

Chapter 9

‘Things said or sung a thousand times’: customary society and oral culture in rural England, 1700–1900

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Things cleared away then down she sits
And tells her tales by starts and fits
Not willing to lose time or toil
She knits or sews and talks the while¹

John Clare’s long poem sequence *The Shepherd’s Calendar* celebrates English rural popular culture or, at least, that part of it represented by the local customs of his own village of Helpston in Northamptonshire in the late eighteenth century. Rural popular culture was most often despised and derided by contemporaries whose judgements have been shared by some later commentators alike as merely a degraded reflection of urban civilization or as an irredeemably backward product of social and economic structures rooted in ignorance and folly and most usually thought of as surviving from earlier times. Historians have, in general, noted the decline of oral tradition in the English countryside as an early stage on the road to spreading popular literacy. One writes: ‘If the oral tradition largely defined the pre-industrial popular culture, the significance of its decline revolved around the question of superstition. The world of those whose horizons were limited by the oral tradition was suffused with the supernatural.’² In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, as in earlier periods, rural popular culture was the subject for humour or condemnation by elite culture or was treated as the object of crusade by reformers and radicals in the name of reason. Rural popular culture was also subjected to attack by the propertied who regarded customary ways of life in the countryside and their cultural expression as an obstacle to improvement and to progress through economic liberalism.³ Rural

popular culture was vulnerable to such attack not least because it was an oral culture rather than a written or document-based culture. As Clare's reminiscences show, however, orality provided a richness of discourse to Helpston's popular culture which never left him and which for many English rural communities sustained the rural labourer's world until well into the twentieth century.⁴ Far from declining, oral tradition retained cultural vitality and injected vibrancy which differentiated rural popular culture by locality, by region or by agricultural area in the form of accent, dialect and local knowledge.

John Clare's work illustrates how village culture embraced both written and printed forms but remained essentially an oral world. *The Shepherd's Calendar* is paradoxically the printed record of an oral culture, a literary description of a customary world, an expression of popular cultural life for an elite readership. Although Clare's original intentions were compromised by his editor, John Taylor, who insisted on correcting Clare's grammar and punctuation and in deleting his dialect terms, Taylor's unsympathetic editing did not entirely destroy the chronicle of English village culture and the extent to which its customary framework was maintained by the evidence of the spoken word or the rhythm of song. From *January's* description of the tavern where the printed word of newspaper or *Old Moore's Almanac* 'a theme for talk supplis' to *December's* account of a visit from the seasonal wassail singer who 'oft for pence and spicy ale ... tells her tale', Clare's poem reveals that the rural popular culture of which he was a product was largely an oral one – notwithstanding the co-existence and close relationship between orality and various forms of popular literature derived from and reinforced by the popular oral world. Literacy levels were not the key determinant of the extent of oral culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural Britain, although these rose considerably through the period as work by David Vincent and others has shown. Rather, oral culture in the countryside was a composite framework binding human experience and perception, and combining oral and popular literature together to form a diversity of rural popular cultures; defined by region, type of agriculture work, gender, and age.⁵

In Clare's world, word and song accompany work and leisure; chant and verse describe seasonal rituals and customs; narratives and tales fill the domestic interior; gossip and news disseminate the conversation between neighbours; knowledge is passed on and lessons learned; and the pace of village life and culture is measured by what Clare refers to as 'things said or sung a thousand times' when recalling cottage storytelling.⁶

Historians have tended to collude with the views of contemporary critics of rural popular culture, because the very lack of documentary sources and the difficult nature of remaining records have obscured the richness and importance of village life and labour or rendered it problematical to recover. Charting the decline of aspects of rural popular culture is a familiar process

from John Aubrey's writing in the seventeenth century to the prose and poetry of Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷ The flight of the oral tradition in face of rising popular literacy through the nineteenth century is the orthodox explanation for the disappearance of customary society.⁸ Similarly, 'traveller's tales' have suggested to recent historians that all was mired in superstition and ignorance steadily dispelled by the advance of literacy and reason, a view which accords with that of many contemporaries. There are exceptions. Some historians – notably the late Edward Thompson and Raphael Samuel – have attempted to redefine the nature of English rural popular culture, and rural society in general, in more vibrant ways.⁹ Samuel has written of the historian's vocation as placing him 'far above the madding crowd; he surveys them [popular rural society], retrospectively, from a height, as objects of reform rather than as the active agents – or subjects – of change'.¹⁰ Thompson used the term 'customary consciousness' to describe the relationship between successive generations and the contest between elite and popular groups.¹¹ Thompson argued that even the growing impact of popular literacy in rural England can be related to the overall importance of oral culture: 'Traditions', he wrote, 'are perpetuated largely through oral transmission, with its repertoire of anecdote and of narrative example; where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products, such as chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, "last dying speeches" and anecdotal accounts of crime, tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives'.¹² This is exactly the world recorded by Clare in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in *The Shepherd's Calendar*. In support of this idea, Barry Reay has written compellingly of the 'orality of print'.¹³ Far from subverting or displacing oral culture, popular printing tended to draw from its forms and to reinforce its idioms. Literacy and orality in rural England were mutually supporting during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Comprehended within these terms is the notion that the relationship between social groups in town or village, workplace or place of worship, leisure venue or customary space, ritual location or realm of memory, was a reciprocal one in which rights and responsibilities were defined, disputed, defended, exercised or contested by oral, dramatic or ritual discourse.¹⁴ Whether this relationship was based upon consensus or conflict, social groups in the English village confronted one another across a landscape defined by reference to past and future but enacted in the present through orally transmitted customs and rituals in which roles, social positions and obligations were closely delineated by oral tradition. This discourse, termed 'folklore' by some in the nineteenth century who claimed proprietorial rights in its 'collection', in preference to the cumbersome but more expressive earlier term 'popular antiquities', used in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,

provided the immediate context for village life.¹⁵ Popular voices in the village were the most important instrument for the defence of custom, whether raised in defiance, used in song, softened in storytelling, made solemn in oath-taking, given legal force in court testimony, passing on wisdom, describing the local environment, defaming a neighbour, claiming a right, demanding a ritual dole, pointing out a significant feature of the landscape, declaiming the part of 'King George' in the local Christmas mummings' play, singing in the local west gallery band or seasonal ritual, crying out the injustice of food market manipulations, or 'hallooing largesse' in harvest to celebrate abundance and supplement harvest wages.

