

Skimmerton Riding in Stoke St Gregory

This form of 'rough justice' was common in Victorian England, going by many different names, but it seems that Stoke was host to the 'Mother of all Skimmertons'.

***‘SKIMMERTON RIDING** - At the Police-court, on Sarurday, William Pearce, Edward Pearce, James Dare, Thorn Boobier, John Boobier, William Hembrow, Benjamin Johnson, Samuel Loveridge, Lambert Hearne, William Chedzoy, James Burt, John Brewer, and William Hearne, all from Stoke St Gregory, were charged with rioting and assaulting seven police-constables on the 1st of May. On the last evening in April there was a great disturbance in the above parish. A police-constable of that village, a man who has been married for a quarter of a century, was alleged to have taken undue liberties with a young girl, from the result of which she was enceinte, and, as the solicitor for the defence put it, the virtuous indignation of the inhabitants was aroused. A skimmerton riding was the result, and there was a serenading with tin pots, trays, and “drain pipes. ”It was to prevent a repetition of this conduct that seven policemen were despatched to the place on the 1st of May, but when they attempted by persuasion to quell the disturbances they were knocked about and severely ill-used by a crowd of 150 - 200 persons, who belaboured them with heavy bludgeons. They had to run for safety, but several of them, as they were endeavouring to get away, were knocked down senseless. All the defendants were identified as being among the crowd, and several of them were sworn to as having assaulted the constables, two of whom were severely wounded and had to be removed from the scene of the riot in carriages and taken to a medical man, who attended their injuries. All the defendants were committed for trial. ”*

So reported the Bristol Mercury on 24th May 1879

Origins

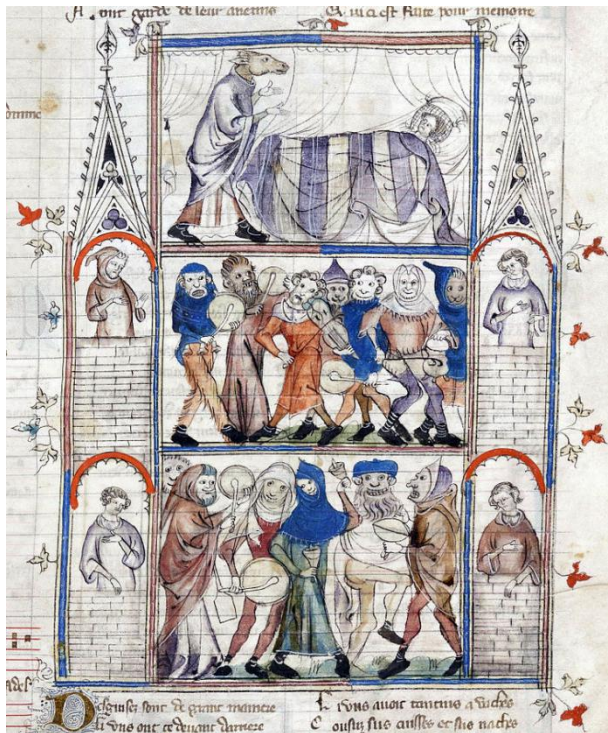


Fig 1 Depiction of a charivari from the Roman de Fauvel C 1300

Charivari, Skimmertons, or Skimmingtons, are recorded in England from medieval times and the term is particularly associated with Somerset and the rest of SW England. Some believe the name Skimmerton derives from the skimming ladle used to take the cream off the milk in dairy processing, which was also supposed to be the weapon used by a woman to beat a weak or henpecked husband. The justifications for a skimmington varied, a favourite being the villagers' disapproval of a man for weakness in his relationship with his wife, maybe even accepting her extra marital relationships.

Communities, however, used "rough music", as it was also called, to express their disapproval of any violation of community norms. For example, they might target marriages of which they disapproved such as a union between an older widower and much younger woman, or the too early remarriage by a widow or widower. Villagers also used charivari in cases of adulterous relationships, against wife beaters, and unmarried mothers.

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The 'Ride'

Many accounts describe the participants as carrying ladles and spoons with which to beat pots and pans. The noisy parade passed through the village, and served as a punishment to the offender and a warning to others to abide by community norms. In its most violent form, a wrongdoer or wrongdoers might be dragged from their home or place of work and paraded by force through the village. In the process they were subject to the derision of the crowd, they might be pelted and frequently a victim or victims would be dunked at the end of the proceedings.



