

THE SADDLEWORTH RUSHCART FESTIVAL

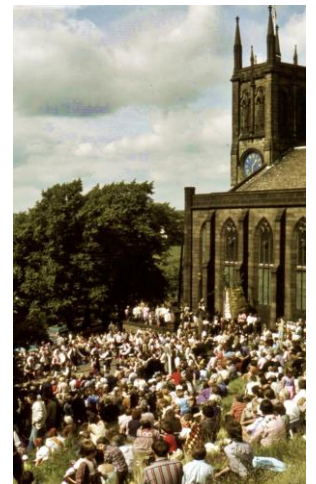
By Daniel Theyer

In the early 1980s, while we were living in Holmfirth, I was intrigued by an article in Pennine Magazine, entitled “It’s a rush job” (Vol. 2 No. 6, August/September 1981), featuring the Saddleworth Rushcart Festival.



Above: Ready for the off – Uppermill 1981

Having 3 small children at the time it seemed like a good idea for an afternoon out, especially as the weather was fine and it was a pleasant 30 minutes trip across the Pennines to Uppermill church, where the rushcart was headed. For once my timing was spot on, and we arrived just before the Morris Men started hauling the rushcart from the village centre up the hill to the church. The bright colours of the costumes and the decorated cart made a fine impression against the imposing church nestling in a green valley, and we all enjoyed the spectacle of the Morris dancers in front of the church. A grassy bank made an impromptu grandstand for the hundreds of other spectators. The two public houses ensured no-one got thirsty and contributed to the air of well-being among the good-natured crowd. We all enjoyed it so much that it would probably have become an annual event, had we not moved to West Germany. When we returned to Yorkshire later it was no longer a short trip away, and there were other distractions, so it was not until 2017 that we revisited Uppermill at rushcart time.



Right: Watching the Morris Dancing at Uppermill church 1981

Origins of the Rushcart Festival

But I am getting ahead of myself, first we need to look into the origins of the rushcart festival. There are several theories of how it came into being, any of which may or may not be correct, as there is little relevant surviving documentation. What is certain is that rushes used to be an important commodity before the industrial revolution. The majority of dwellings had beaten earth floors, which would become damp and cold in winter. Rushes provided an accessible and economic way of improving comfort levels when liberally strewn over the floors.

As they became soiled and compacted further rushes would be laid over those already in place. This would continue until spring, when they could be removed and disposed of, an early and energetic form of spring-cleaning. There are several species of rushes, the choicest being sweet rush, which has a pleasant aroma, but, in practice whatever grew locally would be utilized. Rushes grow in poorer, damp soils, and were much more abundant than they are today, agricultural practices having drained and improved the majority of the land they formerly thrived on.

They had several other uses too:

- A cheap and easily-obtained wick for a rush-light.
- Woven rush mats,
- Chair seats
- Ropes
- Baskets
- Thatch
- Paper manufacture
- Sails
- Medical uses, particularly against thrush, and charms
- Animal bedding
- Hassocks or kneelers (the Old English word *hassuc* meant "clump of coarse grass,")



“ CHAIRS TO MEND ! ”

Many rural churches had earthen floors, with wooden pews reserved for the better off. Naturally rushes were used here too, and it would have been a duty of the parishioners to provide a supply of them. Cutting the rushes, bundling them and carrying them to the church was usually a task for young women, so it is easy to see how this could become a communal activity. Rushes grow quickly in the summer and there is an optimum time to harvest them in late June /early July.

With a larger volume of rushes in more remote areas it was practical to use sledges or wheeled carts to transport them, usually pulled by men. This practice was widespread throughout England, wherever rushes were abundant. In some places, with its wide range of uses, the rush harvest had sufficient importance for the occasion of a village celebration at its conclusion, as did other events like harvest festivals and bringing in the May. Initially it is unlikely that there would be any decoration to the cart bearing the rushes, though it is quite possible that the old custom of using mirrors to ward off evil applied here too.

