenditure, which they felt amounted to little more than petty extortion by the poor, and especially by their children. Richard Willis, rector of Clayworth (Nottinghamshire), noted in 1701 that perambulation costs, which had customarily been shared among all the substantial inhabitants, now fell exclusively to him. He was bothered less by the expenditure (the Rogationtide treat typically cost him less than 11 shillings) than by the principle that the custom was “expected as a right” from the clergyman just as it began to wax cold among his neighbors.⁴² Desire to restrict costs probably explains the growing circumscription of commensality, which was evident from the early seventeenth century. Various deflationary strategies were adopted. Parish officers might reduce the frequency of perambulation, as they did at St Martin’s-in-the-Fields in 1622, when it was decided that the full circuit was only to be walked once every three years; or in South Lynn (Norfolk) in 1675 when beating the bounds every other year was thought sufficient. Alternatively, they might stipulate maximum expenditure on cakes and ale, as at St Mary De Crypt (Gloucestershire) in 1667; or at West Malling (Kent) in 1700, when it was insisted that only 20s was to be spent when “the Parish shall go aprocessioning.” Elsewhere, tight limits were set on entitlement to hospitality. Rogationtide supper was provided only for the mayor and constables of Canterbury from 1618; only for the vestrymen

⁴⁰ Heal, *Hospitality*, pp. 220, 290.

⁴¹ *Before the Bawdy Court*, Hair, pp. 90–91; *Churchwardens’ Presentments for the Oxfordshire Peculiars of Dorchester, Thame and Banbury*, ed. S.A. Peyton (Oxford Record Society, 60, 1928), p. 245; Underdown, *Revel*, p. 81.

⁴² *The Rector’s Book: Clayworth, Nottinghamshire*, eds H. Gill and E.C. Guilford (Nottingham, 1910), p. 143.

of St Martin's-in-the-Fields from 1622; and only for the "gentlemen of the parish" at Deptford (Middlesex) from 1684.⁴³ There is considerable evidence, therefore, that Rogationtide hospitality was becoming more exclusive over the course of the seventeenth century.

The centrality of food and drink to the rituals of perambulation cannot, however, be exaggerated. Feasting after a period of fasting symbolized the omnipotence of a God whose provision of plenty could only be encouraged by a ceremony of thanksgiving; and commensality was an act both of charity and of patronage. The fact that Rogationtide hospitality was increasingly confined to more restricted social groups is, moreover, emblematic of the growth of social solidarity among those local elites who increasingly regarded themselves not merely as representatives of the parish community, but actually as the whole body of that community. By the late seventeenth century, the select groups who were permitted to dine after perambulating had effectively appropriated to themselves the identity of the community. But if abstinence and consumption was one motif associated with Rogationtide, age and youth was another, and it is to the transmission of social memory which we will now turn.

Memory

Rogationtide ceremonies conserved the boundaries of parochial space which had been defined time out of mind and therefore represented a "repetitive rite of communication between the young, the aged and the dead."⁴⁴ Perambulation was the means by which local historical and geographical knowledge was perpetuated, functioning as a secular catechism through which the young were taught the spatial limits of their rights and duties as inhabitants of a particular parish.

Parish boundaries had to be commemorated precisely because they were neither marked in the landscape nor recorded on paper. Indeed, there was little need for boundary stones in the fields of rural England until the sixteenth century. Only from the 1520s do village bylaws insist on the provision of markers of wood or stone to indicate where boundaries actually lay. By the 1580s, however, stakes were being used in Ampney

⁴³ Merritt, *Early Modern Westminster*, p. 212; Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, PD607/101, unfol.; Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester (hereafter GRO), P154/11 CW 2/2, unfol.; Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone (hereafter CKS), P243/4/1, unfol.; Cressy, *Bonfires*, p. 24; *Churchwardens' Accounts*, Cox, p. 264.

⁴⁴ Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003), p. 305.

