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SAMUEL BAMFORD AND MIDDLETON RUSHBEARING

Robert Poole

Samuel Bamford (1788–1872) is best known as the Lancashire weaver whose *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1839–41) is perhaps the best surviving account of the Peterloo era. Beyond this, however, Bamford was also a literary figure and poet, and his autobiographical volume *Early Days* (1848) is an equally indispensable account of the social life of a Lancashire handloom weaving community in its late eighteenth-century golden age. If the centrepiece of *Passages in the Life of a Radical* is Bamford's account of the Peterloo Massacre, that of *Early Days* is his description of the annual rushbearing or wakes festivities. It has with reason been assumed that this part of the book was an exercise in nostalgia. 'Many of the pastimes and diversions which I shall describe' wrote Bamford, 'are no longer practised – some of them not even known – by the youthful population'. In fact, Middleton Rushbearing, like most of the Lancashire wakes, recovered strongly from the depressions of the industrial revolution and was still very much alive in the mid-Victorian period. Bamford himself was an occasional visitor in later life. In his youth, Bamford had fought and fornicated at the local wakes; in his old age, he sought to reform them.

Bamford's personal involvement with the local wakes holidays offers an insight into one of the region's most long-lived and deeply-rooted traditions. More than this, however, the twin histories of Samuel Bamford and Middleton Wakes make an interesting study in the intermingling of radicalism and nostalgia, industrialisation and tradition, and in what Patrick Joyce has recently called 'the elaboration of a radical sense of the past'.¹ In Bamford, we find a man trying to make a living and an identity for himself by trading on his own past, and in Middleton an industrial settlement maintaining a social identity for itself by regularly recreating its own traditions at the annual rushbearing.

Middleton Rushbearing

Samuel Bamford's boyhood coincided with the golden age of handloom weaving in the late-eighteenth-century. Middleton at this time was a rapidly growing weaving village of two to three thousand people, every bit as representative of the early industrial revolution as was Manchester, eight miles distant. The villagers kept up as rich a calendar of festivities as any in 'merry England': Christmas (celebrated after New Year), Shrove Tuesday, Mid-Lent Sunday, Easter, May Day and Whitsuntide in the first half of the year, All Souls, All Saints and Guy Fawkes' night in the Autumn, each with its own associated customs of socially sanctioned unruliness. 'But', recalled Bamford, 'the rushbearing was the great feast of the year'.²

Rushbearing (or 'Rushbearin' in Bamford's preferred dialect form) was 'an annual custom of carrying rushes to the parish church on the anniversary of its dedication'.³ The rushes were essential to warmth and comfort in the days before stone flagging when church floors consisted simply of hard-packed earth, like the inside of a marquee. The rushbearing, or wakes, was, among all the official festivals of the established church, the one that belonged essentially



Samuel Bamford grew his hair and beard to patriarchal effect around the time he moved back to the Middleton area in 1858.

to the parishioners, and its date varied between parishes.⁴ Middleton parish church being dedicated to St. Bartholomew (24 August), the wakes took place on the next to last Saturday in August, at the height of summer, just before the nights began closing in.

Middleton Wakes was 'the great feast of the year' not only for Middleton itself but for all eight townships of Middleton parish. Six of these, recalls Bamford, regularly sent rushcarts: Boarshaw, Thornham, Hopwood, Birch, Bowlee and Tonge. The rushes were sculpted into the form of 'a flattened beehive' on a cart, decorated and drawn with much ceremony to the church. This apparently simple custom was in fact a highly organised spectacle in which the young men of the village took the lead. They met many weeks in advance in a pub to set up a fund and organise every aspect of the procession: the loan of a cart, ropes and wooden 'stretchers' from local farmers; the services of 'an old experienced hand' to supervise the building of the cart; the work of decorating the cart and its frontal 'pack-sheet', done by the sisters and sweethearts of the drawers, who also sewed ribbons and other finery onto the clothes of the rushbearers; and the loan of the jewellery and polished metalware displayed on the front of the cart.

'The quaint and romantically fantastic spectacle' of the rushcart was expensive in both time and money. For a start, 'new clothes would be ordered; and their quantity and

quality would probably depend on the amount of money saved during the year, or on the work performed in a certain time before the wakes.' Rushes might have to be 'bargained for with the owner of the land'. Similarly, 'musicians were also secured in good time: a fiddler for the chamber dancing always, and never less than a couple of fifers and drummers to play before the cart. But if the funds would allow, and especially in later times, a band of instrumentalists would be engaged' – that is, a brass band of some sort. If times were very good, the party might go to the expense of arranging for a score or two of morris dancers to precede the cart, 'decked out' like the drawers themselves.

The measured exuberance of Bamford's description of the sights and sounds of the rushcart procession itself has really to be read in full. To heave a ton or more of rushcart up the steep path leading to the parish church was a mighty feat celebrated by the ringing of the church bells.⁵ What comes over is the way in which the rushcart was the physical representation of the pride, cohesion, prosperity, skill and sheer strength of the whole community. Male and female, young and old, participated, whether in lending plate or money, craft or ornament, applause or muscle-power. The rushcart parade was the centrepiece of the wakes Saturday, and for the rest of the weekend the rushbearers caroused with 'their friends, sweethearts and helpers . . . and treated their neighbours and friendly visitors from other public-houses'. On the Sunday the village opened its doors to visitors, with not only family and old friends but even apparent strangers called in to partake of home-brewed ale and 'the very best dinner which could be provided'. The rest of the week was given over increasingly to 'hard drinking . . . disputes . . . battles' and 'occasional race-running', until even 'the dregs of the wakes-keepers' were exhausted.