Annual church festivals included a celebration of the founding of the church, and these usually took place between July and mid-September. They were known as wakes - from which the Wakes weeks later developed. The wakes were a holiday of several days duration, for which the local inhabitants saved money either all year round or during a short period of concentrated work just prior to the start of the holiday. New clothes were purchased, houses cleaned, and beer brewed, ready to receive visitors.

Entertainment, mostly locally produced, included various sports and competitions, animal baitings, shows and stalls. The bringing of rushes to the church became incorporated into these celebrations. Where rushcarts were used they began to interrupt their progress to the church by calling at the houses of the local gentry, where they were provided with food and drink. The custom of decorating the rushcart now came into play, aided by the loan of silver articles from the gentry. Music began to make itself heard, partly to provide a rhythm for pulling the cart and partly as entertainment. Dance too played a role in some areas.



UPPERMILL RUSH-CART, 1890.

Influences of the industrial revolution

As the industrial revolution spread it had an impact on rushcart processions. Populations doubled and trebled, villages and towns increased in area, the road network improved. It is generally recognized that the industrial revolution led to the elimination of many old traditions, however the rushcart flourished as never before. The heyday of the Lancashire rush-cart was the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Until about 1830 a large number of villages in south-east Lancashire, the Yorkshire border, and north Cheshire, held their rush-cart processions on some day of July, August, or September; and in such market towns as Rochdale, surrounded by populous villages, eight or nine rush-carts might be assembled on one day at wakes time. This centralization of the village pageants was probably one cause of their downfall. The streets and lanes were narrow, the rush-carts bulky, and collisions frequent; local rivalries, old grudges, drinking excesses, and the fighting spirit, led to disorder and even bloodshed, and the prestige of the custom declined. After 1830 the rush-carts began to diminish in number.

For practical reasons the maximum size of the rushcart was fixed to stop the load becoming unstable, as was the basic pyramidal structure of the vehicle. The bundles of sheaves were carefully cut and arranged to produce a smooth neat finish, with a large sheet covering the rear. The decorating of the cart, the gold and silver articles on the sheet, demonstrate the pride of craftsmanship involved in the building of the structure. The shiny decorations were an extension of the old custom of wearing mirrors to reflect away evil. While the gentry were still visited it was now more usual for money to be given instead of food and drink, particularly from the nouveau-riche factory and mill owners – who did not have the same close bond to the local inhabitants as the traditional gentry did. It was easier and ensured that the rushcarts' attendants did not linger. The money collected would be used to purchase ale at the next public house.

In a fairly small area of south-east Lancashire the local Morris dancers accompanied the rushcart, adding to the spectacle and entertainment and encouraging spectators to give contributions in return for a display of dancing. The origins of Morris dancing may have their roots in rites celebrating fertility and the coming of spring, dancers blackening their faces with soot so they would not be recognised by the local priest, and resembling "Moors". Over time "Moorish" become "Morris". More likely the dancing came from Spain and was brought back by John of Gaunt when his army returned from the Spanish wars.



In either case this style of dancing was very popular from the sixteenth century onwards. During the nineteenth century rushbearing remained widespread, in some cases without a rushcart, but this association of rushcarts and morris dancers occurred almost exclusively in south-east Lancashire. (Apologies to readers who are upset by mention of the L word. Although this article is about rushcarts in general its specific focus is Saddleworth, which every true Yorkshireman knows is in the West Riding, whatever the legislative nonsense in 1973 may have decided.) The presence of Morris dancers in the procession added greatly to the spectacle.

Demise of the Rushcart Festival

Paradoxically, as the rushcarts were approaching their prime in the early 1800s the practice of taking rushes into the church was rapidly declining. This was because churches were undergoing restoration, stone or tile floors became the norm and pews more extensive. In some cases churches were completely rebuilt or replaced. In Uppermill the bishop paid a rare visit to the church and was appalled by the rushes in the church, he likened it to a stable and banned their use in future. Usually the rushcart still processed to the churches, but the contents of the rushcart would be sold to the highest bidder. By the end of the 19th century the rushcart festivals had almost completely ceased. There is no single reason for this, but the following must have played a part.