(Wiltshire) and mere-stones in Elmley Castle (Worcestershire).⁴⁵ It is hardly coincidental that this was precisely the period in which the first maps of parish boundaries were drawn up by surveyors acting on behalf of those landowners who were exploiting their assets more assiduously.⁴⁶ The emergence of man-made boundary markers and the maps on which their location was inscribed did not, however, happen overnight, and for many centuries there was a widespread reliance on natural rather than man-made markers. Indeed, parish officers themselves rarely paid for the provision of boundary markers. Only very occasionally did the desire for a more permanent memorial justify parish expense, on “brasse plates” to indicate the boundary of St Michael Cornhill (London) in 1610, for example; or on “three stones for the bounds” at Loose (Kent) in 1618.⁴⁷ By and large, however, landmarks were natural rather than man-made. This was bound to necessitate some flexibility as it did in Layston (Hertfordshire), when Thomas Heton noted in 1707 that the oak where “we were wont to sing a psalm” was “lately cut down” but that they used “another great tree hard by the place where it stood.”⁴⁸ Trees, streams, and hedgerows were therefore as prominent as mere-stones and stakes on the mental maps of those parishioners who were custodians of local knowledge.

The location of the ancient boundaries naturally lay in the memories of the oldest inhabitants, and the longevity of their knowledge was crucial. When the minister of Brimpsfield (Gloucestershire) recorded the perambulation in 1726, for instance, he noted in particular the presence of 86-year-old Francis Hayward, and explained that together they had “marked the same places as was done 80 years now in remembrance.”⁴⁹ One of the three laymen who certified the perambulation of Layston (Hertfordshire) in 1637 remembered practices stretching back 55 years, sufficient to pre-date the written perambulation then in use.⁵⁰ It was accordingly crucial to secure the testimony of the very aged before their knowledge of bounds died with them. In a dispute between three Essex parishes in 1660, 88-year-old Lawrence Searle even declared his memory

⁴⁵ W.O. Ault, *Open-Field Farming in Medieval England: A Study of Village By-Laws* (London, 1972), p. 54.

⁴⁶ P.D.A. Harvey, “English Estate Maps: Their Early History and Their Use as Historical Evidence,” in David Buisseret (ed.), *Rural Images: Estate Maps in the Old and New Worlds* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 27–62.

⁴⁷ Claire S. Schen, *Charity and Lay Piety in Reformation London* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 144; CKS, P233/5/1, unfol.

⁴⁸ “*This Little Commonwealth: Layston Parish Memorandum Book, 1607–c.1650 & 1704–c.1747*,” eds Heather Falvey and Steve Hindle (Hertfordshire Record Publications 19, Hertford, 2003), p. 155; cf. Whyte, “Landscape, Memory and Custom,” pp. 170–71.

⁴⁹ GRO, P58/IN 1/4, unfol.

⁵⁰ *Layston Parish Memorandum Book*, Falvey and Hindle, p. 158.

of the boundaries of Northweald on his deathbed.⁵¹ Cumulatively, those old men who perambulated had collective ownership of centuries of local knowledge and they were accorded ritual authority on these occasions precisely because the great breadth of their potential memory span might help inculcate duties of remembrance amongst the young.⁵² Indeed, if the aged refused to participate, the minister might cancel the perambulation altogether, as did the parson of Huggate (Yorkshire East Riding) in 1578 when he claimed that “the auntyente men of the parishe dyd not offer them selfs” at Rogationtide.⁵³ The presence of the young, however, was equally crucial. At Cuckfield (Sussex) the perambulation took three days, so it was decided that adults need only walk the section closest to their own homes. All the boys, however, were expected to stay the whole course.⁵⁴ Indeed, some perambulations, such as that at Purton, were so demanding that only the young could possibly hope to complete the whole circuit. At Wormingford (Essex), the rector defended his failure to perambulate the bounds in 1590 on the grounds that although he and his wardens were prepared to process, “the youth” were “not coming to go.”⁵⁵

The process of memorialization might be a simple matter of conversation between boys and parish elders, although rather more physical pedagogical techniques were not uncommon. At St Mathew Friday Street London in the 1620s and 1630s, the churchwardens distributed gifts of figs, raisins, and almonds to the boys who perambulated. Similar treats were handed out at St Benet Sherehog (London) in the late seventeenth century. At Purton, the boys had money thrown to them at each of three significant trees along the parish boundary.⁵⁶ Encouraging participation was, however, one thing, inculcating memory entirely another. Indeed, the means of memory might combine the tangible and the symbolic. During Elizabethan Rogationtide processions at All Saints Canterbury, the parishioners marked the house of one parishioner with “a great letter Roman A” to signify that it lay within the parish and was therefore liable for tithes. In Elizabethan Norfolk, the parishioners of Burnham Thorpe and Burnham Overly customarily piled cairns of stones on either side of the path that marked the boundary between them to indicate mutual recognition of its significance. Seventy-five-year-old Richard Johnson noted in 1713 that for “above 65 years” he had perambulated “the out bounds” of Pertenhall (Bedfordshire), and

⁵¹ Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office, Stratford, DR37/2/Box 122/10.