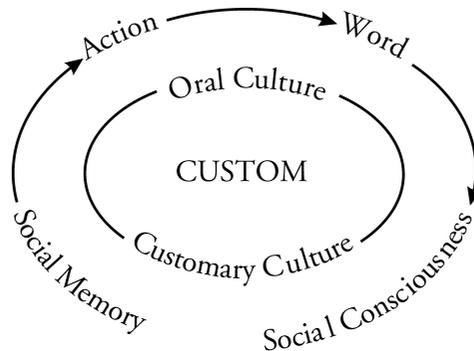
Customary consciousness relied for its formation and transmission on an oral culture. Indeed, it might even be suggested that it was the existence of a vibrant oral popular culture which provided the basis for customary society in the English countryside for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until those popular voices were drowned out by the noise of agricultural machinery and the sonorous prohibition of statute law, to be replaced by new forms of printed discourse and the clamour of changing patterns of rural work and leisure.

Oral culture has at least three aspects. Firstly, it provides a generalized environmental context in which social groups work out their relationships and transact their social, economic and political affairs; secondly, oral culture is itself the medium of expression for those relationships and transactions; and, thirdly, it is the product of those same processes, providing definitive and enduring outcomes in the form of a legacy for the future. As Thompson has suggested, oral culture can be the single dominant characteristic of a society or it can co-exist with literacy in all its forms.¹⁶

For an oral culture to sustain itself certain features are required to be present. Discourse between individuals and groups takes place by word of mouth. Social venues and occasions exist for the expression and transmission of oral culture.¹⁷ The social environment is conducive to forming and using memory tools such as formulaic songs and rituals. Clare wrote: 'I heard my mother's memory tell' as if memory itself was empowered with the possibility of speech. 'In simple prose or simpler rhymes' he recounts that she retold stories from her own experience, or from local tales, or from popular stories common in chapbook or ballad literature.¹⁸ Modes of work and leisure in the English countryside provided proximity and opportunity for oral discourse or depended upon oral forms for learning or practical demonstration. Oral culture operated most successfully at the local level or in the small-scale community where it was based upon a shared language of values, customs, ideas, songs, symbols, rituals and ceremonies within a common experience. In these circumstances, popular culture was most usually transmitted by observed practice, by repetition and accumulation based upon memory and word of mouth. These characteristics have been well described by social

anthropologists and historians for certain kinds of societies where different identities, languages and historical records can be described in opposition to the dominant hegemonic culture. The experience of Wales, Scotland and Ireland within the hegemonic construction of a Britain dominated by English culture provides an historical example although, upon investigation, a complex emerges in which social, institutional and cultural contexts operated to form and reform relationships not necessarily resulting in the sudden death of orality.¹⁹ The situation in rural England differed only in the extent to which it was dialect and regional form rather than language which formed the medium of discourse. The importance of oral culture within English rural society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and especially its significance for customary consciousness or the ideology of custom, are often overlooked by historians frustrated by a fragmentary or partial record or where inspired to document a radical or rationalist triumph.²⁰

Custom required an appeal to the legitimation of the past in the form of repeated annual or regular testimony in ritual discourse in the present which made an unambiguous, oral or vocal affirmation and declaration of 'witness' for the future by the participants. Custom took the form of personal and collective testimony legitimated by deed. These testimonies consisted of oral and visual signifiers which gave form and meaning to the participants' actions, and which emphasized that such behaviour was in accordance with custom or *lex loci* and that due response was required. An orally communicated consensus was proclaimed to the local community in the form of customary collective action through word and deed. In rural England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the local community was a spatial and temporal construction delineated by shouts, songs, chants, tellings and re-tellings, through a range of annual perambulatory rituals which provided a memory tool to access the mental map of the village sanctioned by its members and, sometimes, legitimated by reference to Church and State. Popular culture in the village shaped a circle of customary consciousness based upon oral discourse, which can be marked out and represented in diagrammatic form as shown below:



Custom was therefore reinforced and bound by a systematic and regular structure of oral witness and ritual performance. Most accounts of rural society in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries omit any notion of popular culture or customary consciousness or relegate it to the margins in accounts of pastimes or leisure pursuits or quaint superstitions and picturesque survivals. The relevant volume of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* describes a social structure, social institutions and social activities in terms of formal institutions and official culture. There are separate accounts of the rural labourer, as a rank in the table of social status, and of the labourer's pleasures alongside similar pieces on the country house and hunting, which gloss over the existence of an orally transmitted rural popular culture still vibrant at the time of the Great Exhibition,²¹ and still distinctive at the beginning of the Great War.

More sympathetic writers, whilst admitting the fact of rural popular culture, describe it as being in decline and decaying under the pressure of rural depopulation. One account concludes that, 'following the geographical and social intermixing engendered by the Great War, the year 1918 ... finally and symbolically clanged shut, like a blood-stained cast-iron gate, on an already dwindling cultural tradition that had existed in one form or another over more than a thousand years'.²² These words concur with the steady witness of the late Laurie Lee who was born at the beginning of the Great War.²³

It was the attack on customary consciousness through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which undermined the English rural oral tradition, and led to the final decline of the labourer's cultural world. Historians who are deaf to those customary voices do not hear a distinctive rural popular culture at all. Concerning village benefit club processions and festivals at Whitsuntide, Alfred Williams might have been describing the general aspects of much popular culture, when he concluded: 'The village fair and church festival were condemned because simple people assembled together to indulge in simple amusements ... they [elite culture] said it was hateful and abominable, pure barbarism, it was time it was put a stop to; they could see all manner of evil in it, it was nothing but a 'drunken, rowdy show; a public pest and a nuisance.'²⁴ Unsympathetic accounts are written entirely from the perspective of formal institutions and official culture and are constructed from the records of the elites for whom the destruction of custom was a necessary step in the progress towards an all-consuming ideology of possessive individualism.²⁵