One year, Bamford and his childhood friend Mima, now a milkmaid, rambled off in search of cows while eleven rushcarts descended on the village. 'That evening,' continues Bamford, 'we had another and longer walk. Turning away from "vanity fair" we sought the lone by-paths and sweet meadows of Hopwood, where we . . . For hours together sat, in the silentness of joy'.⁶ In later married life, they returned many times to that spot.

What is so valuable about Bamford's description is that it reflects the mixed elements of the wakes at a transitional period. He offers us both commerce and custom, roughness and respectability, promiscuously jumbled together. He adopts neither the folkloric nor the march-of-progress models so often used by outside observers of popular customs in this period. He clearly identifies picturesque features such as processions of garland-bearers or the 'Queen of the Wakes' as recent additions. He resists the temptation succumbed to by so many social and geographical outsiders to divide popular customs into authentic and corrupt elements, or pure and degenerate. Bamford's view is that of an insider, marked by social depth, incidental detail and cultural loose ends. His nostalgia was born of experience, not fancy, and a little nostalgia is surely not to be begrudged him, for an industrial revolution separated Bamford the autobiographer from the wakes of his boyhood.

Middleton

To understand Bamford, and to understand the wakes, it is necessary to understand Middleton. Its growth, though rapid, embodied strong elements of social and economic

continuity. In the late 1840s, as Bamford was writing *Early Days*, it was undergoing a belated phase of factory-building, but perhaps more striking was the way in which it had retained its older character.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century the township of Middleton had grown from 300 souls to approaching 3,000. The parish, numbering 8,000 in 1801, doubled in size over the next fifty years – growing a little more slowly than the rest of industrial Lancashire. Of the 2,241 families in the parish in 1821 (12,793 people), 262 were supported chiefly by agriculture, 56 were classed as professional or unemployed, and the rest were supported chiefly by trade, manufacture or handicrafts. The dividing line, however, was unclear, and in 1849 the *Morning Chronicle* reporter Angus Reach was told that around 1800 the numerous weavers had gone 'a-shooting and a-sporting in the fields nigh three days a week, and many had farms and tilled them likewise'.⁷

Middleton's weavers survived as a community thanks to specialising in fine and silk weaving, whose move into the factory still lay in the future at mid-century. Silk manufacture was, according to Fielding, introduced there in 1778. 'A few years afterwards' Middleton saw its first cotton mill, in Wood Street. The events surrounding the attack on this mill by weavers and others in 1812 are described by Thompson as 'the climax of Lancashire Luddism', and 'in terms of casualties, the most serious Luddite affray in the entire country'; at least ten were killed.⁸ Nonetheless, the first half of the nineteenth century did see many smaller silk and cotton manufactories built in the parish, together with the enormous Rhodes dyeworks (1832), half a mile from



Middleton in 1839.

Middleton Old Hall: covering eight acres it was 'one of the largest and most extensive calico printing and bleaching establishments in the country', employing 750 people. In 1845 the old Hall was demolished to make way for two cotton mills and a gasworks, and soon afterwards the Rhodes dyeworks threw up a three hundred foot chimney. Other green fields soon went the same way. It was in this period of rapid physical change in Middleton that Bamford was writing *Early Days*.

Recent factory building notwithstanding, Reach was struck on his visit in 1849 by 'the scattered streets of an old-fashioned village' and 'heard on all sides the rattle of the shuttle. Still the aspect of the pace was half-rural'. The impression that he formed was exaggerated but interesting, especially as this just was after Bamford had finished *Early Days*.

The 'folk o' Middleton', to use their own vernacular, are almost all silk handloom weavers, pursuing their craft in their own houses, preserving an independent and individual tone of character. . . . keeping up even amid their looms a great deal of the rural and patriarchal tone of bygone times – a few of them handling the plough and the hoe as well as the shuttle and the winding-wheel, and the entire community great favourers of the old English manly sports. When the Hopwood hounds pass the village (says the Rev. Mr Durnford, the Rector), there is always a goodly train of sportsmen, on foot, in attendance.

Middleton's social character clearly owed much to the independent traditions of its weavers, but two other influences are worth mentioning: the gentry and the Church. Middleton Old Hall had been occupied until 1765 by the Assheton family. The last of the male line, Raphe Assheton, was idealised by Bamford (from stories he had picked up) as 'an old English gentleman' who 'kept up the ancient customs of hospitality'.⁹ Lady Assheton's later resistance to the building of cotton factories near the Hall may also have made her popular among the weavers.¹⁰ The Asshetons' successors, however, were the absentee earls of Suffield, and more particularly the gauleiter of a steward who ruled in their stead. The third earl (1821–38) did visit Middleton, but his heavy-handed patronage of the local Mechanics' Institution and other ill-fated ventures seems to have alienated more people than it propitiated, Bamford included. The local custom of lynching an effigy of the 'Black Knight of Middleton' at Easter may have had more contemporary edge than its supposedly ancient origins suggested.¹¹