There were other, newer, competing attractions. The railways came to Saddleworth in 1849 and for the first time people could enjoy a day trip beyond Saddleworth's borders – in 1850 nearly 400 people availed themselves of a cheap trip to Liverpool. Blackpool became a focus for many of these trips. Local papers recorded the tickets sold at each station and resorts included Llandudno, Southport and London, with perhaps the most exotic the Isle of Man.

Matrix of Wakes Week Destinations Reported From Saddleworth Stations

Destination	1850	1854	1855	1860	1870	1871	1879	1883	1891	1893
Blackpool					431		560	20	381	1207
Buxton						350				
Douglas									45	63
Liverpool	400	520	600		416			600	139	187
London									10	1
Manchester										187
North Wales				100						1
Oldham										1403
Scarborough										103
York	1200									

However the rushcart festival remained popular in Saddleworth for much of the second half of the century, with some years being more successful than others.

THE WAKES.—The time-honoured wakes, with their rush-bearing, rush-carts, and Morris-dancing, seems to have lost none of their charms of attraction in this locality. There are no doubt many to be found in these modern times who find fault with this custom; and they would be blind indeed who could say that it has no fault; but, after all that may be said against it, there is much to be said in its favour. For weeks previously to the wakes, every cottager, however humble in circumstances, may be seen lime-washing and painting the interior of his house, in order to make his relatives and friends, whom the vicissitudes of life have taken to other districts, as comfortable as possible when they pay a visit to the place of their birth—a common practice at this annual period of festivity and rejoicing. Besides this, it is a general thing for parents to provide new clothing for their children at the wakes, which makes it to be a season of cheerful gaiety for the young folks. Were it not for the wakes many a young boy and girl would probably have to be absent from Sunday-school, church, and chapel, in consequence of not having what they consider suitable clothing to appear in at these places. This thorough cleaning, clothing, and social entertaining of friends and relatives, are the commendable parts of wakes keeping in rural districts, and which we hope may be continued in their pristine integrity. On Saturday last Saddleworth wakes commenced with a rush-cart being drawn from Running-hill to the church, accompanied with the usual number of antic morris-dancers, to the music of fife and drum. At the Mountain Ash Inn, there was the attraction of a first-class quadrille band in the spacious pavilion, which was well patronised by the young people, who apparently enjoyed themselves in the merry dance. Sunday morning trains brought many visitors, and large quantities of roast beef and “home brewed” were consumed. On Monday the wakes were kept up with great spirit at Dobcross, with pigeon shooting at the Granby Arms, Uppermill, hound dog trail, and other sports at Shawhall; and a large party enjoyed themselves with field sports of various kinds at the Mountain Ash. On Tuesday the wakes-keeping reached Uppermill. In the evening a very neat rush-cart made its appearance from Frenches, drawn through the village by six donkeys, richly caparisoned. On Wednesday the wakes ended at the much frequented and celebrated Bill’s o’ Jacks, where the company were numerous and highly respectable. It is matter of congratulation that the wakes have been conducted in a most orderly and becoming manner. All seemed to enjoy themselves with great gusto in open air exercises, which they were able to engage in to their hearts’ content, from the favourable state of the weather, which was exceedingly fine.