⁵² Shepard, *Manhood*, p. 224.

⁵³ *Tudor Parish Documents of the Diocese of York*, ed. J.S. Purvis (Cambridge, 1948), p. 194.

⁵⁴ Hutton, *Merry England*, pp. 247–8.

⁵⁵ Maskeleyne, “Purton, 1733”; Emmison, “Tithe,” p. 184.

⁵⁶ Hutton, *Merry England*, pp. 182, 247; Maskeleyne, “Purton,” p. 124.

remembered that the parishioners always “made four crosses” at decisive points on the circuit.⁵⁷ A watercourse lay at the point of intersection between the two Shropshire parishes of Pattingham and Clarely, so that when their ministers met there at Rogationtide they would “put each of them his foot” on a stone in the middle of the stream and “read the gospell.”⁵⁸

The young were often encouraged to remember with inducements of pleasure or marks of pain. In late Elizabethan Bourne (Kent), Richard Hooker would make “facetious observations” at significant points along the boundary in the hope that the boys would subsequently remember both their laughter and its location.⁵⁹ Other memories were more painful. John Clarke of Worth (Sussex) remembered the precise line of the boundary with West Hoathley because the parish minister had boxed his ears at that point almost 50 years earlier. Robert Leicester of West Tilbury (Essex) had encouraged Robert Mocke to remember that certain stones were “the mark for the dividing of the parishes” by “pinch[ing] him by the ear so that he felt it sharply,” a strategy vindicated by Mocke’s recollection of this detail some 60 years later.⁶⁰ The recollections of old men about the precise locations of mere-stones, boundary streams, or decisive trees are replete with references to being bumped, ducked, or beaten at the appropriate point. Local knowledge was, therefore, transmitted from the memories of the aged through physical inscription on the bruised backsides and sore heads of the young.⁶¹

Over time, it became increasingly likely that perambulations were recorded in writing rather than simply committed (however painfully) to memory. Those who recorded them included, amongst numerous others, the incumbents of Bradoc (Cornwall) in 1574, North Benfleet (Essex)

⁵⁷ John Craig, “Reformers, Conflict, and Revisionism: The Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Hadleigh,” *Historical Journal*, 42/1 (1999): 4 fn. 12; Whyte, “Landscape, Memory and Custom,” p. 176; Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service, Bedford, P65/28/2.

⁵⁸ Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury, 330/14.

⁵⁹ Izaak Walton, *The Lives of Doctor John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr Richard Hooker, Mr George Herbert and Doctor Robert Sanderson*, ed. Vernon Blackburn (London, 1895), pp. 155–6.

⁶⁰ Shepard, *Manhood*, p. 225; Emmison, “Tithe,” p. 193.

⁶¹ For a contemporary Italian example of boxing the ears to make an event memorable, see *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, Revised Edition, trans. George Bull (London, 1998), pp. 6–7. Cellini’s father boxed five-year-old Benvenuto on the ears when the family discovered a rare salamander in the fireplace. He then kissed Benvenuto, gave him some money, and instructed him never to forget.

in 1587, and Brenchley (Kent) in 1647.⁶² Clergymen, especially vicars, doubtless had in mind the rights, privileges, and incomes associated with their tithes when they inscribed the parish boundary in their registers, but they may also have had other motives for perpetuating local knowledge in this way. The fact that the bounds were “set down very directly in the register book,” as they were at Cold Norton (Essex) in 1592, could be cited by clergymen to justify their failure to perambulate, though this might be little more than special pleading for their unwillingness to provide hospitality.⁶³ Churchwardens themselves also had a vested interest in keeping a written record of their knowledge of local boundaries, not least because it might be used to justify their calculations of church rates payable per acre, and they did so as far south as Liskeard (Cornwall) in 1613 and as far north as Arthuret (Cumberland) in 1701.⁶⁴