Hopwood Hall nearby had a happier reputation. Having been in the Hopwood family for some five centuries until the demise of the line in 1763, it too was passed to an outsider, Sir Edward Gregge. Gregge, however, settled there and changed his name to Hopwood, and his son Robert Gregge Hopwood who succeeded him in 1798 was still there in 1852. His two children married offspring of the earls of Sefton and Derby. It was his hounds which the Middleton weavers still followed on foot at the time *Early Days* was published. In the 1860s a successor, Captain Hopwood, was acting as patron of the rushcart, lending plate and donating a sovereign when the procession visited the Hall, while Mrs Hopwood gave prizes to the morris dancers for the best hat.¹²

In religious terms, Methodism was strong in Middleton but the traditions of the established church had deep roots; Bamford himself began life as a Methodist but ended it as

an Anglican. The living of the ancient parish was a rectory in the gift of the lords of the manor, and was still occupied by an Assheton in Bamford's youth, a sign of the remarkable continuity of personnel and church custom in the parish. Another Assheton rector had managed to occupy the living almost throughout the Civil War and Commonwealth periods, despite being identified by the parliamentary commissioners as an idle man neglectful of psalms and sermons alike. The first Restoration rector, Robert Simmonds, was in post from 1663 until 1714, and the second, Samuel Sidebottom, until 1752. The churchwardens' accounts suggest a spirited revival of the social calendar of the church soon after the Restoration, with generous payments to the bellringers for ringing on the king's birthday and November 5th. The detail is otherwise not sufficient to identify any payments associated with the wakes, although the occasional payment for 'dressinge [the] Church' is suggestive; this often meant clearing out the old rushes before each rushbearing.¹³ The rector who presided over the rushbearings of Bamford's youth, Richard Assheton, was only the fourth since the Restoration. Two shorter incumbencies followed, but the rector after that, James Archer (1829–32) had been curate at Middleton for 55 years, half of it under Assheton. The Rev. Durnford, who had acted as Reach's guide among Middleton's weavers, enjoyed another long incumbency, from 1835 to 1870. A sociable and popular man, he always sent to Manchester for a new hat at the wakes, lent silver plate for the rushcart, and put on special wakes-time services which were kept up by his successor.¹⁴ On his occasional return trips to the parish after being made bishop of Chichester, he always reserved a warm greeting for one of Middleton's veteran rushbearers.¹⁵



Rev. Durnford, Rector of Middleton and patron of "Owd Stiff".

In Bamford's youth: 'All true church goers were duly apprized of the wakes, as its date was cried by the bell-man in the churchyard, whilst the congregation were leaving the church, on three Sunday afternoons previous to its commencement.' Church bells were rung for the rushcarts on wakes Saturday, then: 'on Sunday some of the principal banners and garlands which had been paraded the day before, were displayed in the church'. One piece of evidence indicates that, as one would expect, these links went back much further. The timing of the wakes close to St Bartholomew's Day in August shows that the rushbearing must have been brought forward along with the rest of the ecclesiastical calendar at the time of the reform of the calendar in 1752; in many Lancashire parishes where the link between the church and its parish festival was less strong, the liturgical year moved forwards eleven days in line with the reform whilst the parishioners continued to keep up the wakes on the old date. 'Since the introduction of pews in the church', recalled Bamford, the rushes had not been needed for the church itself; they were disposed of 'either by gift to the church – in which case they became the perquisite of the sexton – or by sale to the best bidder'.¹⁶ The church was flagged and pewed as part of major renovations in the mid-1790s financed by the Earl of Suffield; the rushbearing, as in other places in this period, was robust enough to survive the innovation.¹⁷

The Changing Wakes

The earliest evidence for a rushcart at Middleton Wakes is an entry in the diary of an eighteenth-century Alkrington farmer, John Poole.¹⁸ Unfortunately for the historian, Poole's attention was occupied almost entirely by the weather, which at wakes-time seems to have been generally bright but shower-prone. In 1775 he raised his attention from the elements sufficiently to notice the marriage of two of his nieces in Manchester on wakes Sunday, and in 1776 there occurs this entry:

August 23rd Saturday Morning. Rain with a brisk west wind – showers till ten then fair the afternoon was very fine which gave the young men of the Rhoades Green a favourable Opportunity of bringing a Rush cart drawn by thirty six young men in their shirts which made a very desent appearance the evening mild and fair remained so all night.

The Oldham handloom weaver William Rowbottom occasionally had the time and money to visit Middleton wakes in the prosperous mid-1790s, and his diary bears out Bamford's recollections. On 24 August 1795 he wrote:

Being Middleton rush-bearing Monday, it was very throngly attended, and, owing to nankeens and other light goods being so high in wages, the inhabitants appeared in high spirits, and well-dressed. There were seven rushcarts on Saturday.

The previous year, also 'very throng', there had been nine rushcarts and one waggon.

