

Annually, the Sheriff's Riding is performed in the dark streets of York on 21st December. The ceremony is based on Yule pageantry as described in detail by Francis Drake in *Eboracum*, 1736.

SHERIFFS RIDING.

The sheriffs by the custom of this citty do ride to several parts in the same every yeare, betwixt *Michaelmas* and *midwinter*, that is Yoolle, and there to make proclamation in the form following.

O yes, &c. we command in our liege lord's behalf the king of *England* whom God save and keep, that the peace of the king be well kept and maintained within this city, and the suburbs thereof by night and by day with all manner of men, both gentle and simple, in pain that falls thereon.

Also we command that no man walk armed within the city by night or by day, except the officers assigned for keeping the peace, on pain of forfeiting his armour and his body in prison.

Also we command that the bakers of the city bake good bread, and of good boulder, and sell after the assize, &c. and that no baker nor no huckster put to sale any manner of bread, unless that it be sealed with a seal delivered from the sheriffs.

Also we command that the brewers of the city brew good ale, and wholesome for mans body, and sell after the assize, and by measure ensealed.

Also that no manner of man pass out of the citty by night or by day to encounter any manner of victual coming to the city to sell, neither by water nor by land, to lett to come to the market, upon paine ordained therefore.

Also that corn brought to the market be *pursuand*, i. e. as good beneath in the sack as above, upon forfeiture of the same corn and his body to prison.

Also that corn that's once brought into the market to sell, be not led out of the market for to keep from market-day to market-day, without licence of the sheriff or his deputys, upon pain that falls thereupon.

Also we command that no manner of man walk in the city nor in the suburbs by night without light before him, i. e. from *Hafche* to *Michaelmas* after ten of the clock, and from *Michaelmas* to *Pafche* after nine of the clock.

Also we command that no ostler harbour any strange man no longer than a night and a day, unless he do the sheriffs to witt, and if he do the contrary he shall answer for his deeds.

Also we command that no foreign victualer bring any victuals to the city for to sell, whether that it be flesh, or poultry, that he bring it to the market-
stead limited therefore in the city, and not sell it or it come there, upon pain
that falls thereupon.

Also we command that the lanes and streets of the city be cleansed of all
manner of nuisance, *i. e.* of stocks, of stones, of middings, and of all manner of
filth, on paine that falls thereupon.

Also we command that no manner of men make no infurrection,
congregation, or assembly within the city or suburbs in disturbance of the
peace ; nor letting of the execution of the common-law, upon paine of
punishment, and all that he may forfeit to the king.

Also that no *common woman* walk in the street without a ray=hood on her head
and a wand in her hand.

This proclamation I have given at length as it was antiently used in the city, what is
used now is much abridged. The ceremony of riding, one of the greatest shews the
city of *York*, does exhibit, is performed on this manner, the riding day of the sheriffs
is usually on *Wednesday*, eight days after *Martinmas* ; but they are not strictly tied to
that day, any day betwixt *Martinmas* and *Yoolle*, that is Christmas, may serve for the
ceremony. It is then they appear on horseback, appavelled in their black gowns and
velvet tippits, their horses in sutable furniture, each sheriff having a white wand in his
hand, a badge of his office, and a servant to lead his horse, who also carries a gilded
truncheon. Their serjeants at mace, attorneys and other officers of their courts, on
horseback in their gowns riding before them. These are preceeded by the city's
waites, or musicians, in their scarlet liveries and silver badges playing all the way
through the streets. One of these waites wearing on his head a red pinked or tattered
ragged cap, a badge of so great antiquity, the rise or original of it cannot be found
out. Then follows a great concourse of country gentlemen, citizens, &c. on horseback,
who are invited to do this honour to and afterwards dine with them, and though
they dine separately I have seen near four hundred people at one entertainment. In this
equipage and manner, with the sheriffs waiters distinguished by cockades in their hats,
who are usually their friends now, but formerly were their servants in livery cloaks;
they first ride up *Micklegate* into the yard of the priory of the *Trinity*, where one of
the serjeants at mace makes proclamation as has been given. Then they ride through
the principal streets of the city, making the same proclamation at the corners of the
streets on the west side of *Ousebridge*. After that at the corner of *Castlegate* and
Ousegate ; then at the corner of *Coneystreet* and *Stonegate* over against the *Common-hall* ;
then again at the south gate of the *Minster*. After that they ride unto *St. Marygate*
tower without *Bootham-bar*, making the same proclamation there. Then returning they

ride through the streets of *Petergate, Colliergate, Foffgate*, over *Foffbridge* into *Walmgate*, where the proclamation is again made ; and lastly they return into the market-place in the *Pavement* ; where the same ceremony being repeated, the sheriffs depart to their own houses, and after to their house of entertainment ; which is usually at one of the publick halls in the city.