Some anthropologists define the term 'oral tradition' as a set of cultural processes and products which are passed down through time in an unwritten form.²⁶ One cultural anthropologist has written: 'In its most general sense, oral tradition comprises any established custom, set of beliefs, or repeated routine that exhibits some continuity from the past (or is believed to do so) and is transmitted not through writing but by word of mouth.'²⁷

In English rural society the relationship between custom and oral culture reached a crucial stage during the period from the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries when rapid population growth, economic and industrial change, new moral imperatives and the attack on customary consciousness produced crisis in the rural community. During this period, oral culture reinforced customary consciousness and allowed the statement of new and vibrant customary forms which, far from being backward or primitive, were progressive and dynamic. The village benefit club walking at Whitsun is one example of such innovative creation. The historians of these new forms of customary consciousness are rare but one annalist, drawn from the world of oral rural culture itself, wrote that, until the coming of the National Health Insurance Act in 1910, village benefit clubs offered the only protection to rural labourers and their families from the uncertainties of sickness or injury.²⁸

From these voluntary associations, grew other kinds of democratic co-operative societies. The great event of the customary calendar in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was the benefit club day at Whitsun and the procession through the village of club members, the annual dinner and the various exhibitions of garden produce and music bands from the associated clubs and societies. Benefit clubs required an organizational structure of committees, elected representatives, minute books, secretaries and treasurers and were, occasionally, presided over by the local clergyman or publican, but the annual Whitsun procession with its club banners, medals and sashes, local band and club staffs with ornate brass heads or willow wands, followed by dinner and dancing, links it firmly to the oral tradition in which previous rural festivals had been rooted such as the parish Whitsun ale. A description of a Cotswold ale in the late eighteenth century could be matched by the photographs of late nineteenth-century benefit club days in Cotswold villages such as Ebrington. An observer of the former wrote:

These sports are resorted to by great numbers of young people of both sexes, are conducted in the following manner. Two persons are chosen, previous to the meeting, to be Lord and Lady ... A large empty barn, or some such building, is provided for the Lord's hall, and fitted up with seats to accommodate the company. Here they assemble to dance and to regale in the best manner their circumstances and the place will afford, and each young fellow treats his girl with a ribbon, or favour. The Lord and Lady honour the hall with their presence, attended by the steward, sword-bearer, purse-bearer and mace-bearer, with their sacred badges or ensigns of office. They have likewise a page, or train-bearer, and a jester dressed in a parti coloured jacket, whose ribaldry and gesticulation contribute not a little to the entertainment.²⁹

The Ebrington photograph, dated 1903, is not completely removed from

this much earlier description. The benefit club procession was accompanied by a village band consisting of brass players and a bass drum; members of the entertainment committee rode on an open cart, sitting on chairs; women and girls, although marching on a separate day, were accompanied by a banjo player; the procession was preceded by the Ebrington club banner. Earlier versions of the banner, dating from 1856, depicted the associative nature of the club with the phrases 'Unity is Strength' and 'Let Brotherly Love Continue'. The central image of the banner showed five farm workers combining to pull up a stump of a tree, at their feet, a sickle, pick, shovel and rake. As with so many of these banners, similar to trades union banners, the maker was G. Tutil of the City Road, London.³⁰ On death, benefit club staffs were broken and the brass heads were either interred with the deceased member or kept by relatives as a memento. Rather than interpreting new customary forms in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, as degraded or controlled versions of the older popular calendar festivals, it should, perhaps, be noted that the connection between them was stronger and more continuous and linked them together within the framework of oral culture. Far from the degenerate survivalism of traditional culture, or from the world we have lost, beloved of popular antiquaries and early folklore alike, a revitalized customary consciousness underpinned a distinctive rural popular culture in which orality remained the medium of expression and transmission from the late eighteenth century until the years after the First World War.

Oral culture in rural England was linked closely to popular memory. Within customary society, memory provided the continuity for both individual and collective action by those in the local community. Oral culture, however, also had a close relationship to printed forms. There was no dichotomy between popular oral culture and popular literacy. Indeed, the rise of cheap printed materials such as ballad sheets and chapbooks, available throughout rural England at local fairs and markets and distributed by 'higglers' and other itinerant traders, both reinforced and was underpinned by oral culture. John Clare wrote:

Both my parents was illiterate to the last degree, my mother knew not a single letter, and superstition went so far with her that she believed the higher parts of learning was the blackest arts of witchcraft, and that no other means could attain them; my father, could read a little in a bible or testament, and was very fond of the superstitious tales that are hawked about a sheet for a penny, such as old Nixons Prophecies, Mother Bunches Fairy Tales and Mother Shiptons legacy etc, etc, he was likewise fond of Ballads and I have heard him make a boast of it over his horn of ale with his merry companions at the Blue Bell public house which was next door that he could sing or recite above a hundred; he had a tolerable good voice, and was often called to sing at those convivals of bacchanalian merry makings ...³¹

In the 1890s, Henry Burstow of Horsham in Sussex stated that his father could sing nearly 200 songs and Henry himself could list some 420 songs from 'Boney's Farewell to Paris' to 'Turnips Are Round'. He recollected: 'In learning and retaining all my songs my memory had seemed to work quite spontaneously, in much the same way as the faculties of seeing and hearing; many of the songs I learnt at first time of hearing, others, longer ones, I have learnt upon hearing them twice through; none, not even '*Tom Cladpole's Trip to London*', nor '*Jan Cladpole's Trip to Merricur*', each of which has 155 verses, has ever given me any trouble to acquire'. Henry Burstow learned his songs from his father and mother, his brother-in-law and a network of friends, neighbours and fellow workers, and in public houses in nearby towns and villages; and '... the remainder I learnt from ballad sheets I bought as they were being hawked about at the fairs, and at other times from other printed material'.³² Burstow was clearly remarkable but not entirely unusual. His world was exactly that of John Clare's father 100 years earlier insofar as the nexus of orality within rural popular culture was concerned. Popular memory was the medium for the transfer of oral culture and was decisive, as can be demonstrated by a consideration of four areas in which oral culture provided both a general context and the particular mechanism of transmission. These are: ritual and ceremony; law and custom; knowledge and wisdom; and environment and community.