There follows a long gap in the records of Middleton Wakes, covering the war and Peterloo years and the early factory age, although the *Manchester Guardian* did find a Sunday School tea party at Birch on wakes Sunday 1836 worthy of mention.¹⁹ As late as 1840 Middleton wakes was crowded and peaceful and saw 'several rushcarts', and in 1845 was still regarded as 'a noted place for rushcarts'. None, however, appeared in 1842, when the wakes took place during the great Chartist strike with over half the population unemployed.²⁰ There was one rushcart in 1844,

one small one in 1845 and none in 1846 or 1847.²¹ The wakes of 1847 was thinly attended except on the Monday, the fair was meagre, and the publicans' booths on part of the former grounds of the old hall 'reaped a poor harvest'. The reporter clearly felt that Middleton Wakes was changing its character.

*The working classes of Middleton and neighbourhood have, for several years past, discontinued the dragging of rush carts and coal carts for the purpose of obtaining free drink, now regarding these as foolish sports. On Monday several friendly societies held their annual meetings, and had dinners and refreshments. The parties generally kept sober and orderly. Bull baiting and cock fighting were formerly practised at Middleton to a great extent, but there has been nothing of the sort for many years past.*²²

Bamford must have felt as he was writing *Early Days* that the days of the rushcart were at last over. As trade revived, however, so did the rushbearing: one rushcart in 1848, two in 1849, three in 1850–1 and four in 1852.²³ Local wakes all over Lancashire enjoyed a long mid-Victorian Indian summer, buoyed up by increased prosperity, mobility and range of attractions in the decades before the seaside holiday became established.²⁴

In Middleton, the popularity of the local side of the wakes was especially marked. This was partly because the railway came relatively late: Middleton Junction, three miles away, opened in 1839, but Middleton itself had to wait until 1857 for a station. The level of excursions seems only to have become substantial in the years after the Cotton Famine, and the wakes of 1871 was said to have been the 'dullest . . . ever'.²⁵ Again, however, economic rather than social depression seems to have been the culprit. Despite the rising numbers going away for day trips (4,000 in 1877, 7,000 in 1884)²⁶, the rest of the 1870s and earlier 1880s saw big crowds from places such as Manchester, Bury, Rochdale and Heywood.²⁷ In 1883 it was observed that the railways brought as many people in as they took out, and in 1885 there was an 'unprecedented influx of visitors'. Conspicuously large contingents were now coming from Oldham, perhaps looking for a taste of an old-style domestic wakes as Oldham Wakes a week later was becoming the first in the region to turn into an extended seaside break.²⁸ As late as 1884 it was observed that 'old-fashioned people cheat the revenue by brewing ale' (although the 'old-fashioned' is significant).²⁹ Only in 1890 did a week's closure become general at Middleton's mills, making a week at the seaside possible.³⁰

The range of attractions at Middleton Wakes widened in the mid-Victorian period. The fair on the market ground, and for a time on the grounds of the former old hall, thrived until late in the century, sizeable enough to attract visitors from outside despite the watch committee's decision in 1888 that only two steam organs should be allowed to play at once.³¹ The period also saw circuses,³² horse and donkey races at the old hall, outdoor sports at some pubs, and indoor entertainment from local singers at others (albeit threatened by the 1872 Licensing Act with its eleven o'clock closing rules).³³

The forces of improvement also made themselves felt at the wakes, adding to rather than undermining the wider range of attractions. In 1845 Daniel Burton, whose mill had been defended with fatal shots from the Luddites in 1812, 'treated the whole of his operatives with an excellent dinner and refreshments, in a large room at the factory,

where the master and hands enjoyed themselves in a very agreeable manner'.³⁴ In the 1840s and earlier 1850s the teetotallers were conspicuous with their open-air camp meetings in alliance with groups from other towns; an audience of 4,000 was claimed for the Sunday evening open-air meetings at the wakes of 1845, but as these were held in Market Place this was hardly surprising.³⁵ In the 1850s the Floral and Horticultural Society began its annual wakes-time show, which soon sprouted other attractions such as performances by the Oldham handbell ringers. Flower shows were perennially popular and smaller pub-based versions blossomed alongside the main one; the roots of this local enthusiasm went back to the oft-noted botanical enthusiasms of handloom weavers.³⁶ The years 1884–5 saw a well-attended joint brass band show and athletics festival. The established church continued its 'unique' wakes-time anniversary services into the 1880s, with the associated Sunday School parade attracting many hundreds each year.³⁷

The Rushcarts

The church's formal association with the rushbearing had long lapsed when Bamford wrote about it, but the rushcart custom, always the property of the people, continued. After the mid-century revival, the 1850s and 1860s generally saw one or two rushcarts at Middleton Wakes, but this was followed by a lull for about a decade; during his last years (he died in 1872), Bamford could have been forgiven for supposing that the custom had at last died out. Between 1878 and 1883, however, there was a final flowering of rushcart building in Middleton. The changing character and context of this later phase of the custom are worth tracing.