Fig 2 William Hogarth's engraving "Hudibras Encounters the Skimmington"

Sometimes special rhymes were written for the occasion:

*“Has beat his wife!
Has beat his wife!
It is a very great shame and disgrace
To all who live in this place
It is indeed, upon my life!”*

A skimmington ride is depicted in a plaster frieze in Montacute House, which dates from the Elizabethan era, and shows a man mounted on a pole, carried on the shoulders of others.

Some will remember the skimmington ride in Thomas Hardy's 1884 novel, 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'. Effigies of the mayor and Lucetta, a former lover, are paraded through the streets on a donkey by a noisy crowd when rumours of their prior relationship emerge. Lucetta, now respectably married to Henchard's rival Farfrae, collapses in distress and humiliation, miscarries her baby and dies.

More recently, there was a depiction of an incident in a Warwickshire community in the twentieth century (Fig 3, from Illustrated London News, 14 August 1909). The caption stated that the custom, although dying out, was still occasionally observed.



Fig 3 A lewbelling in Warwickshire, 1909

Finally, Midsomer Murder fans might remember the episode where John Nettles has to come to terms with the principles of Skimmerton. Out on a family excursion, the Chief Inspector finds himself investigating the murder of Mildred Danvers, whose flask of brandy was apparently spiked with barbiturates. They were all there to attend the annual Skimmington Fair, a decades-old village fête that pitted the women against the misogynist men.

The Hearing

“RIOTING AT STOKE ST GREGORY. William Pearce, Edward Pearce, James Dare, Thorn Boobier, William Hembrow, Benjamin Johnson, Samuel Loveridje, Lambert Hearne, William Chedzoy, James Burt, John Brewer, and William Hearne, mostly labourers, of Stoke St. Gregory, were charged with having, on the 1st of May, unlawfully assaulted P.C. William Dicks, whilst in the execution of his duty at Stoke St. Gregory. The same men were also charged with unlawfully, riotously, and tumultuously gathering together to disturb the peace, and making a great noise, riot, tumult, and disturbance, for more than two hours, to the disturbance of the public: and with

assaulting W. Dicks, R. Raymond, J. Sparks, T. Stuckey, M. Coles, H. Brimble, and W. U. police-constables at the same time and place. Mr Goldsmith in stating the facts of the case said that on the morning of the 1st of May he received complaints that a scene of disorder, riot, and tumult, was going on in the parish of Stoke St. Gregory. In consequence of those complaints he gave direct instructions to the constables named in the summonses, and gave Sergt. Self instructions how to act. They went to Stoke at. Gregory and their attention was called to a loud noise, and they found at least from 150 to 200 men and boys assembled for the purpose of making this tumult. The sergeant addressed the ringleaders with the words, "You men, you are doing wrong; take my advice and go home quietly," at the same time telling the constables not to draw their staves. Immediately after this the mob began to surge and sway about, and they succeeded in surrounding Constable Sparks. Sergeant Self told them again to disperse, but before the words were hardly out of his mouth Constable Dicks received a wound which felled him to the ground. It was a mercy that some of the constables were not killed. One of the policemen was struck with something which cut through his helmet, and made a wound on his head. At the suggestion of Mr Chapman all witnesses were ordered to leave the court, and the following evidence was taken. Mr J Bendall, surgeon, residing at Creech St. Michael, said that on the night of the 1st May he was sent for, and went to P.C. Coles. He found him at his house. The constable made a complaint to him. examined his head and found a contused wound over the left eyebrow about inch in length and extending nearly to the bone. The wound was bleeding very little, because it must have been done several hours, and there was dirt in the wound. He also found swelling behind the right ear. It was such a blow as would have been caused by a blunt instrument. He appeared to have received severe shock, and looked as if the injury was severe. He saw Police-constable Dicks at about eight or nine o'clock on the second of May at West Monkton. He examined him and found a wound on the forehead, but it was not so severe as that of Constable Coles. He had been attending Coles up to within few days. Sergeant Self said on the day in question he received instructions from Mr Superintendent Goldsmith, and went to Stoke St. Gregory with several constables. They went to the house of Constable Sparks, the constables being then present were Sparks, Dicks, Raymond, Brimble, Coles, and Stuckey. Between eight and nine o'clock in the evening witness and Sparks walked up the road to the public house, where they went in and sat down; on coming outside he saw the defendant William Pearce, who had a large stick in his hand. He said to them "You had better not carry on any games to-night." Defendant replied "I don't care a toss for you. Play up men. There were several people in the road, and they began to beat tin kettles, trays and the like. He and P.C. Raymond went to Sparks's house and turned out the other constables. He heard a loud noise up the road in the direction the public house, and he thought he saw Pearce. The noise was such as would be produced by the blowing of drain pipes and the beating of tins and kettles. All the constables then proceeded towards the public house, and they saw large number of men coming towards them still continuing the noise. There were about 150 or 200 persons there at that time. As they approached he said to the front men in the crowd, "Now, my men, you know you are doing wrong; you had better disperse and go home quietly." Some of them shouted "We don't care for you," and the front portion of the crowd passed on. He then saw several men surround P.C. Sparks and part him from the rest of the