The first area for consideration is annual ritual and ceremony, defined by custom, conveyed by oral discourse and operated as a local chronology for experience in the English village. Clare's village of Helpston is typical in this respect and Clare provides a calendar of customary events which linked social groups and offered opportunities for rituals of social cohesion and social disunity alike. In 1825, Clare recorded the Helpston customary calendar in a letter to William Hone, the radical printer. He noted the following customs: St Mark Eve's divination practised by young men and women, Whitsun good luck wishing at the Eastwell spring with the drinking of sugar and water, processing on Holy Thursday, May Day sports and garlanding, mumming at Christmas (which Clare refers to as the 'Morris Dance'), St Thomas's Eve divination and Plough Monday 'plough bullocks'.³³ This chronology which Clare recorded and amplified in his other work linked a variety of activities from midwinter perambulations to spring collective rituals around Easter, Rogationtide, May and Whitsun, to work-based secular events concerning the pattern of agricultural labour culminating in harvest and Michaelmas, to autumn perambulation customs. The common elements in all these forms were: firstly, the reliance upon popular memory for the purpose, route, meaning, structure and form of the particular ritual or ceremony; secondly, the collection of community largesse; thirdly, the provision of an opportunity for social disruption as well as the renewal of ideas of social cohesion; and fourthly, the use of set oral forms such as

songs, rhymes, greetings, verses, challenges, incantations, chants, slogans, exchanges, ritual texts, collective labels. Whilst these are not unique to Clare's Helpston, their local specificity is emphasized by dialect, song form, play form and rhyme form in a way which identified them as a part of Helpston's oral culture.

The text of the Mayer's song from another English village, Swinton, illustrates, for example, many of these elements. The two versions of the May song which were recorded by chance in the mid-nineteenth century both aimed at the collection of largesse and were examples of 'doling customs'. Their joint existence indicated change although the correspondent who noted down the 'May songs' stated that his informant told him that they '*must* be sung before the first of May'.³⁴ Acceptance of the legitimacy of such behaviour by mid-century was not universal in Victorian England. Support for such activities was increasingly withdrawn by middle-class patrons or only given on the strict understanding that events were to be orderly and seemly, controlled by established institutions such as the local school or church. Maying, May carolling and garlanding or green boughing on the first of May were common to many places in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Local variation was indicated in the form and structure of the calendar custom prevalent in a specific area or region, the shape and construction of the garland and the form of the carol. At Swinton, in Lancashire, the custom was recorded in 1861. The leader of the band of Mayers was Job Knight who, attesting to the legitimacy of the custom, stated that their visits usually began in mid-April and ended on the evening of 30 April and was within memory from the last thirty years. Two songs were used, the old May song and the new May song, the first of which brought luck to the household and concluded with a clear reference to the custom's orality. May was 'sung' in Swinton.

So now we're going to leave you, in peace and plenty here,
for the Summer springs so fresh, green and gay;
we shall not sing you May again until another year,
for to draw you these cold winters away.³⁵

The form of 'May garlanding' which had been once common in the eighteenth century – a youth festival centred on a tall May pole taken from the woodland with distinctive features of social disruption – was widely condemned and failed to continue to command support in the Victorian age. At either end of the process of the application of social control to Maying stand Samuel Bamford and Flora Thompson. Bamford, recalling his village of Middleton at the end of the eighteenth century, wrote that May-eve was 'Mischief neet' when a complex symbolic code was invoked by use of greenery of different types or natural materials to indicate social criticism of the inhabitants of each dwelling. The deposit of greenery before the door was

The spoken word

accompanied with general disruptive acts such as setting cattle astray, treading down of gardens or taking gates off hinges.³⁶ These symbols were interpreted by reference to mnemonic rhymes such as those used in Lancashire. For example,

Wicken [mountain Ash], sweet chicken
Oak, for a joke
Ash, for trash.³⁷

Flora Thompson wrote of 'May garlanding' in her Oxfordshire childhood in the 1870s as a children's calendar custom, organized around the school-room, where the May garland was carried in procession from door to door beginning with the rectory and the squire's house, on a seven-mile tour of the village and its surrounding farms.³⁸

Doling customs, defined by reference to an oral declaration that the particular visit was sanctioned by the legitimation of the customary calendar, occurred at various set times of the year, principally, Christmas and New Year, Easter, Maytide, Whitsun, Rogationtide, sheep shearing, haymaking and harvest, and the 'doling days' of autumn and early winter which preceded Christmas and which coincided with certain saints' days such as those of St Catherine, St Clement and St Thomas.³⁹

The oral declaration of the visitant set out the elements underpinning the specific form of customary collective action. The visitant entered into a ritual discourse with the householder which proclaimed purpose, identity, local affiliation, legitimation, saluted the household, claimed a specified dole or other customary right and affirmed that this was an annual visit rather than a random occurrence of begging. Such songs or rhymes were ritual calling-cards for the visitants. Cheshire 'soul caking', also common throughout the north midlands in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was begun with verses of salute:

You gentlemen of England, pray you now draw near
To these few lines, and you shall soon hear
Sweet melody of music all on this evening clear
For we are come a-souling for apples and strong beer.⁴⁰

The attack on customary ideology between 1750 and 1850, associated with demographic, economic and industrial change, and the transformation of English rural society, illustrated that oral culture provided an affirming and a defining framework for the remaking of custom and customary consciousness in the second half of the nineteenth century. This process was both dynamic and progressive. A renewed and vibrant rural plebeian culture emerged as a result. Far from being an example of degenerate survivalism or traditional culture in disintegration, oral culture in English rural society provided a cohesive element to customary consciousness.

The second area where oral tradition continued to have a significant role was the interaction between law and custom and between literate and oral cultures. Illustrations of the relationship can be found in the first twenty-eight reports of the Charities' Commissioners from 1819 to 1835. Some examples from Buckinghamshire suffice to show how oral culture transmitted vital evidence of rights and benefits for the village poor which were then recorded in the reports of the Charities' Commissioners and, without which, such rights and benefits might have been extinguished. At Wingrave, for example, a 'small piece of land ... was given in exchange at the Enclosure in 1798, for land "left for the purpose of furnishing rushes for the church on the feast Sunday" ... The rent of this land is received by the parish clerk, who provides grass to straw the church on the village feast day.'⁴¹ The customary practice of church rushbearing became, in this example, the symbolic legitimation for the social calendrial rites which established the feast Sunday as a continuing village convivial festival.