The point where oral custom was fixed in the written record was evidently recognized as a symbolic transition. When Richard Aynsham, the vicar of Layston (Hertfordshire), recorded the perambulation of the parish in 1591, he noted that these were the bounds “as they were gone ... by the Direction of Old Men” and “confirmed by other Years going too before time out of Mind kept and gone by the parishioners.”⁶⁵ In this formulation, Aynsham testified to the authority inherent in the wisdom of the elderly and in custom practiced beyond memory.⁶⁶ But to fix a perambulation in writing did not mean that it could not thereafter change. Indeed, what was once regarded as the definitive circuit might be recorded by one clergyman, only to be amended as required by his successors. Seen from this perspective, perambulations were constantly evolving. When he described what was subsequently venerated as the authoritative perambulation of Layston, Richard Aynsham noted that the route he had taken included “for Quietness sake” a deviation insisted upon 30 years previously by one of the substantial farmers. He nonetheless recorded the justifications—including the existing tithing customs; the fifteenth-century manorial court rolls; and the contemporary opinions of the “ancients”—for the original route.⁶⁷ Even the written record could not remain unamended in the face of agrarian change. The vicar of Amwell (Hertfordshire) recognized as much

⁶² Cornwall Record Office, Truro (hereafter CRO), P17/1/1, fos 22r–22v; Harold Smith, “Early Registers of North Benfleet and Nevendon,” *Essex Review*, 42 (1933): 62; CKS, P45/3/3.

⁶³ Emmison, “Tithe,” p. 184.

⁶⁴ CRO, P126/4/3, unfol.; Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle, PR18/18, unfol.

⁶⁵ *Layston Parish Memorandum Book*, Falvey and Hindle, p. 153.

⁶⁶ Adam Fox, “Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing,” in Griffiths et al. (eds), *Experience of Authority*, pp. 89–116.

⁶⁷ *Layston Parish Memorandum Book*, Falvey and Hindle, p. 155.

when he recorded the parish bounds in 1613, noting that “wrightings many tymes lose theyr worth with themselves, being either concealed, or lost, or defaced, or misconstrued.” Although he thought that a “well and orderly kept” written perambulation might “give a great strength to right and concord,” his preference was for “prescription and direction,” which he thought were always the “best evidences.”⁶⁸ Whether it was burned into the memories of the ancients or engrossed in the accounts of churchwardens, therefore, custom might all too easily be corrupted.

In most cases, the motives for recording the intricacies of perambulation perforce remain speculative. However it was motivated, the existence of a definitive written account might preclude future dispute, perhaps even litigation. Only very occasionally are these motivations spelled out. When Robert Poole of Belchamp Otten (Essex) recorded the perambulation in his tithe book in 1701, he hoped it would be a “memorial to posterity,” and explained that a written account was necessary because “the landmarcks of our parish were cut down” during “the time of the long Rebellion.”⁶⁹ In other cases, the traditional boundaries had doubtless been obscured by enclosure. But underlying the desire to inscribe perambulations in the written record rather than in memory was a more fundamental meta-narrative about the changing relationship between the oral, the literate, and the social circulation of local knowledge.⁷⁰

Identity

So what exactly was being defined on these occasions? Rogationtide processions had originally, by the dramatic use of movement in the performance of liturgy, constituted a walking manifestation of spiritual community, a perambulation of fellow-believers in charity both with one another and with God. Even in the pre-Reformation period, however, important territorial issues had been at stake. Communal identity was invariably forged in opposition to the perceived interests of strangers and outsiders. As early as the fifteenth century, the inhabitants of adjacent parishes had a vested interest in approving each other's boundaries. The bounds of Yardley (Warwickshire) were certified in 1495, for instance,

⁶⁸ *The Parish Register and Tithing Book of Thomas Hassall of Amwell*, ed. Stephen G. Doree (Hertfordshire Record Publications 5, Hertford, 1985), p. 199.

⁶⁹ Essex Record Office, Chelmsford (hereafter ERO), D/Du 441/96, pp. 22–3.

⁷⁰ Fox, “Custom”; Andy Wood, “Custom and the Social Organisation of Writing in Early Modern England,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 9 (1999): 257–69; Adam Fox, *Oral and Literature Culture in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2000); Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*.

not only by 12 men of that parish, but also by 12 men from each of four neighboring parishes.⁷¹ In a context where Rogationtide rituals might be used to expel demons across the parish boundary, local communities could not define their bounds in isolation. Boundaries were perforce identified in relation to other geographical jurisdictions and the communal interests associated with them.