constables. Almost immediately he heard a blow, and on looking round he saw blood streaming from the forehead of Constable Dicks. to that time he had seen in the crowd the two Pearces, both armed with bludgeons, Thorn Boobier, Burt (whom he knew well), and also Brewer, He saw one of the constables holding Dicks, who said to him, "I have got it, sergeant." He then said to the crowd, "Now, my men, do not use sticks; none of us have drawn our staves on you." Some of the crowd replied that they thought it was Sparks. He left the constables and went to the inn to set the horse at the trap. The animal became restive, and he spoke to a young man, who asked the crowd to desist while the horse was being put in harness. He gave Dicks in charge of the trap, and also gave him instructions to go to the doctor, and immediately he was joined by the other constables. The crowd then came up to them, completely blocking the roadway; some of them said "Now let's give it to the -" and all the constables were then struck with bludgeons. He had to walk backwards several hundred yards warding off the blows of Burt, which he aimed at his head with bludgeon. He received violent blows; one across the wrist of the right hand, one on the head, and one on the right arm, from Burt, and it was visible for nine or ten days. The lamp he was wearing was smashed in. He did not recognise any of the defendants except Burt having been in the front of the crowd. received blows from others in the crowd. Witness saw Brimble had his hand to his heart, and he told him to go into a house near. He left, and then went towards the house of Mr Garland, During the whole of that time none the constables had drawn their staves. Witness saw the constables make off to Mr Garland's house, but the crowd pursued them, and before they reached there Constable Coles was knocked down by a severe blow over the left eye. Coles attempted to get up, but fell down again. Witness and another constable picked him and took him into Mr Garland's house, where they remained some time, and where Coles's wounds were dressed by some of the family. The crowd went away towards the public house, and they (the constables) left Mr Garland's at about half-past eleven o'clock. Cross-examined: He had heard the cause of the disturbance. Most of them had sticks and tin pots. Did not see Pearce play an "instrument" (laughter). He should say that the crowd was composed of a lot of riotous half-drunken men and boys. He had heard that Constable Sparks had been familiar with a girl in that parish. Sparks did not tell him the cause of the row. P.C Dicks corroborated the evidence of the last witness, adding that before he was struck he saw the Pearces, the two Boobiers, Loveridge, both Hearnies, and Brewer. P.C. Coles said that on the 1st May he went to Stoke St. Gregory with Sergeant Self and others. In the road they met about 200 persons. Sergeant Self held up his hand and told them they were doing wrong, and persuaded them to go home quiet. They went on towards the public-house and met another mob. He got surrounded and struck, but saw Sergt. Self and Burt were assaulted with sticks. Loveridge and William Heame were near. As he was leaving he was struck, but did not know by whom. He was afterwards attended by Dr. Bendall. P.C. Newberry was next called, and stated that he was standing at the outer door of the Shire-hall that morning when the defendants were entering. He saw Constable Coles pass those people, and heard James Burt say, "That is the one I gave one to." This remark was addressed to two women, but he could not tell who they were. P.C Brimble proved that he received a blow in the face with a large stick, also across his right arm, and across his left hand. Those blows were given by someone in the crowd, but could not say by whom. He