At Horton, it was recorded: 'The Reverend William Brown, Rector of Horton from 1796 to 1851, bequeathed £500, to be given in bread to the poor who shall attend morning service in the church.' Brown's charity, preserved in local customary consciousness and recorded by the Charities' Commissioners, reaffirmed a dole right for the poor of Horton parish.⁴² A further example from Bledlow will suffice to indicate the importance of oral testimony to customary consciousness. Under the Bledlow Enclosure Act 'A piece of land called the scrubbs, containing about 20 acres, was allotted to the poor in lieu of common rights.'⁴³ This provision was drawn to the attention of the commissioners and was duly noted. In these Buckinghamshire examples, oral testimony preserved the 'mental map' of the local community, aided social memory in place of documentary records and archives, provided an interpretation of the local topography and its history, underlined local customary leisure patterns and calendar events and protected the legal memory of doles and benefits for the local poor.

All these features are present in the account of Gang Monday land in the parish of Edgcott, Buckinghamshire, recorded by the Charities' Commissioners:

There is about an acre of land in the parish so-called, in respect of which Robert Markham, esq., pays the overseers about 3l yearly. This used formerly to be distributed in cakes and beer to the tenants, two cakes each and as much beer as they chose to drink at the time; the residue was distributed to all poor persons who came for it, whether parishioners or not. Since the inclosure of the parish about 30 years ago, this sum has been distributed about Christmas in coals, to all poor householders, parishioners, who came for it, in equal shares. Before the inclosure the poor people had a right to get fuel on the common ... No accounts have been kept. We recommend that they should be kept in future.⁴⁴

This is an oral record of an elaborate set of entitlements and social occasions, captured and transferred into a documentary record at the time of the commissioners' enquiry.

An entire history is here preserved by oral testimony. Ganging days were the dates of the Rogationtide parish perambulations or processions – communal calendar customs designed to preserve not only the memory of the parish boundaries but also common rights including those of the poor. The cakes and ale dole was to provide for those who accompanied the procession. At Edgcott the memory of the custom, extinguished at enclosure, was preserved in oral culture along with the memory of the fuel rights of the poor by that date commuted to a Christmas dole of coal. All would have been extinguished without the oral transmission of these memories as an accurate historical record of events in the parish.

Buckinghamshire calendrical rights of commensality were also defined by oral testimony as was the case in the Buckinghamshire village of Cuddington where 'one sack of wheat and two sacks of barley are given to the poor on St Thomas's Day'.⁴⁵ The date of this pre-Christmas dole right was 21 December and customary practices of collecting money, food and drink were widespread on this date. At Cuddington, an elaboration of the right was preserved in oral culture and annual collective action was duly reported to the Charities' Commissioners. Similarly, fuel rights were underpinned. At Ellesborough at enclosure 'an allotment of about 50 acres of scrub and underwood was awarded to the poor of the parish for fuel, which they cut for themselves during the winter when they have occasion for it'.⁴⁶ Customary consciousness, reinforced by word and deed, defined fuel rights and gave poor people access to be used at their discretion.

That poor people might take action 'for themselves' was increasingly denied them after 1834. At Great Wishford in Wiltshire, such fuel rights were defended by annual ritual and the oral declamation: 'Grovely, Grovely, and all Grovely!' The shout, made round the village before dawn on Oak Apple Day, 29 May, and before the altar at Salisbury Cathedral, remains the most striking example of the oral defence of custom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴⁷

As R. J. Olney wrote of attitudes towards literacy in nineteenth-century rural Lincolnshire: 'Why should the poor need to write? The labourers were not expected to play any part in parish affairs.' Oral culture forced the poor to the attention of their parish governors in a way which could not be ignored. Olney, referring to customary consciousness as the 'old culture', pointed out that 'The old culture was slow to die, for it was not lacking in strength and suppleness to adapt itself to changing conditions.'⁴⁸ Orality was the means by which customary consciousness was transmitted, adapted and reinforced throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in rural England.

Calendrical rights, related to dole or fuel customs, such as Guy Fawkes or 'Bonfire Day' as it was known in nineteenth-century rural England, used oral testimony and ritual to proclaim their legitimacy. 'Remembering the fifth [of] November', in the words of the chant of visitants or collectors of largesse in the streets, was simplified to 'memb'ring' in the popular tongue and, with blackened faces and in costume, householders and passers-by were told that 'memb'ring' was the purpose and that the dole was a legitimate accompaniment to the custom itself.⁴⁹ In Lancashire, the popular voice called the date 'Plot Night'.⁵⁰ In an example from late Victorian rural Hertfordshire, the verses of the song used on the occasion proclaimed loyal intent by the shout 'God Save the Queen' even though Queen Victoria herself had decided by royal proclamation to drop the '[f]orm of Prayer of thanksgiving to be used yearly upon the fifth day of November, for the happy deliverance of King James I and the Estates of England etc.' from the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1859.⁵¹ The response of plebeian village society was, in part, the evolution of bonfire clubs, especially in the southern counties of England but 'memb'ring' in most cases continued up to and beyond the First World War, with village societies collecting subscriptions, organizing winter carnivals and donning disguise in the form of clowns, Zulus and Red Indians, in order to maintain the social basis of this key pre-Christmas calendrical festival appropriated by popular culture from its original political and state framework, in order to affirm local community loyalties and links against all-comers.⁵²

Edwin Grey wrote of his recollections of rural life in Hertfordshire in the 1860s and 1870s. He recalled that 'many of the children left [British and National schools] at 10 years of age to go to work, and as they had then little or no occasion for writing and 'summing, these two accomplishments were commonly lost though the reading of the Bible still remained'. The acquired skills of literacy were not put to use as the world in which they moved was essentially an oral one as was reflected in the richness of life in the hamlets of 'Chapel Row', 'Pimlico', 'Hatching Green' and the 'Bowling Alley' in the southern part of the parish of Harpenden in Grey's childhood.⁵³