Rushbearing was an adaptable custom. Occasionally enormous 'coal carts' with powerful pit ponies proudly harnessed in front made their appearance, collecting goodly sums from onlookers, while one year the Rhodes dyers 'caused a great deal of merriment' by parading a decorated dye-house wagon, beautifully adorned with a garland of flowers, and on it sat one 'Johnty', with the following inscription: 'Little Johnty's 25th anniversary, dyers' cart, God Save the Queen'.³⁸

The rushcarts of the mid-Victorian period owed less to collective know-how and more to the specific efforts of small groups of proud but (one can infer) increasingly self-conscious tradition-bearers. In 1865 the Hebers rushbearers

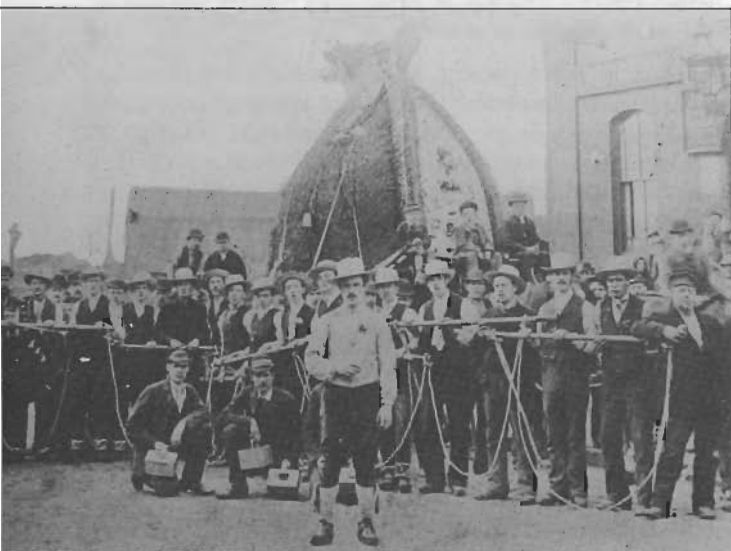


Captain Hopwood of Hopwood Hall, whose hounds were followed by the local weavers and whose wife acted as patron of the Middleton Morris Men.

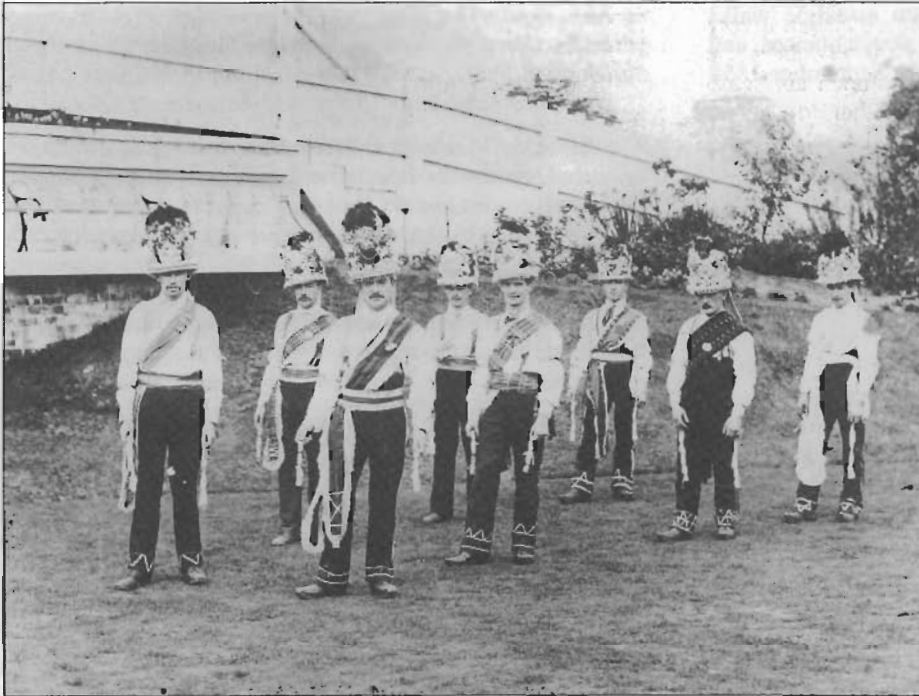
were overheard 'intently revealing in conversation the secret of the "make" of the cart, "smoo-bowts", etc., and expatiating on the artistic skill of the whole'.³⁹ The main exhibitors of rushcarts in the 1850s and 1860s were Tonge and Hebers, two small settlements outside Middleton itself, whose intense rivalry had on one occasion issued in a spectacular fight. The carts were built by 'Owd Charley Partington from Birch' while the two best whipcrackers in the area were from Blackley and Boarshaw Clough. Patronage was important: the Rector, Captain Hopwood and others lent plate for the front of the cart, and the cart was then paraded around to the houses of the lenders to solicit cash donations; at Hopwood Hall there was usually a guinea.⁴⁰

The last rushcart at Middleton in 1883 is well documented. The 1883 cart was pulled by a horse and sixteen young men, with a conductor, a whip-cracker, and collectors, and the procession posed for a photograph. The personnel are more soberly dressed (and probably more sober) than they would have been in Bamford's day, but the sheer scale of the procession is apparent. It took £23 over two days, but was also intended for Oldham Wakes the following week, where it could expect to collect a great deal more.⁴¹ One rather later photograph survives of a rushcart at Middleton Wakes, but on a four-wheeled wagon rather than on the traditional two-wheeled cart, and somewhat different in form and style to its predecessors; this seems to have formed the model for F.W. Jackson's painting, '*Rushbearing at Middleton*'.