Left: Huddersfield Chronicle 28 August 1858

SADDLEWORTH WAKES.—These wakes commenced on Saturday last, and about seven o’clock in the evening groups of rough, half-drunken, disorderly young men, from what is familiarly called “the lower end” of Greenfield, yoked themselves to “rush carts,” by long ropes and poles, or “stangs,” by which they drew them through their different districts, and to Uppermill, to the evident delight of themselves—judging from their uproarious laughter and merry-andrew capers, as they went along drawing the carts. Four carts were thus drawn through Uppermill; and as is usual on such occasions, the parties drawing the different carts came into contact with each other, and fully sustained the true character of their affair by kicking and striking one another. If the guardians of the peace had not happened to be there, no one can tell what might have been the result of the encounter; as it was, kicks and cuffs were dealt about in a profuse manner for a few minutes, before the police could get the parties separated. The wakes, however, are not to be disparaged on account of the disorderly conduct of those who get up “rush carts” for the sole purpose of getting money to spend in drink. These displays of rival rush carts will cease to exist, if parties who get them up are not supplied with money and drink. The wakes, or annual pastime, are a great benefit generally to the working classes, as they give them a short relaxation from toil, and enable them to invite and entertain their friends at the social board with good old English fare. This is not the only benefit. Children mostly get their new winter’s clothing, and domiciles get thoroughly cleaned and renovated against the wakes. Besides, in these railway days of cheap trips, the humblest individual can, at the wakes time, avail himself of the boon, to extend his knowledge or recruit his shattered health, by spending a few days at the seaside. On Sunday evening the wakes were held at Saddleworth Church, and were very thinly attended. On Monday, at Dobcross; but in consequence of a great number of people from that neighbourhood having gone to Liverpool, by the Oddfellows’ cheap trip from Diggle and Saddleworth, the village was nearly deserted. On Tuesday the wakes reached Uppermill, where the landlord of the Marquis of Granby entertained his friends with a pigeon shooting for a free sovereign. And on Wednesday the wakes ended, according to custom, at “Bill’s o’ Jacks.” This favourite resort is mostly well attended; but this year there was a great falling off in numbers in comparison with former years. Probably this was owing to the unfavourable state of the weather in the forenoon, which, however, cleared up and was fine during the afternoon and evening. Upon the whole, there was great provision made for the wakes in the shape of “roast beef and home brewed;” and on Saturday and Sunday there were many visitors in the district.

Right: Huddersfield Chronicle 01 September 1860



Left: Uppermill - Sedlock Cart 1879

The following account of the Saddleworth Rushcart of 1890 is an extract from "*Rush-Bearing*" by Alfred Burton, published in 1896. This is a classic book, written as the era of rushcarts was ending. It has recently been re-published, and is also widely available on the internet.



There are many quiet little valleys running into the hills on the east and south-east border of Lancashire, where the inhabitants retained many of their old manners and customs till a recent date, but the spread of manufacturing industry into these out-of-the-way places, and the introduction of railways, have led to a rapid increase in the population, and consequent change in its character. The parish of Saddleworth is a typical specimen, and bears the curious anomaly of being included in the County of York for civil, and in the diocese of Chester for ecclesiastical, purposes, a state of affairs which has given rise to a saying that while York holds its body fast, Chester ministers to its soul. Comprising several hamlets, the rush-bearing (which takes place on the second Saturday after the 12th August), led to many rush-carts being drawn to the parish church at Saddleworth.

Left: Uppermill Rushcart 1890 – Front



Right: Uppermill Rushcart 1890 – Back

Mr. George Shaw, J.P., who gave a lecture on the subject of rush-bearing in the Mechanics' Hall, Uppermill, on the 31st December, 1870 states that at that time there were seldom more than two or three, though, in his early days, five or six, and on great occasions, such as election times, double that number appeared; and that he once saw twelve at the church at one time. There are people yet living who remember as many as eight being drawn to the church on the Wakes Saturday. The last time rushes were spread in the church was in 1821; they were often spread to a depth of twelve to fifteen inches. After the rushes ceased to be used on the church floor, they were used as bedding for cattle. Some few years ago the landlord of the "Church Inn" used to give a sovereign a load for them, but of late years no cart has been taken up to the church.

On ordinary occasions the rush-carts came from Cross, Boarshurst, Friezland, Running Hill, Harrop Dale, Burnedge, Uppermill, and Greenfield. The Cross rush-cart always claimed precedence, and was allowed the privilege of backing up to the old porch of the church; the Boarshurst between the gate piers opposite, front to front; the Running Hill was generally stationed under the great yew tree; and the Friezland always went up to the 'Cross Keys Inn.' There seemed to be some tacit understanding that this should be the arrangement. How or why, I cannot tell, but I very well know that fifty years ago any other positions would have been deemed wrong, and entirely out of order.