If territoriality was an issue, it is hardly surprising that symbols should have evolved to express distinctive parish identities. In Beverley (East Yorkshire), for instance, participants in the late fifteenth-century “Cross Monday” processions paraded the town’s relic of St John; and the Rogationtide festivities in St Newlyn (Cornwall) in the 1520s involved the parishioners of four adjacent parishes processing behind the bones of four local saints.⁷² A much more common symbol of parish identity was, however, the banner, like the one purchased by the churchwardens of Yeovil (Somerset) in 1457. Banners were usually embroidered with the image of the patron saint, often adorned with streamers or pennants, and normally affixed to staffs for the purpose of carrying them in procession. Two banners donated to the parish of Ashburton (Devon) in 1518, for instance, were painted with the images of St Clement and St Katherine. In 1537, the parish of Morebath (Devon) paid 12s to London craftsmen for a silken banner decorated with the image of the favored local St Sidwell on the one side and that of St George on the other.⁷³ Indeed, St George was a favored symbol, especially in the west country. The banners bequeathed to five Cornish parishes in 1522, for example, were all decorated with the image of St George, a perfect example of the appropriation in the local context of a symbol that was gradually attaining significance for nascent English national identity.⁷⁴ The banners themselves might even be instrumental in territorial demarcation. In early sixteenth-century Cheshire, for instance, banners played a central part in an elaborate ritual between the inhabitants of Helsby and Woodhouse who passed these and other

⁷¹ Birmingham City Archives, Birmingham, MS3375/427740.

⁷² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 269; Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 241.

⁷³ French, *People of the Parish*, p. 190; Whiting, *Blind Devotion*, p. 21; Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, 2001), pp. 40, 77, 103. For the cost of silken banners elsewhere, see Ken Farnhill, *Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia, c. 1470–1550* (York, 2001), pp. 79, 107.

⁷⁴ French, *People of the Parish*, p. 205; John Bengston, “St George and the Formation of English Nationalism,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 27 (1997): 317–40; Muriel C. McClendon, “A Moveable Feast: Saint George’s Day Celebrations and Religious Change in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (1999): 1–27.

symbols, including their respective parish crosses, back and forth across the boundary represented by Levins Brook.⁷⁵ In some cases the staves on which banners were supported might serve as convenient weapons if and when groups of rival parishioners came to blows about the precise location of a boundary.

The use of banners was officially forbidden in 1559, though parishioners took some persuading to abandon them. They were displayed at Rogationtide in Buckinghamshire and Cornish parishes in 1560, for example, and in 1564 the churchwardens of Stanford-in-the-Vale (Berkshire) were presented for having taken a streamer on the perambulation. As late as 1604, 57-year-old Samuel Brockis of Havering (Essex) could affectionately recall the church banners and pennants he had as a boy seen carried in the perambulations of the 1550s and 1560s. There is even some evidence that banners re-emerged as ceremonies became more elaborate after the Restoration: at Brightwalton (Berkshire), the “chief flag or holy banner” of the parish was carried round the bounds when they were perambulated for the last time in 1720.⁷⁶ Generally, however, banners were conspicuous by their absence from seventeenth-century perambulations. Parishioners nonetheless found other ways of asserting their collective identity. The very frequent practice of purchasing large numbers of silk ribbons to be worn by the boys who beat the bounds, as happened in St Martin’s-in-the-Fields in 1618, in St Mary Woolnough (London) in the 1630s, in St Martin’s Leicester in 1638, and in Hawkhurst (Kent) in 1673, may be seen as a form of parish livery, symbolizing the nexus of belonging which perambulation inculcated in the young.⁷⁷ By the late seventeenth century, this sense of place was augmented by highly localized folk-rhymes associated with Rogationtide. Those perambulating the bounds of Much Wenlock (Shropshire), for instance, chanted that “We go from Beckbury and Badger to Stoke on the Clee / To Monkhopton, Round Acton, and so return we.”⁷⁸ Songs of this kind testify to the longevity of a proverbial culture which was deeply embedded in the local landscape.

These symbols of local identity were so important because territorial demarcation could be a matter of life and death, or at least of the expenses that might accompany either fate. Thus in a late seventeenth-century

⁷⁵ Whyte, “Landscape, Memory and Custom,” p. 176.

⁷⁶ Hutton, *Merry England*, p. 106; McIntosh, *Community Transformed*, p. 202; G.C. Peachey, “Beating the Bounds of Brightwalton,” *Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Archaeological Journal*, 1/3 (1904): 75–81.