As the rushcart declined, the morris dancers began to strike out on their own. In 1865 the local morris troupe was revived, after a gap of 'about eight years', trained by a character called 'Owd Stiff'. They set out from the 'Turn



The Last Rushcart in Middleton, 1883



The Middleton morris dancers, 1886.

of Luck', Market Place, accompanied by the Rhodes Brass Band and by women bearing garlands, all much admired by the *Albion's* reporter and also by the public, who gave £27 over two days.⁴² Morris dancers were an occasional feature of subsequent wakes. A handsome troupe of about a score accompanied the 1878 rushcart. Those of 1883, however, suffered by comparison, and having been 'got up rather hastily' met with little success. The Middleton morris team of 1886 were much more elaborately attired, and some of the faces in the surviving photo (including the leader) are recognisable from the 1883 rushcart company. The rushbearers, their central custom now dead, continued to develop their own dancing traditions.

'Owd Stiff', the trainer of morris dancers, is a tradition bearer who is worth a closer look. His real name was Thomas Thorp, and for almost all of his long life from 1808 to 1895 he was a handloom weaver.⁴³ Almost wholly uneducated, he began following rushcarts and morris dancers in the late 1830s, and was a skilled rushcart builder, specialising in pack-sheet and garland; his own rushcart always bore the motto 'No grumbling'. He was also the leader for nearly fifty years of the local morris troupes, and an accomplished step-dancer and clog-dancer, last dancing in public within a few days of his death. Later in his life he added colour to Middleton Wakes by displaying on the back of a cart a small home-made handloom. He alternated weaving and banter with the crowd with bouts of step-dancing, and collected money in a soap-box 'to be a bit of a benefit for my old lass and me'. With his reminiscences of rushbearing, and the battles between the Middleton and Hebers teams, he was 'a conspicuous figure' at 'old folks' parties'. He was said to have been 'known by almost everyone in the district' and was, according to his obituarist, 'a very unostentatious man, and of kindly disposition, and was held in the highest respect'. This last judgement is curious, for 'Owd Stiff' also had a conviction, in 1863, for indecently exposing his person repeatedly to young females, the details of which offence were considered 'unfit for publication'.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this, 'he was also invited to visit the residences of some of the upper classes, and many times appeared at Heaton Hall, and he delighted to

tell of the "good doings" he had when "Th'owd Earl" 'was alive'. He was also on excellent terms with the rector, the Rev. Durnford. The appeal of tradition was clearly a powerful force in Middleton.

Samuel Bamford

We return at last to Samuel Bamford, whose connection with the wakes did not end when he wrote *Early Days*. After the Peterloo period, Bamford had lost sympathy with the tactics of radicals and Chartists and instead sought a living as a writer. In the 1840s he went through a nostalgic phase, producing *Walks in South Lancashire* (1843) as well as poetry, autobiography and other prose. He then spent most of the 1850s in London, working for the Inland Revenue. He had hoped to research a history of Lancashire, but his job, and the limited opening hours of the British Museum Library, made this impossible.⁴⁵ He resigned his job in

April 1858 to return to Blackley, a 'wooded vale' a few miles from Middleton, with his wife of nearly fifty years, Mima.⁴⁶ Here, he worked to promote himself as a kind of radical tradition-bearer, doing public readings and generally keeping his name in the public eye with a view to gaining recognition and a state pension.⁴⁷

After *Early Days*, at the time of his move to London, Bamford had written wistfully of lost acquaintances. 'We go to the door and look for them; up the street, down the lane, over the meadow, by the wood; but the old folks are not to be seen high or low, far or near; and we return to our



Mima Bamford, c.1859. Her courtship with Samuel blossomed at Middleton Wakes early in the century, but some of his visits to Middleton Wakes in her last years were without her.

room disappointed.⁴⁸ Now, he went on nostalgic walks around the area, dropping in on old acquaintances and catching up on years of reminiscence. In September 1858 he recorded in his diary:

Went with Mima, in the afternoon, to Ann Fords at Charlestown, to tea. Homely and kindest hospitality always awaits us at the humble board of these honest people. John made us accept a handkerchief full of fine apples from his own trees.⁴⁹

Bamford may have found the gift of apples especially warming; one of his most vivid childhood memories was of helping his father carry home a peck of apples from Manchester. Perhaps because he had other opportunities for visiting, Middleton Wakes, did not occupy an important place in his diary, and for him did not match the ideal event of his memory. In 1858 he merely noted the date, although he was there chatting about it the following week when he picked up the story that many of the prizewinning entries at the annual floral and horticultural show had been bought rather than grown by their exhibitors. In 1859 Middleton Wakes passed unremarked. On Middleton Wakes Sunday in 1860 he was 'at Middleton with Dronsfield. A dull concern, came away by the six o'clock bus.' The following year he was visited on Middleton Wakes Sunday by some admirers from Royton, who insisted on pressing a florin into his hand when they left, 'so I have entered it so much towards my compensation fund'.⁵⁰

Bamford's home wakes, however, was not now Middleton but Blackley, at the beginning of August. He disliked having to keep the sort of open-house hospitality which he had idealised in *Early Days*. His diary for 1858 reads:

August 1, Sunday. Blackley Wakes. Bethel, wife and daughter came uninvited, as they always do. Had tea, and to avoid their calling a second time, we went to Grimshaws. Grimshaw and Mary Ann called after tea, and we went with them over the Clough to Charlestown. Dronsfield and some friends called as they were going home; made them welcome to a pig of my ale, and after some pleasant conversation they departed.