The sheriffs of the city of *York* have anciently used on *St. Thomas's* day the apostle before *Yoolle*, at toll of the bell to come to *Allhallows* kirk in the *Pavement*, and there to *hear* a mass of *St. Thomas* at the high quiere, and to offer at the mass ; and when mass was done to make proclamation at the pillory of *Yoolle-girthol*, in the form that follows by their serjeant, &c.

We command that the peace of our lord the king be well kept and mayntayned by night and by day, &c. *prout solebat in proclamatione praedict' vicecomitum in eorum equitatione.*

Also that all manner of whores, thieves, dice=players, and all other unthrifty folk be wellcome to the towne, whether they come late or early, at the reverence of the high feafte of *Yoolle*, till the twelve dayes be passed.

The proclamation made in form aforesaid, the fower serjeants shall go and ride, whither they will, and one of them shall have a horne of brafs of the tollbroothe, and the other three serjeants shall have each of them a horne, and so go forth to the fower barrs of the citty, and blow the youle=girthe ; and the sheriffs for that day use to goe together, and they and their wives, and their officers, at the reverence of the high feaft of *Yoolle*, at their proper cofts, &c.

from: *EBORACUM* by Francis Drake, 1736

DISCUSSION

What we've been doing in York every 21st December since the early 1980s is a hybrid of two ceremonies: the **Sheriffs' Riding** (there two sheriffs until the 20th relatively recently) and **Yulegirthol**. Historically (as far as we know), the waits only appeared at the Sheriff's Riding and what we perform is a sort of Yoolgirthol with Sheriff and waits, Tony with his horn representing the four sergeants.

THE SHERIFFS' RIDING usually took place on a Wednesday, roughly eight days after Martinmas (11th November + 8 days = **19th November**).

The waits led the procession.

These are preceded by the city's waites, or musicians, in their scarlet liveries and silver badges playing all the way through the streets. One of these waites wearing on his head a red pinked or tattered ragged cap, a badge of so great antiquity, the rife or original of it cannot be found out.

We can go one better than Drake, for in the City Chamberlains' Rolls (Y:C6:10, 1539) we read:

Item paid to Iohn wayte wyff for an old Reyd hoode Iaggyd for one of the Eldest wayttes to weyre xvj d

John wayte will have been John Harper, chief wait, who died in 1539 and it seems likely that his wife was handing over the hood he wore to display his seniority. The question remains, does "Reyd" mean red or rayed, as in striped? If Drake's "red pinked or tattered ragged cap" is the descendent of Harper's hood it would seem that red is correct.

Beginning near Micklegate bar, the long proclamation quoted above was promulgated at:

Holy Trinity Priory (now Priory Street)

and they rode down Micklegate for repeat the proclamation *at*

the **corners of the streets on the west side of Ousebridge** (possibly including Jacob's Well, *what is now* George Hudson Street, North Street, Skeldergate)

over Ouse Bridge *to*

the **corner of Castlegate and Ousegate** (Spurriergate)

along Coney Street *to*

the **corner of Coney Street and Stonegate** (St Helen's Square)

Along Stonegate *to*

the **south door of the Minster**

through Bootham bar *to*

St. Marygate tower

Then they returned through Bootham Bar to ride down Petergate, Colliergate and Fossgate *to*

Walmgate and then returned *to*

Pavement for a final proclamation in the market place (Market Cross at the outside the east end of All Saints).

YULEGIRTHOL occurred later in the year, precisely on St Thomas's Day (**21st December**). The Sheriffs would go to mass at All Saints Pavement and, after mass, preside over proclamation of the **Yulegirthol** at the pillory (was this by the Market Cross, outside the east end of the church?) which was performed by one of the four

sergeants after a blast on a brazen horn which was at other times at the toll booth. Thereafter, the four sergeants would go each to one of the four bars (Micklegate bar, Bootham bar, Monk bar and Walmgate bar), each with a horn, to make further proclamations of the **Yulegirthol**.

Historically, there is no record of the waits' presence at this ceremony and the Yulegirthol was a brief proclamation, the same that we use today on the "Sheriffs' Riding" which takes place on 21st December.

Today it is common knowledge (and our practice) that after the Sheriffs' Riding the participants celebrated with "venison pasty and pints of sherry". I can find no evidence of this, so can it be that it is a *tradition of so great antiquity, the rise or original of it cannot be found out? Perhaps this document will provoke the emergence of historical support for this merry custom.*

James Merryweather, 2004