During the last fifteen years, there have been seven rush-carts built in Saddleworth. Uppermill now takes the lead in the celebration of the wakes, known as "Longwood Thump." Last year (1889), the rush-cart was so badly made that the top fell to pieces, bringing down the riders. A row ensued, and in the melee the cart itself was broken. So disgraceful were some of the scenes witnessed in the evening, that many people thought no rush-cart would be made this year; but the landlord of the "Commercial Inn," being a new one, and wishing to ingratiate himself with his customers, called to his aid a number of men who were anxious to wipe out the failure of the previous year, and it was determined to have a rush-cart in the old style. A committee of twelve was appointed to superintend the affair. Subscriptions were canvassed for, a shilling constituting a member, and the rush-cart builder, now a sailor by profession, and who is considered the best builder of a rush-cart in the neighbourhood, set to work.

Early on Sunday, the 17th August, a number of men went up the hill to the moss reserves to cut the long rushes needed for making the bolts, which must be of a superior kind to the short hard ones used for the body of the cart; and these rushes require to be selected as long as possible, and cut with a knife. They brought down fifteen large bundles of fine, pliant rushes, none less than four feet six inches, and many over six feet in length.

Right: Uppermill Rushcart 1890 – Side view



On the Monday, the builder of the rush-cart proceeded to tie them up into bolts four inches in diameter, rejecting all the broken ones. An assistant, in the meantime, mowed the shorter rushes required for the body of the cart, and brought them in to be tied up in larger bundles ready for the building. The cart was one of the small two-wheeled ones used for carting stone in the neighbourhood, and was sunk in the ground up to the axle, being further secured by slotches, and trestles under the shafts, so as to render it immovable. At noon, on Thursday, the actual building of the cart began. An iron rod, bent to the angle required, was fixed at each corner, and tied at the top, to strengthen the structure and guide the builder in placing the rushes. The body of the cart, having been filled with loose rushes, well-trodden down, the bundles-the ends cut straight with a scythe blade-were laid, keeping the face as nearly as possible to the curves it would finally assume, the longer and finer bolts being placed with the ends to the front and back of the cart only, and not transversely as well, as in the carts made in some places. The usual height to which the rushes are piled in these small carts is from nine to ten feet above the side, but, as the maker was determined to make a finer and better one than that of last year, he decided to build twelve feet. This required great care in consolidating the rushes and keeping to the curves, any deviation from which would have entailed a similar disaster to last year. This great height, for so small a base (six feet by four feet), as will be noticed on looking at the illustrations, gives the rush-cart a very tall appearance, much different to the huge, substantial ones which used to be built in wagons, and which, to the same height, were half as much longer and wider. This peculiarity is to be observed in all the rush-carts built in the hill districts, in former times

as well as the present. Having arrived at a height of ten feet, the builder began to use the bolts made of long rushes, in order to bind the top together as much as possible, and, finally, as these left a small face unfilled along the top, made two good bundles of rushes, which were placed across the others, or lengthways, to fill up this space, and afford a more comfortable seat for the two men who had to ride upon it. The sides swelled out (at the cart wheel) to a distance of eighteen inches, and then gradually sloped upwards and inwards to the top, the greatest projection being at a height of two feet six inches above the side of the cart. The front and back did not curve outwards, but sloped gradually inwards from bottom to top.



Left: Uppermill Rushcart 1881



The builder and his assistants had proceeded so far by Friday night, but a strong, south-westerly gale springing up in the night-time, accompanied by torrents of rain, daylight on Saturday revealed a most unpleasant state of affairs, for, as the cart was being built in a yard sheltered on two sides by high buildings, it had not been thought necessary to secure the top with ropes, and the settling down of the rushes, caused by the rain which soaked in, and the strain of the wind on so high and narrow a structure, had bent over the cart to one side, the mischief being aided by the sinking of one of the wheels. Though somewhat disheartened, the builders commenced to put the best face upon the matter that could be done, for to have had no rush-cart after the trouble that had been taken, and the boasting which had taken place, would never do. To take down the rushes in order to straighten it would be to nearly dismantle the cart, and time was pressing, so it was decided to get boards and ropes, and endeavour to pull the top over into something like its original shape, and then trust to the man who pares the faces of the cart to put as presentable an appearance as possible upon it. This was done, and though several inches were pared off one side, yet it left the cart with a most unpleasant-looking hoist. The substantial