Bamford revered the old-style wakes hospitality, but also like to choose his own visitors. He sought to resolve this very Victorian contradiction in a very Victorian way: by grumbling about these degenerate times and idealising past society. In Bamford's case this went further than idealism, firstly, because Bamford had lived through the sort of times he idealised, and, secondly, because he had hopes of reforming and improving Blackley Wakes.

Blackley Wakes was an altogether smaller affair than Middleton Wakes, by which it seems to have been absorbed towards the end of the century. In 1852 Joseph Fielding, another Middleton weaver turned journalist (with whom Bamford was acquainted), recalled that around the turn of the century a local corn miller and cloth friezer 'frequently had open house at the annual wakes or rushbearing, as well as at Christmas and Whitsuntide, on which occasions he treated his work people and the neighbours with roast beef, plum pudding, and ale for several days.' Rushbearing and morris dancing had been 'carried on to a considerable extent until within the last few years', and the three-day festival of mid-century was 'still held in considerable esteem even by the more serious and reflective proportion of the population'.⁵¹ In 1858, Bamford joined with the local mechanics' institute in an attempt to 'restore' Blackley Wakes, as announced in his diary:

Aug. 2nd. The Fete of the Blackley Mechanics Institution took place, recorded in the annexed report which I wrote, and which the honorary secretary could not have done if it would have saved him.

The Blackley Mechanics' Institute fete was advertised ten days before the wakes in a handbill whose style and concerns are so close to Bamford's that he must have had a major hand in its drafting. He personally advocated a very similar programme in a speech to the institution's committee a couple of months later.⁵² As a Victorian postscript to Bamford's more famous account of Middleton rushbearing, the handbill which was posted round the area is worth quoting in full.

That the old English customs of our forefathers in the celebration of their feasts, wakes, and other annual modes of rejoicing, have in these manufacturing districts been long perverted from their original designs, and their modes of celebration, are facts which are both undeniable, and to be regretted. Ancient simplicity of enjoyment, truthful and honest sincerity in friendship, and kindly and neighbourly feeling, are much less prevalent than they were in the memory of persons now living. A few observant inhabitants of Blackley have noted these changes with regret, and wishful to aid in restoring, and if possible improving upon the customs of our forefathers, they have formed a Committee, who, after various meetings, and much consideration, have deemed it best to solicit the aid of the respectable inhabitants of Blackley in endeavouring, by every dissuasive and example, to restrain at the ensuing wakes, if not entirely to prevent, drunkenness, gambling, quarrelling, and fighting; to encourage exhibitions of running, leaping, and climbing, and other peaceful feats of agility and strength; to arrange processions, with dancing, music, and choral singing, after which tea parties may succeed, when readings, and recitations of prose and poetry may be introduced; whilst hospitality to invited guests, courtesy towards strangers, oblivion of past offences and grievances, and a renewal of kindly feeling amongst neighbours, will be strongly recommended. Should the proposals, which are respectfully tendered, meet with the desired response, they may, perhaps in the same amicable spirit in which they are put forth, be adopted in other places; and may prepare the way for improved regulation on successive recurrences of the Blackley annual wakes. The active assistance and co-operation of the well-disposed of every class and denomination will be thankfully accepted by the Committee.

*C.L. Delaunay, Honourable Secretary.
Blackley Mechanics' Institute, 21 July 1858.*

At such short notice, this ambitious scheme met only a limited practical response, and the reformed wakes resolved itself down into a combined tea party and sports day in a local field. The sports chosen were traditional: 'A tall climbing pole, a leaping ground, a place for quiting, another for archers, and a large space for cricket'. The unfortunate secretary lost an eye from a carelessly fired arrow. In the afternoon there was 'a procession, consisting of a band of music, morris dancers, several waggons or carts, decorated with gay flags and banners, and carrying the female members of the institution, followed by the male members'. There followed dancing, tea for 200, and speeches, among them one from Bamford himself. He urged that the 'torpor' of the institution should be relieved

by a series of open-air summer public readings. 'As an example', continued Bamford's report, 'he gave an affecting little piece called "Dora" from Tennyson's poems. Both speakers were cordially cheered.'⁵³

There is clearly a lot of Bamford in all this. The exhortation against drunkenness may owe much to the desire to appeal to the respectable, but Bamford elsewhere deplored, for example, the 'guzzling and demoralisation frequently attendant upon such festivals' as the harvest home.⁵⁴ (Bamford's Diary a couple of weeks on contains an enthusiastically endorsed editorial from the *Middleton Albion* praising a reformed harvest home held in East Brent; this must have been written shortly after the editor visited Bamford the Sunday after Middleton Wakes, and may also reflect Bamford's views).⁵⁵ The emphasis on 'hospitality to invited guests' is very much Bamford, as is the fondness for traditional outdoor games, the especial joy of his Middleton childhood. Bamford, though, was not able to live up to his own ideals. He repeatedly drank enough to regret it the next day, on one occasion chasing away a hangover 'by frequent swigs from my bottle of ale behind the kitchen door... but, no more'.⁵⁶ From his social perambulations in Middleton (which did not usually include Mima) he commonly came back with memories of old grudges awakened, on one occasion even rejoicing over the death of an old enemy. Nor, given his suspicion of middle-class patronage, can he have thought much of the Institute's appeal to the respectable classes of Middleton to take responsibility for restoring and improving the Wakes; there had, as the poster had noted, been much debate about this.