identified Thorn Boobier and James Burt amongst the crowd. Constable Stuckey proved that he was assaulted by some men with what seemed to be a large stick. He was struck from behind, and could not see who dealt the blow. He should think it was a large stick by the weight of it (laughter). He identified Loveridge, Hearne and Burt as being amongst the crowd. He also saw Coles struck. P.C. Raymond recognised the two Peirces, Thorn Boobier, Samuel Loveridge, James Burt, James Brewer and William Hearne among the rioters. He was struck across the right arm with bludgeon by either William Pierce or Samuel Loveridge. P.C Sparks was next called, and described the state of Stoke St Gregory on the night in question, and identified those charged, with the exception of Brewer. Shortly after the commencement of the riot he was surrounded by Hembrow, Johnson and Chidgey, and from them received several violent blows. He drew his staff to keep them off, and when he saw an opening he made off to the public-house. Pearce followed him and said, "I will kill you" and struck him with a stick. Edward Pearce came into the house and threatened to kill him. Pearce : Don't you tell lies now (laughter). Cross-examined Mr Chapman. He was a married man, and had been in the force about 18 years. He knew a girl named Ellen Kinglake. Mr Goldsmith: I object; this is nothing do with the case, sir. Chapman : I have a right ask such questions as tending to show how this rioting originated, but if the bench do not wish me to mention names I will not do it. Cross-examined : Had heard the riot arose in connection with this female. Mr Goldsmith: I still object to this, it will tend to prejudice the character of the constable. Cross-examined by Mr Goldsmith: He had never had a complaint brought against him in his life as a police officer. This concluded the case. Mr Chapman in his defence said he had been instructed that the constable stationed at Stoke St. Gregory was thought to have been improperly familiar with the young woman alluded to, and this demonstration he regarded the virtuous indignation of the inhabitants of Stoke of Gregory." The magistrates then retired, and after consulting for some minutes returned with their decision that all should be committed for trial, bail in £20 each being granted to all except Thorn Boobier and the two Pearces. "

Wednesday 21st May 1879

The Trial

The story was repeated at the jury trial on Wednesday 9th July 1897, with additional material being discussed about the behaviour of Constable Sparks. He was asked "*if he had ever had illicit intercourse with a young woman named Ellen Kinglake. Witness was silent for some seconds. When pressed for an answer, the Chairman said : Silence is admission. Mr Norris : Yes ; but I will have an answer. Witness : I won't deny it. Examination continued : Had she a child by you ?—I can't say ; I have heard so. But the poor girl is dead ? They tell me so. Seduced you?—No answer Is that so —No answer. How old are you ?—I am 46. Was she 26 ?—I cannot say; I cannot say her age. Was she to the best of your belief over 20 ? —I should say she was over 30. Did you seduce her ?—I won't deny I was with her. I may say she seduced me, I think. That's what you really wish the jury to understand ?—I do. You yielded to the*

temptation she put in your way Yes. And that's the tribute you pay to the memory of the dead ?—Yes. Then all I can say is God help you,”

The Vicar of Stoke, The Rev Gurney, also had a part in the story: “The first witness called was the Rev. F. F. Gurney, vicar of Stoke St. Gregory, who deposed that on the last day of April he heard disturbance in the village. Mr Norris objected, the alleged offence took place on the 1st May, Mr Hooper referred to a decided case on the subject. Mr Norris: I dare say. It looks a nice old book. Mr Hooper: It is good old law. The Chairman said evidence to what took place on April 30th might show that the police were necessary the following day; and were in the execution of their duty. Witness continued to say that he made a communication to Supt. Goldsmith by letter. Mr Norris: Then I call for the letter. Witness said he sent the letter to the police station at Taunton. Supt. Goldsmith having been requested to produce the letter, made a search in his office and on returning said was unable to find it. In reply to Mr Norris the Superintendent said he believed the letter was burnt with other papers when clearing out his office. He did not think it necessary to keep it. To the best of his recollection the substance of the letter was a complaint of riot and disturbance which took place on the preceding night (April 30th), with request that the Superintendent should send over a sufficient force to preserve the peace. It was also suggested that the men should be sent in plain clothes and should secrete themselves in the vicar's garden, so that they might see what persons took part in the disturbance.”

The way the police had handled the situation, combined with the behaviour of Constable Sparks, must have influenced the jury: *“The jury after retiring to consider their verdict returned into court at half-past four and in answer to the formal question said they had found all the prisoners Not Guilty on all counts. This ended the business of the sessions.”*

Further Reading

For those wanting to know more about the subject a useful start would be Dr George's paper, where he examines skimmington, domestic violence, and the more general relationship between the rulers and the ruled, in folklore and in practice.

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