character of the building was, however, shown by the treatment it received, and survived. This led to a delay of a couple of hours, and as it had been stated that the rush-cart would be drawn out about three o'clock, and as much remained to be done, every hand that could be found room for was set to work. Trestles were placed, and whilst one man pared the face of the rushes smooth and into shape with a scythe blade, others were making fresh blades as sharp as a razor, for the toughness and density of the rushes took the edge off the blades very quickly. This paring is rather a dangerous business, for, the blade slipping, the man nearly cut off his thumb, and, two years ago, a man almost cut his left hand off: Others procured two large branches of ash, and tying them securely to strong pointed stakes, drove them down into the rushes at the top of the cart, leaving the centre clear for the riders. Another was trimming the edges, or "feathering," with a pair of shears, whilst the front of the cart was being embellished with the sheet. This was a piece of bleached calico, cut to the shape of the front of the cart, and was ornamented with a border of red and blue braid crossed diagonally, and in the diamonds thus formed were fastened artificial flowers. At the bottom of the sheet was a large rosette of silver and gold tinsel and blue ribbon, above which was a large crown in silver. This was surmounted by the figures "1890," in white, on a black ground. Then came a large heart in silver, on which was displayed some coloured scraps, artificial flowers of various kinds and colours, filled all the blank spaces, and the whole affair, when the sun shone upon it, had a most gorgeous appearance. No plate has been displayed on the Saddleworth rush-carts for some years past. Natural flowers were stuck in the ends of the bolts, both at the front and back of the cart. These were to have been dahlias of various colours, a number of which had been promised, but, failing to arrive, resource was had to the neighbouring gardens, and shift made with such flowers as they afforded.





As the moment for drawing-out arrived the excitement became intense; the inn-yard was crammed with men and boys all wanting to have a hand in hauling in the ropes. Trestles and props were knocked away, the ground in front of the wheels dug out, the ropes run out to their full length, and the stretchers manned by as many as could lay hold (I counted over seventy drawers), who roughly sized themselves, the boys next the cart, increasing in height to the tallest in front. Two men mounted the cart, sitting back to back, and steadied themselves by the large branches before mentioned. This post is one much coveted, although rather dangerous. I have been informed of three men who have fallen off and broken their backs, and have myself witnessed several ugly falls, but these chiefly occur through the rider getting too much beer. In the present instance one of the riders had provided himself with a tin can tied to the end of a long string, so as not to miss his share through inability to reach it. The whip was now brought out, it was twelve feet long, having a lash two feet long at the end, and was an inch and a quarter thick at the handle. It had been well oiled several times in order to make it pliable, and was a most formidable implement. The "band" now collected, consisting of two fifers and a drummer, and,

everything being ready, the men laid hold of the shafts, the boys began "girding," or straining at the ropes, the word "neaw lads" was given, and for a moment quietness reigned, but the music struck up, the men shouted, the cart gave a slight heave, and then rose up to the level ground as the strain told. Till now there had been but little noise, but as soon as the cart began to move freely a most extraordinary sight presented itself, for the music changing to the old rushcart tune, a cheer was given, and instantly the whole of the drawers commenced to dance, if such it may be termed, or rather capered most vigorously, at the same time swaying from side to side of the road, and carrying the stretchers high above their heads. The cart was now run into the square, where it was greeted with a cheer from the crowd assembled to witness the spectacle. Here a rest was taken, beer served round, and the cart and its ornaments criticised by the onlookers.