⁷⁷ Merritt, *Early Modern Westminster*, p. 211; Hutton, *Merry England*, p. 176; *Churchwardens’ Accounts*, Cox, pp. 263–4.

⁷⁸ *English Folk-Rhymes: A Collection of Traditional Verses Relating to Places and Persons, Customs, Superstitions etc.*, ed. G.F. Northall (London, 1892), p. 202.

dispute over the boundary between two Shropshire parishes, it was remembered that the “Further Portway” lay in Rattlinghope because a woman once “found dead” in that field was buried at the charge of the parishioners there, “as Church Stretton said it was out of their bounds.”⁷⁹ After the institutionalization of the Elizabethan poor laws of 1598 and 1601, moreover, the financial costs of a contested boundary could exceed the expenses of a vagrant’s burial. Once parishes were made financially responsible for the maintenance of any poor children born within their bounds, overseers of the poor aggressively prevented the settlement of families that would “breed up” a charge on the poor rate, and especially of single mothers.⁸⁰ It was not, accordingly, unusual for servant girls in the advanced stages of pregnancy to be harried across the boundary to give birth in the fields of an adjacent parish, the ratepayers of which would then have to meet the substantial economic costs of the illegitimacy. When Grace Fisher of Fillongley (Warwickshire) went into labor in 1653, for instance, the inhabitants drove her “uncivilly and unmercifully” across the parish boundary to Allesley, where she gave birth to her bastard child the very next day.⁸¹ To this extent, the obligation to pay rates in relief of the poor made it even more imperative that parishioners should remember where their boundaries lay. Seventeenth-century Rogationtide ceremonies therefore retained several elements of an older festive tradition, but the careful perambulation of borders helped parishioners control the limits not only of the traditional obligations of tithe and church rate; but also of their novel secular responsibilities for the poor, and especially for abandoned, illegitimate, or even congenitally idle children.⁸²

Parochial identity was, therefore, defined in conjunction with, and sometimes in outright opposition to, the claims of neighboring communities. This was not simply a matter of local pride but of the recognition of obligations and the financial responsibilities that went with them. Where contention existed between parishes about the precise location of a boundary, perambulations might easily degenerate into fisticuffs. At Rogationtide 1578, for example, those perambulating the bounds of Runwell (Essex) came to blows with their neighbors over rights of access to Rettendon common. The minister of Runwell alleged that two dozen parishioners of Rettendon had violently “hindered them from

⁷⁹ Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury, 93/25, 26.

⁸⁰ Steve Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), Ch. 5.

⁸¹ *Warwick County Records*, eds. S.C. Ratcliff, H.C. Johnson, and N.J. Williams (9 vols., Warwick, 1935–64), 3:153–54.

⁸² Schen, *Charity*, p. 230; Hindle, *On the Parish?*, pp. 223–5.

their lawful, peaceful and ancient procession and perambulation.”⁸³ But it was not only neighboring parishioners who prevented perambulations. As common lands became increasingly vulnerable to enclosure, some parishioners complained that their landlords had stopped them beating the bounds, as in the Dorset villages of Netherbury in 1613 and Long Burton in 1623.⁸⁴ Since Rogationtide commenced with the ritual cursing (derived from Deuteronomy 27:17) of those that dared to remove their neighbors’ landmark, perambulations might license, perhaps even encourage, parishioners to attack the fences of those landowners who had modified customary boundaries. The vicar and parishioners perambulating the fields of Coleby (Lincolnshire) at Rogationtide 1616, for instance, promptly demolished the enclosures with which their landlord had “blemished” and “obscured” their ancient bounds. Their fellows at Old Buckenham (Norfolk) sang satirical songs mocking their landlord’s hospitality while they demolished his fences during the 1619 perambulation. At Rogationtide 1641, meanwhile, crowds numbering as many 400 burnt down the posts and dug down the mounds with which parts of the town lands of Colchester (Essex) had been enclosed.⁸⁵ The fact that the beating of the bounds might involve the cracking of skulls and the leveling of hedges epitomizes the passions provoked by questions of local identity and its associated rights and obligations. It is no coincidence that these skirmishes took place quite literally at the parish boundary, for it is at the margins where communities are most regularly tested and new social identities most intensively forged.