The oral world to which the railway did not come until 1867 was still one in which gleaners threshed their gleaned wheat in an old barn by flail; where benefits continued such as cherry-gathering, gathering dead wood for fuel, or 'wooding' as it was referred to in the popular tongue, and where the annual Hiring Fair occurred around Michaelmas with labourers wearing the 'badges' of their trades, whipcord for the ploughmen and a wisp of cow hair for the cowmen; ten o'clock provided the opportunity of a short break from labour for 'beever', a word which would have been familiar to John Clare, and the harvest brought with it the extra wages and allowance in beer which made up what the labourers referred to as 'their month' and where gleaners

returned to the hamlets with the shout of acclamation which concluded the in-gathering of the crop:

Wheat, wheat, harvest home
see what great bundles we bring home.⁵⁴

The oral transmission of knowledge and wisdom held Grey's childhood world together even though his community was entering the late Victorian period. Men were known locally by their nicknames such as 'Clipper Weston', 'Slappy Twidell', 'Wacky Russell' and 'Slenderman Heath'. Words were shortened and pronunciations omitted unnecessary syllables such as the diminutive form most commonly used in speech.⁵⁵ The Statute Fair was known locally as 'The Statty Fair'.⁵⁶ Alternative wisdom and belief was widespread and 'rough music' was still occasionally to be heard in the hamlets.

Place names also went through a transformation brought about by the popular tongue. Grey recalled that "The name "Bowling Alley" was hardly ever, amongst this agricultural community, pronounced properly as written. Until then it was spoken as Bow'n' Alley, or more often still as Bow'n' olly, for the labourers would never use long words (if they could possibly avoid it), but would always shorten them".⁵⁷

Grey's childhood world was a richly oral one in which accent mingled with dialect words and shortened terms to produce a highly local but deeply coloured discourse. In referring to the old word 'flack' meaning to comb, he gives the example of 'A mother would say to her little girl: "come 'ere an' let me flack yer' air out, it's all of a tangle".' But this was distinguished from 'flacking' for quick, sharp movements as in the example of a mother saying to her child 'keep still; don't keep flacking about'.⁵⁸ Grey's was a village community in which the village crier, one Tom Lovett, still announced notice of meetings and other important local events.⁵⁹ News was still passed by word of mouth rather than through the medium of the local press and the ballad seller was a regular visitor to the village, carrying sensationalist accounts of murders or trials, exactly as would have been recognized by John Clare. Grey remembered that the ballad seller '... would pass slowly along the roadway by the front of houses, singing some harrowing verses made up specially for the occasion, the singer fitting some sort of a drawling tune to the words, the more harrowing and bloodcurdling he could make the sordid theme appear the better in all probability would be the sale of his papers, for many of the people would buy whether they could read it or not; the verses would be there for anybody to read who wished. These verses were printed on single sheets of cheap paper and sold at one penny or halfpenny per sheet.' Grey could even recall the last such ballad seller he encountered, a man 'singing and selling verses relating to the murder of Miss Harriet Lane by Henry Wainright whose terrible murder took place in 1875'.⁶⁰

Information, news, knowledge, the passing of wisdom between generations or of gossip among neighbours was essentially an oral transaction in rural England well towards the end of the nineteenth century. It was not literacy itself but cheap printed alternatives to ballads which ultimately saw their demise.⁶¹ The currency of knowledge in the English village community until the 1920s was the spoken word. Conversation was the natural medium of social intercourse in which local lore and practical wisdom was transferred effortlessly from inhabitant to stranger, parent to child, old labourer to young, neighbour to neighbour and wife to husband. Those outside the nexus of local discourse mistook silence for ignorance or miscomprehended dialect and lore for simplicity. Those who took the trouble to comprehend the meaning could share in the world of oral communication. At the end of the nineteenth century, some mediators such as Alfred Williams and George Sturt attempted to present this world for a middle-class urban readership. The former recorded the comments of the Surrey farmworker Fred Grover, called Bettesworth in Sturt's accounts, at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Queer anecdotes came from him as plentiful as ever, and shrewd observations. Now it would be of his harvesting in Sussex that he told; now, of an adventure with a troublesome horse, or an experience on the scaffolding of a building, and again he would gossip of his garden, or of his neighbours, or of the old village life, or would discuss some scrap of news picked up at the public-house.'⁶² Sturt recorded these conversations for an urban public titillated by rural ways before the First World War. His purpose was clear but this cannot disguise the accuracy of the oral world he described. In one conversation, Sturt noted:

He touched on scythes for a moment, and then glanced off to name a distant village ... and to tell of a family of blacksmiths who once lived there. 'They used to make purty well all sorts o'edge-tools. And they earned a name fo't, too, didn't they? I've seen as many as four of 'em over there at a axe ... There was one part of making an axe,' said Bettesworth, 'as they'd never let anybody see 'em at.'⁶³

Local knowledge was combined with anecdote, observation, practical experience and reflection, in a stream of orally transmitted wisdom. Alfred Williams made no apology to his readership for introducing his untutored voices. 'I am proud of every single one of them', he wrote; 'some of the dialect and narrative may appear a little barbarous to those of refined tastes, but I can assure them it is all accurate and characteristic, typical of the countryside still ... I have found the villagers industrious, sturdy in principle, breezily optimistic, cheerful, philosophic, and exceedingly kind-hearted, but poor ...'.⁶⁴ Williams recorded an account of Henry Brusden of Coate who knew Richard Jefferies in the latter's boyhood. 'His memory', wrote Williams, 'is remarkable; he can quote poems and recite rhymes innumerable, and compose them himself, too ...'.⁶⁵

The practice of gleaning was maintained in the hamlets in which Edwin Grey grew up and his recollections of the custom indicate the extent to which this essentially collective activity was organized, maintained and continued within an oral environment. The gleaning gang of the Bowling Alley was organized by Mrs Day '[S]he it was who decided as to our route; to which farm and to which field we should go; the other women told of information obtained from their husbands as to the progress of the harvesting at the respective farms on which they worked, when such and such a field would probably be cleared and so on. This information was discussed and the final decision as to our destination rested upon Mrs Day, and to whichever farm she decided upon, all agreed and so started off.' The timing of gleaning depended critically upon oral information and the accurate judgment of the leader. If too early, the gleaning gang had to wait about before beginning because 'it was an unwritten law that gleaning should not commence until the last shock was carried'. If too late, other gleaning parties would have occupied the field already.⁶⁶