The scene which presented itself was an extremely picturesque one. On one side of the square runs the high road, lined on one side with stalls and booths of various descriptions, containing nuts, gingerbread, hotpeas, toys, and pots, The square itself was filled with other stalls of a similar character, swing-boats, and a merry-go-round, whilst the whole was backed by the clean-looking grey stone houses, above which towered a couple of factory chimneys, the blue hills in the distance just giving it a rural look, and leading the mind to the quieter scenes beyond.

Having refreshed themselves, and decided on the route to be taken, the carter cracked his whip, the band struck up "The girl I left behind me," the drawers began capering, and, with a shout, the rush-cart started on its way to Greenfield, calling at all the public-houses on the way, where the drawers were liberally regaled with ale and contributions given to the expenses of the show.

The illustrations of the cart here given to show it when the building was completed, and before the sides had been pared to their proper shape and smooth surface. They also show the damage done by the storm, and, notwithstanding the care spent upon its building, the cart, which was to excel any previous one, was finally judged by its makers as "the worst we ever made." It cost just £9 in building, of which the builder had £1 for his services, and weighed about fifty cwt. On the Tuesday, the rushes were given to the owner of the cart, as some recompense for the damage done to it last year.

Revival of the Rushcart Tradition

The Rushcart tradition was revived in 1975 by the newly formed Saddleworth Morris Men; rumour has it that the revival was sparked by the local government boundary changes!



Left: 1975 – the first Saddleworth Rushcart since Victorian times

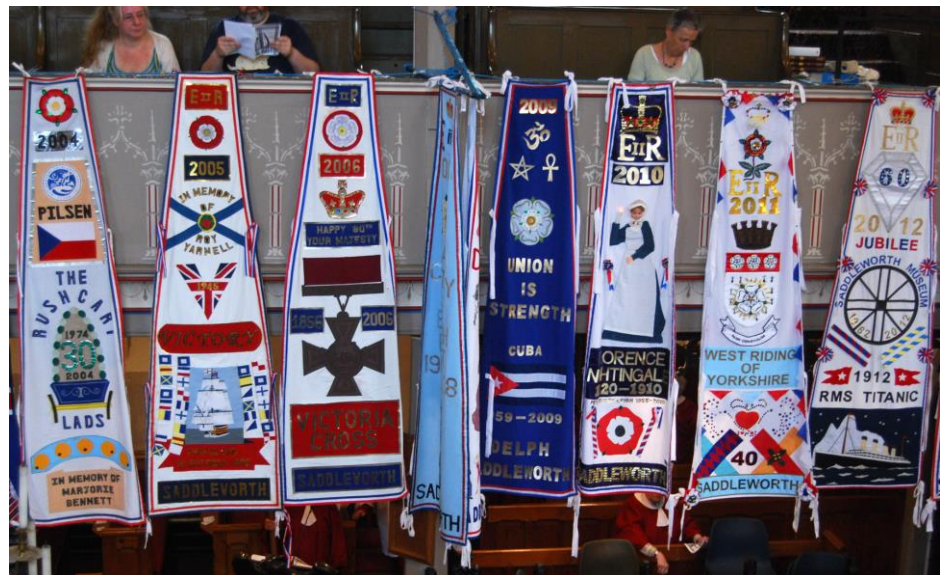
A suitable cart was found at a local farm and stangs (long wooden poles attached to a rope to enable the rushbearers to pull the rushcart) were bought from a timber firm. With the help of old plans, books and reports, the Rushcart was built in the traditional location of the Commercial Inn, Uppermill. The first Rushcart for over 50 years was ready and on the Saturday morning emerged from behind the Commercial to renew the old tradition. The small 1975 audience is in stark contrast to the hundreds who now gather in Uppermill.





The Rushcart is built onto a two-wheeled cart into a conical shape. It is 13 feet high and weighs 2 tons. It is trimmed and decorated with heather and then on the Saturday morning the front is dressed with a banner made by the Jockey. Tradition dictates that the Morris man with the longest continuous service without already riding the cart, takes his turn as Jockey. He sits astride the Rushcart with only two Rowan branches to support him. He is supplied with ale for the day in a copper kettle. On Saturday the cart is then pulled around the Saddleworth villages by Morris Men from all over the UK, pausing, often at a public house, for displays. There are usually 150 men in the stangs fixed to the cart by a strong rope. On Sunday the Rushcart is taken to St Chad's Church above Uppermill where the top is dismantled and in keeping with tradition the rushes are mixed with fragrant herbs and flowers and then symbolically spread in the aisles.