Defining community

In John Mirk’s Rogationtide sermon, first printed in Caxton’s edition of the *Festial* in 1483, the order of perambulation was described: “in procession, bells ring, banners are carried first, the cross comes after and the people follow.” Mirk exhorted parishioners to “put away all danger and mischief [for] holy church ordains that each man fast these days and go in procession, in order to have help and succour of God and of his

⁸³ ERO, Q/SR 70/4. For a late medieval example, see Dorothy M. Owen, *Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1971), pp. 108–9.

⁸⁴ Underdown, *Revel*, pp. 80–81.

⁸⁵ The National Archives, Public Record office, Kew, STAC 8/163/30 (Hall *vs.* Allen *et al.*); STAC 8/98/7 (Cocke *et al. vs.* Jolly *et al.*); John Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 101–2.

saints.”⁸⁶ Over a century and a half later, in 1632, the churchwardens of Bolney (Sussex) concluded their detailed description of the perambulation with a prayer: “The God of peace and love vouchsafe of his infinite Mercy to Sanctify and preserve you all for ever for the Merits of his beloved and our alone Saviour.”⁸⁷ Even into the seventeenth century, therefore, perambulation retained intense spiritual significance, the aspirations of the first generation of Elizabethan bishops notwithstanding. Thus the parishioners of early Stuart Amwell met together at the church before the perambulation and “commended [them]selves to God in prayer.” Indeed, the early Stuart bishops were interested not only in whether perambulations took place regularly but also whether appropriate prayers were used during the procession.⁸⁸

Perambulation therefore long remained “a religious ceremony in which the language of custom was spoken with the authority of God.”⁸⁹ As we have seen, the meaning and symbolism of Rogationtide changed significantly over the course of the next two centuries, but not beyond all recognition, perhaps not even as far as Bishop Grindal’s deft distinction between a *procession* and a *perambulation*. To be sure, as the spiritual significance of beating of the bounds declined, the practical importance of the demarcation of boundaries only increased. In this respect, the parish community that was being defined by Rogationtide rituals increasingly resembled an institution rather than an organism. Even so, when George Herbert argued in favor of perambulation in 1633, the four benefits he identified would surely have sounded familiar to any late fifteenth-century parishioner chanting gospels or drinking ale during “cross day” procession: “first, a blessing of God for the fruits of the field; secondly, justice in the preservation of bounds; thirdly, charity and loving walking and neighbourly accompanying one another, with reconciling of differences at that time, if there be any; fourthly, mercy in relieving the poor by a liberall distribution and largesse.”⁹⁰ Herbert, and other conservative clerics like him, doubtless had vested interests associated with tithes and other property rights in the perpetuation of Rogationtide processions.⁹¹ But he surely echoed centuries of tradition in concluding that “those that withdraw and sever themselves

⁸⁶ John Mirk, *Festial*, ed. Theodore Erbe, *Early English Text Society*, early series, 96 (1905), p. 150.

⁸⁷ West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Par/252/9/1, fos 19, 20r–20v.

⁸⁸ *Parish Register and Tithing Book of Thomas Hassall*, Doree, p. 193; *Visitation Articles*, Fincham, 1:xvi, 29.

⁸⁹ Beaver, *Parish Communities*, p. 35.

⁹⁰ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 284.

⁹¹ Jeffrey Powers-Beck, “‘Not Onely a Pastour, but a Lawyer Also’: George Herbert’s Vision of Stuart Magistracy,” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 1/2 (1995): 8–10.

from” this annual definition and celebration of communal identity should be reproved “as uncharitable and unneighbourly.” Rogationtide perambulations may in practice, of course, have been less indicative of parochial cohesion than Herbert hoped. After all, they took place in the context of the perennial push and shove of local social relations, to say nothing of the litigation and labeling that were especially characteristic of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century economic differentiation.⁹² They were, even so, one of those very “few specific moments of ritual petition or festivity” which helped rid an otherwise intolerable life of communal tension.⁹³ So if we seek the local communities of early modern England in the act of defining themselves, then the perambulation of the parish bounds is a particularly promising place to start, perhaps even the place to finish.

⁹² Keith Wrightson, “The ‘Decline of Neighbourliness’ Revisited,” in Norman L. Jones and Daniel Woolf (eds), *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 19–49.

⁹³ Beaver, *Parish Communities*, p. 33; John Bossy, “Blood and Baptism: Kinship, Community and Christianity in Western Europe from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries,” in Derek Baker (ed.), *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World* (Studies in Church History 10: Oxford, 1973), p. 143.