The fourth area where the orality of rural popular culture can be examined concerns the network of community and local lore, 'folk' tales and narratives, histories, explanations and descriptions for the physical environment surrounding the village.⁶⁷ Oral culture operated as a form of binding structure in which local lore was a shared resource from which were constructed identities, memories and histories. Orality in rural England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the medium for the formation and transmission of social memory in which were located the individual, his or her relatives and their neighbours and the local community as a whole. This structure might look like the hierarchy of social strata with which historians of the Victorian countryside are familiar but the common framework was horizontally-organized within an immediate environment whose past, present and future were expressed orally. The oral transmission of local customary culture described the village community in both temporal and spatial terms, and although this structure could be regarded with indifference by those whose social positions led them to withdraw from all but contractual relations with the labouring poor and their families, its manifestations presented themselves regularly in an interconnected world of oral discourse, beliefs and rituals. The naming of the locality, its features, fields, farms, parts and places was fixed in oral culture and the mental map of the community was affirmed in customary consciousness through oral discourse.

Edward Thomas's long evocation of the continuity of rural culture embodied in the universal country figure 'Lob', points to the interconnection of local lore and narrative and the 'naming' of the community's surroundings as the oral fixitive of that culture. He writes:

Yet Lob has thirteen hundred names for a fool,
And though he never could spare time for school
To unteach what the fox so well expressed,
On biting the cock's head off, – Quietness is best, –
He can talk quite as well as anyone
After his thinking is forgot and done.⁶⁸

Thomas's idea that there was an enduring continuity in rural popular culture at the beginning of the twentieth century is a corrective to those who see its demise as entirely brought about before the First World War. The world of John Clare's village of Helpston would not have been unfamiliar to Edwin Grey and Grey's Bowling Alley would have retained both the temporal and spatial ordering, through a vigorous oral popular culture, with which Clare would have been acquainted. Both men shared a customary consciousness which was expressed in oral terms. The customary calendar in rural Hertfordshire in the 1870s, while different in content, was similar in form to Clare's Northamptonshire in the 1790s, having some customary events in common such as May garlanding and the annual fair day when travelling ballad sellers 'hawked' their news. The houses and farms of the hamlets of rural Hertfordshire in the 1870s were visited by midwinter parties of carollers and handbell ringers, Thomasers on 21 December (St Thomas's Day); Christmas boxes were collected, 'memb'ers' went round in disguise on Bonfire Day; and harvest-home feasts took place at the end of the harvest. With the exception of 'memb'ring', these highlights in customary consciousness would not have been out of place in Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar*.

Customary consciousness was maintained and extended by oral culture in eighteenth and nineteenth century rural England, carrying it forward to the First World War. One Lancashire exile, in temporary khaki on the Gallipoli peninsula remembered it was 'plot night' on 5 November 1915 but that there were no fireworks – at least not of the kind he remembered at home.⁶⁹ Soldiers recruited from rural England, whether volunteers from 1914 or conscripts from 1916, took with them to war a sophisticated oral culture which provided a coping mechanism for the conditions which they faced in the environment of trench warfare. The alien landscape of the forward area and the front line was 'named' in a detailed way, drawn from memories of localities in England, and Scotland, Ireland and Wales, it should be noted, known to the soldiers themselves. Solidarity was maintained by word and song and alternative beliefs circulated widely.⁷⁰ Soldiers whose duties in their rural peacetime occupations had included management of horses, now managed horses for the British Expeditionary Force and, as Ivor Gurney recorded in one of his letters, those who sang and danced at Whitsun and the benefit cub walking, took their songs and dances into the army.

'In this band of ours', Gurney wrote of his service in B Company, 2nd/5th

Gloucestershire Regiment: 'I have discovered a delightful creature. A great broadchested heavy chap who has been a Morris dancer and whose father and grandfathers, uncles and other relations knew all the folk songs imaginable. High Germanie, High Barbary, O no John, I'm seventeen come Sunday – whole piles of 'em. He is a very good player too and a kind of uncle to the band he whistled 'Constant Billy' which I had never before heard.'⁷¹ Gurney calls him 'the Morris dancer of old time, who is alternatively telling stories or answering questions in broad Gloucestershire, and playing cadenzas and hymn-tunes on his trombone'. He was one Fred Bennett, and Gurney recorded a snatch of his music, the lyrics to which might serve as an appropriate testimony to English rural culture before 1914:

Here's luck to the world as sound as a wheel
Death is a thing we all must feel.
If life were a thing that money could buy,
The rich would live, and the poor would die.⁷²

NOTES

- 1 John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 12.
- 2 David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in Robert D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 31.
- 3 See Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700–1880* (London: Junction Books, 1982).
- 4 See George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Brown, 1983) and *John Clare's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Eric Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Cf. Claire Lamont 'The Essence and Simplicity of True Poetry: John Clare and Folk-song', in *John Clare Society Journal*, 16 (July 1997), 19–33.
- 5 Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, 2, 127.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 7 See *John Aubrey: Three Prose Works*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1972). Aubrey entitled one of his works 'Remains of Gentilism and Judaism'.
- 8 Vincent, 'Decline of the Oral Tradition', 36. See also idem, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 9 See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991) and Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).
- 10 Samuel, *Village Life*, p. xvi.
- 11 Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 15.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 13 Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England 1550–1750* (London: Longman, 1998), 48.

