

# The Cheshire Wakes *Highlight of bygone years in many towns and villages*

Throughout the centuries, the highlight of the year for many Cheshire towns and villages was an annual event known as the Wakes. Celebrated around the time of the local Parish Church's patronal dedication festival. The Wakes was a holiday lasting for one or two days up to a week, and because it was customary for each parish to hold their Wakes nearest to the date of its own patron saint's dedication.

For most country folk, the annual Wakes was their only opportunity to rub shoulder to shoulder with the outside world. Fairs were set up on village greens, each one bringing into the community its quota of travelling showmen. Market stalls lined the streets, pedlars, hawkers and salesmen came from afar to sell their wares.

For country women, it was their once a year change to buy the pretty things they otherwise never saw, silks and laces, garter and ribbons, and "all they lacked from head to heel". Unfortunately, it also gave an opportunity for the unruly and rougher element of the community to drink too much strong ale with fights, brawls and empty pockets often the inevitable outcome.

The attractions during Wake's week were numerous and varied, and in most villages often well organised. At Bunbury, for instance, in 1808 the parish advertised for a master of ceremonies to supervise the week long events, which included bull, bear and badger, baiting, cock fighting, goose riding, bare fist fighting, jawing, gurning, whistling, jumping, skenning, grinning and pudding eating competitions.

Even though there were ample other pastimes for the local men to enjoy, many of them also with scores of outsiders from nearby towns, came to the Wakes especially to participate in the cruel, but immensely popular sports of bull and bear baiting.

Most country towns had a site usually in the Market place call the Bull-Ring to which the bull was taken in ceremony. There tethered by a chain to the large iron ring firmly secured in the ground, he would await the dogs and more often than not to die in fear. At village Wakes he would be baited on the Green, with the end result nearly always the same.

Bear-baiting unlike bull-baiting which invariably ended in the bull's death was less one sided, with the odds rather against the dog, whose owner paid two pence to the bearward for the privilege of allowing it to try and over throw the larger animal. At Barthomley, a man killed during a bear-bait, provided a sufficient enough excuse for abolishing the Wakes in that village, while over in Bunbury, a Bearward by the name of Robinson, "was cruelly rent in pieces by a Bear and so died fearfully."

Lots of stories are told in Cheshire about the travelling bears, for their coming was a great event in the dull life of most villagers. During Wrenbury Wakes, the bear was usually brought to the village on Saturday evening, and stabled at the inn ready for Monday morning.

A custom the villages of Weaverham and Wynbunbury held during Wake's week, was to bake fig pies to give to their friends, because of this they were known as "Good neighbour pies" and although their Wakes petered out in the early 1900's. Fig pies were still made in the locality for many years afterwards.

This an instance of one of the nicer customs the Wake's left behind, yet even this pleasant cusom was at one time abused. In earlier days at Wynbunbury, the fig pies were sometimes baked hard and rolled down Swan Bank for prizes, but there are stories of individuals hurling them at passers by, from the church tower.

As time went by, the Wake's festivities degenerated into a fair where brutality, cruelty, crime, accidents and tragedy became common place, and seemed to have little in keeping with the true reason for the celebrations.

One waiter describing the Middlewich Wakes wrote, "There was often a bull fight in one field and a mon feight, I'th next, with the parson as referee." And so it was with a certain amount of relief to the authorites when the Wakes in most areas died a natural death.

Today, apart from a few towns and villages which still hold a respectable Wake's Day, they have almost faded into the past, most churches preferring to celebrate their patronal Saint's Day in a quieter way, though the signs still abound to remind us of former times.

Many towns still have "Bull Rings" and there are pubs throughout the county that carry names associated with the bear-baiting, e.g. the Bear's Paw and the Bear's Head.