Encouraged by old friends who now live in Uppermill we decided to pay a return visit in 2017. The M62 is as quiet as it ever is early on Sunday morning so we made good progress, arriving around 9:30 in good time for the planned departure of the rushcart from the Commercial Inn at 10 o'clock. Parking in the village car park was surprisingly easy and we soon made our way to the Commercial Inn, which was doing a roaring trade with the assorted Morris Men. They made a fine sight, in an array of colourful costumes. Particularly prominent were the Saddleworth Morris Men, with their fantastic heather and flower headgear, and the Britannia Coconut Dancers of Bacup, unmistakable with their blacked faces and frilly red and white aprons. They were in no great hurry, but eventually a small group of them set off to retrieve the rushcart from its overnight rest place behind the inn. After taking part in the first Rushcart in 1975 at the age of 5, it was finally the turn of Saddleworth Morris Man Simon Williams as Jockey, riding on top of the 13 feet-high cart. A few minutes later the rushcart was pulled into the main street to the cheers of the other Morris Men and the spectators, who were now lining both sides of the street. Getting the teams of Morris Men organized in their appointed positions to pull the train took quite a bit longer, reluctant as they were to drink up and leave the comfort of the inn. It was well after 10 o'clock before the rushcart was in motion, slowly at first but soon picking up speed to a smart pace. Once out of the village centre the road began to rise on its way to St Chad's, which lay almost a mile away, and the pace dropped, so the assorted crowd of followers had no trouble keeping up with them, even the pushchair brigade. Before long the parade was in open country and St Chad's could be seen in the valley ahead. The road down to the church is quite steep and now it was the turn of the men on the stangs behind the rushcart to use their muscles to brake the heavy cart.





The rushcart was pulled right up to the church, a few sheaves of rushes removed and strewn in the aisle before the well-attended church service – even some of the Morris Men were seen in the gallery. All round the church the banners of the previous rushcarts since 1975 were displayed. A sombre note was struck by the vicar at the end saying that the building was now on the buildings at risk register, and that £300,000 was needed for repairs to the roof, tower and stained glass – the message being dig deep if you want to come back next year!

After the service the Morris dancing started in two locations, in front of the church and also outside the nearby Cross Keys Inn. The grassy bank overlooking the dance floor had become quite overgrown with shrubs and small trees, so it no

longer made such a good grandstand. There were probably two to three hundred people there – and about the same at the Cross Keys – with limited seating, most folk forming a circle around the dancing area. Each group of Morris Men performed for ten to fifteen minutes. It soon became apparent that there were two main types of dance groups; the southern and Cotswolds’ groups having lighter footwear, with more fluid dancing, featuring high leaps. The Saddleworth Rushcart is one of the most important events in the Morris Ring (National Morris Society) calendar and attracts groups from all over the country, so there were plenty of connoisseurs in the crowd, who were only too pleased to explain the different styles.

Although the pubs and food stalls were attracting long queues it was refreshing to find that neither were the prices inflated nor the quality and quantity of the offerings were diminished. Although the dancing was the main event there were other competitions taking place - Gurning, Wrestling, Worst Singer and Clog Stepping etc.



Having taken place annually since 1975 the tradition is now firmly re-established in Saddleworth, and its immediate future is secured. Other areas have also revived their traditional rushcart festivals, Sowerby Bridge being the other venue in Yorkshire, with Littleborough and Whitworth also holding rushcart events. There are plenty of videos on the internet which capture the atmosphere of the event – just google “Saddleworth Rushcart”. See you there next time?



The latest recruit to Morris Dancing saw his opportunity to perform a solo between dances, to the dismay of the following group, who pronounced “That is just not FAIR, how do we follow that?”