

Rough Music and the Eyre Family of Ewelme

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Today, reminders of the old family of Eyre are visible in the village in Eyre's Lane, Close and Shaw. From the early 17th century they were prominent land owners with farm buildings opposite the Shepherds Hut, where the remnants of a wall remain. The Church burial record lists thirty two Eyre burials, although there is a mystery surrounding a possible thirty third.

The last official Eyre burial was of lawyer George Eyre in 1885 – a man whose arrogance made him universally unpopular. (He erected a wall opposite his house, the present War Memorial, for the purpose of nailing up attacks on and crowing over victories over his enemies). Desperate for an heir he advertised for a 'mail-order' bride, answered by a young French woman 24 years his junior, Marguerite from Bolougne. (Their only child Charles, died of typhoid fever in 1869. Eyre allegedly blamed his wife's lack of intercessory prayers for the little boy's death and Marguerite is rumoured to have taken poison in her despair. Naturally, people believed Eyre had murdered her).

The villagers had taken exception to the cruel way Eyre treated his unhappy wife, locking her in her room for days on end where she reputedly appeared at the window begging passers-by to help her. An entry in the 1961 Elm Club Scrapbook, explains the extraordinary action they took against the lawyer to express their disapproval of his tyrannical ways. The following report was written in September 1870 for 'The Malburian', the journal of Marlborough College,

Rough Music

"On the evening of the 19th and two following days of September, the quiet village of Ewelme, a small place near the Thames, was the scene of an unwanted commotion, and, having been a spectator, I wish to give the readers of the Malburian an account of what I believe to be a rather uncommon custom.

About 7.0 o'clock on the evening of the 19th I heard a dreadful noise and, roused by a pardonable desire to learn the cause of it, I hastened out. Soon I met a band of men and boys intent on making the night horrible with din and worse: for this they had cow-horns, tin trumpets, pots and pans and their own lungs (a most formidable weapon). A bystander informed me that it was the time-honoured custom of the village (called 'Rough Music', and well it deserved the name), whenever a man beat his wife, a thing I hope happens as seldom as is compatible with marital authority.

The procession went all through the village, stopping now and then for the inner man to be refreshed, and at these times the row was doubled. Through all was conducted in a most orderly manner, if such a term can be applied to such a disorderly proceeding, the performers did not seem to wish for notoriety, for the disguises were various:- the blackened face with high hat and smock frock were predominant, women were also present, whose mighty strides, large hands and stentorian shouts belied their dresses.

Curiosity and the love of old customs made me wish to be present the other two nights after I had gleaned all I could about such an institution as Rough Music, I found that the 'casus belli' was a retired lawyer, one of those men supposed to be under the peculiar protection of his Satanic Majesty, and hence called 'the Devil's Own' – according to his own account a 'Jurist deservedly renowned for learning and ability' but not for temper: alas! Report said that he had treated his wife badly and the chivalrous feeling of the villagers could not permit this to pass without strong marks of their disapprobation.

The evening of the 21st beheld the Grand Finale: at about 7.0 o'clock, men and boys began to assemble in numbers, though horns had been sounding in a most dismal manner long before; soon a shout arose, and I saw a faint glimmering far up the street; then from out of the dusk came a few men in motley garb, one bending beneath the weight of a mighty effigy with a lantern hung round its neck. Behind this a procession was formed, which slowly went round the village, with a far greater tumult than on former nights, for full 100 men and boys were present. The din was horrible, for at times a halt would be made, when the bearer would demand a shot at the effigy; the guns would be fired, the signal for redoubled shouting and groaning, clattering of pots and pans, braying of trumpets and cow horns. When the procession had traversed the whole village, it proceeded to a field near the house of the offender, where the effigy was burnt in triumph, guns and pistols being discharged at it with most fearful tumult, and loud hopes expressed that the man it represented would become a wiser and more manly husband.

I must not omit to tell you the lady, the innocent cause of the excitement, appeared at her window in her 'robe de nuit', and made a most spirited address to the multitude".

There was a further mystery involving Eyre's brother Thomas, who came to Ewelme to live with him. Apparently, when Thomas died (also rumoured to have been murdered by the hated man) George had quarrelled with the Rector and avoided the church. In a local newspaper interview of April 30th, 1930, Moses Winfield related that he was the village undertaker and that Thomas Eyres of Nettlebed, 'Lawyer' Ayres [sic] brother had been buried in the grounds of Eyres home. By order of the Court the body was exhumed and re-buried in the churchyard - a task Moses carried out at midnight! However, of that thirty third Eyre burial there is no official record and no-one now living to verify the macabre tale.



The tomb of Charles Eyre, Ewelme Churchyard