- 14 See Bushaway, *By Rite*, for a further discussion; cf. idem, '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 Social History of Rural and Urban Labour from Medieval to Modern Times* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992).
- 15 See Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: a History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968).
- 16 Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 8. See also Andy Wood *The Politics of Social Conflict: the Peak Country 1520–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); idem, 'The Place of Customs in Plebeian Political Cultural: England 1550–1800', *Social History*, 22 (1997), 46–60.
- 17 For discussions on the nature of oral culture see Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All: the Relevance of the Oral Tradition* (London: Faber, 1970).
- 18 Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, 18.
- 19 See, for example, Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture and Nineteenth-century Scottish* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also the chapters by Eryn White and Richard Suggett, Donald Meek and Martin MacGregor in this volume.
- 20 See Jonathan Barry 'Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective', in Tim Harris (ed.) *Popular Culture in England c. 1500–1850* (London: Macmillan, 1995).
- 21 J.H. Porter, 'The Development of Rural Society', in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), vol. 6: 1750–1850, 836–937.
- 22 Charles Phythian-Adams 'Rural Culture', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 2. 624.
- 23 Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie* (London, Penguin Books, 1962), 216: 'the last days of my childhood were also the last days of the village. I belonged to that generation which saw, by chance, the end of a thousand years life. The change came late to our Cotswold village, didn't really show itself till the late 1920s; I was twelve by then, but during that handful of years I witnessed the whole thing happen.'
- 24 Alfred Williams, *A Wiltshire Village* (London: Duckworth, 1920), 234.
- 25 Mingay, *Agrarian History*, passim.
- 26 See Ruth Finnegan, 'Oral Tradition', in D. Levinson and M. Ember (eds), 4 vols *Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 3. 887.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 887–8.
- 28 Arthur A. Ashby, 'Village Clubs and Associations', in *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 75 (1914), 1–20.
- 29 Samuel Rudder, *A New History of Gloucestershire* (Cirencester: privately published, 1779), 23–4.
- 30 Edith Brill, *Life and Tradition on the Cotswolds* (London: Dent, 1973), photograph numbers 234, 235, 238, 243, between pp. 144–5.
- 31 Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Robinson, 2. Adam Fox has shown a similar pattern for early modern England in his book *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).
- 32 Roy Palmer first drew my attention to the prodigious Henry Burstow, for which

- information I now record my gratitude. Henry Burstow, *Reminiscences of Horsham: Recollections of Henry Burstow* (Horsham: Bells, 1911), 107–8.
- 33 Deacon, John Clare and the Folk Tradition, 287–90. See also Bob Bushaway, 'Review of John Wardroper (ed.), *The World of William Hone*', in *John Clare Society Journal*, 17 (July 1998), 89–91.
 - 34 For texts and full account see R. Chambers (ed.) *The Book of Days: a Miscellany of Popular Antiquities*, I. (London and Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1888), 546–9.
 - 35 *Ibid.* For an account of earlier attitudes to maying see Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
 - 36 Samuel Bamford, *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford*, ed. W. H. Chaloner (London: Frank Cass, 1967), vol. 1: *Early Days*, 144.
 - 37 G. F. Northall, *English Folk-rhymes* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1892), 239.
 - 38 Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 196–204.
 - 39 For a detailed description and discussion see Bushaway, *By Rite: 'The Rituals of Privation and Protest'*, 167–206.
 - 40 Northall, *English Folk-rhymes*, 216.
 - 41 James Joseph Sheaham, *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire* (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1862), 12.
 - 42 *Ibid.*, 86–7.
 - 43 *Ibid.*, 108.
 - 44 *Parliamentary Papers, 27th Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into Charities 1834*, 21 April, vol. 225, section xxi, p. 71
 - 45 Sheaham, *History and Topography of Buckinghamshire*, 112.
 - 46 *Ibid.*, 129.
 - 47 See R. W. Bushaway, "'Grovely, Grovely, Grovely and All Grovely': Custom, Crime and Conflict in the English Woodland' *History Today*, 31 (May 1981), 37–45.
 - 48 R. J. Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 1979), 83, 91.
 - 49 Edwin Grey, *Cottage Life in a Hertfordshire Village* (St Albans: Fisher, Knight, [1935]), 214–15.
 - 50 For Lancashire in the late eighteenth century see Bamford, *Early Days*, 159–60.
 - 51 Grey, *Cottage Life*, 215. See also various rhymes in different parts of England in Northall, *English Folk-rhymes*, 244–50.
 - 52 On 'Bonfire Clubs' see Chris Hare, 'The Skeleton Army and the Bonfire Boys, Worthing, 1884' *Folklore*, 99, 2 (1988), 221–31. James E. Etherington, 'The Community Origin of the Lewes Guy Fawkes Night Celebrations', *Sussex Archaeological Collection*, 128 (1990), 195–224. Gavin Morgan, 'The Guildford Guy Riots (1842–1865)', *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, 76 (1985), 61–8. Robert D. Storch "'Please to Remember the Fifth of November": Conflict, Solidarity and Public Order in Southern England, 1815–1900', in Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture*, 71–99.
 - 53 Grey, *Cottage Life*, 11–12.
 - 54 *Ibid.*, 60–3, 123.
 - 55 *Ibid.*, 25, 40.

- 56 Ibid., 160, 209, 215.
57 Ibid., 40.
58 Ibid., 41.
59 Ibid., 43.
60 Ibid., 43–4.
61 See Leslie Shephard, *The History of Street Literature* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), for a full discussion.
62 George Sturt, *Memoirs of a Surrey Labourer* (London: Duckworth, 1907), iv–v.
63 Ibid., 183.
64 Alfred Williams, *Villages of the White Horse* (London: Duckworth, 1918), vii.
65 Ibid., 124.
66 Grey, *Cottage Life*, 120–1.
67 For folk-tales, the definitive collection is Katherine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk Tales in the English Language*, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).
68 Edward Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Plymouth, Macdonald and Evans, 1978), 70.
69 Susan Elandye, 'A Gallipoli Diary', *Lancashire Family History Society*, May (2000), 37. I am indebted to Frank Walmsley for this reference.
70 See John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Trail: Soldiers' Songs and Slang 1914–18* (London: Sphere Books, 1969).
71 *Ivor Gurney: War Letters*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington, Northumberland and Manchester: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group–Carcanet, 1983), 38.
72 Ibid., 44. The particular significance of these words is their source. They comprise the final verse of a well-known folksong, *Death and the Lady*, having origins in the seventeenth century, when it was first published as a broadside by J. Deacon, sometime between 1683 and 1700. It was a regular item in the oral tradition and was collected in many places in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Known in another version as *Lord Lovel* it is to be found in Francis Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York: Dover, 1965), II, no. 75, at 204–13. Another version is to be found in Cecil J. Sharp *English Folk Songs* (London: Novello, 1920), 96. The note given on p. xxvi cites information on other versions. Thus, these words have moved between printed and oral versions across more than three centuries in order for Gurney to encounter them from Fred Bennett, the Morris dancer in 1915.