Bamford's appeal for public events to revive the fortunes of Blackley Mechanics' Institute is an idea of his with an interesting history. He followed it through himself, giving readings at both Blackley and the Harpurhey Mechanics' Institutes.⁵⁷ Over thirty years before, however, Bamford's plans for similar public entertainments at Middleton Mechanics' Institute had been stifled by the manipulative patronage of the Suffields at Middleton Old Hall. The Suffields, it will be recalled, were the largely absentee landowners whose condescension and above all whose haughty steward Bamford had grown to hate. In *Early Days* and other works of his nostalgic period, Bamford implicitly contrasted their ways (and those of grasping manufacturers) with the unpretentious hospitality of their predecessor 'the good old knight' Sir Raphe Assheton, the Hopwoods, and the earls of Wilton. 'Come back to the halls of your fathers', he urged the latter-day gentry.⁵⁸ But if the Suffields and their ilk would not fulfil their hospitable obligations at wakes time, then workers, through their institutes, would have to do it themselves.

The "Sense of the Past"

The sense of the past was very important to the inhabitants of Middleton. The wakes and rushcarts proved persistent beyond expectations in the mid-Victorian period, continuing to adapt to changing circumstances as they had always done. Rushbearing survived long enough to prosper from a wave of nostalgia while it was yet alive. Patrick Joyce has shown how important a social and economic reference point the age of the handloom was, and what an important theme 'the elaboration of a radical sense of the past' was in Lancashire popular culture in the nineteenth century. Middleton's wakes and rushcarts were a living part of this sought-after past, not only for its own inhabitants but also for outside visitors, whose numbers seem to have increased just at the time when their own wakes holidays were losing their domestic character.



The Old Boar's Head, Middleton, overlooking the green area where rushcarts were displayed before beginning the ascent to Middleton Church.

The sense of the past was also important to Samuel Bamford, and Bamford's personal sense of the past seems to have been influential locally. When a young reporter joined the company of some veteran rushbearers at Middleton Wakes in 1886, his account of their reminiscences had a good deal of Bamford woven in.⁵⁹ So too did Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth's 1860 novel *Scarsdale*, for whose account of Rochdale rushbearing in the 1820s the author prepared by reading *Early Days*, and for which Bamford did some paid research into the power-loom riots. At Blackley Wakes of 1859, a suspicious but impecunious Bamford was actually a guest of Kay-Shuttleworth's at Gawthorpe Hall.⁶⁰

Martin Hewitt's recent account of how Samuel Bamford retained his radical principles is a welcome corrective to views of him as a mere renegade or turncoat. However, Hewitt's view that Bamford 'wrote as a Victorian' without harking back to a lost artisan past surely overlooks an important part of Bamford's make-up.⁶¹ Certainly Bamford wanted to improve upon the past as well as restore it, most notably in the case of his attempt to reform Blackley Wakes, but as Joyce has shown this was quite compatible with a strain of radical nostalgia in which the recent weaving past was a central reference point. The more imaginary past of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (which had strongly influenced Bamford), of Saxon peasants, and of the ancient lordly hospitality supposedly exercised in the local halls was also important to Bamford, but it was his own memories which really made him tick.⁶²

There is something strangely moving in the thought of the aged Bamford, his mind swirling with the half-imagined glories of the rushbearings of his youth, haunting the wakes of mid-Victorian Blackley and Middleton, prevented by his own cantankerous nature from living up to the hospitable ideals which his own work was responsible for perpetuating. He turned instead to an attempt to reform his local wakes into an idealised version of the past where he would feel more at home, but this too did not really fit, for in advocating sobriety and moral improvement Bamford was at war (not always successfully) with another part of himself. The saga of Middleton Wakes in Bamford's lifetime is a fascinating blend of tradition and innovation, past and present, imagination and reality, and the culture that is produced by the interplay between them. While Bamford reminisced about them, Middleton wakes yet lived

NOTES

- 1 Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), especially ch.7.
- 2 Samuel Bamford, *Early Days* (1849; reprinted Frank Cass, London, 1968), chs 14–15.
- 3 Samuel Bamford, *The Dialect of South Lancashire* (1850; second edn, 1854), glossary.
- 4 For a more detailed account of rushbearing, see Alfred Burton, *Rushbearing* (Manchester, 1890), and R. Poole, 'Wakes Holidays and Pleasure Fairs in the Lancaster Cotton District, c. 1790–1890' (Lancaster University Ph.D thesis, 1985), ch. 3. On the wakes generally, see, R. Poole & J.K. Walton, 'The Lancashire Wakes in the Nineteenth Century', in R.D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1982), and R. Poole, 'Oldham Wakes', in J.K. Walton and J. Walvin (eds), *Leisure in Britain 1780–1939* (Manchester, 1983).
- 5 Bamford, *Early Days*, p.27 and pp. 146–55.
- 6 Bamford, *Early Days*, p.225–6.
- 7 A.B. Reach, *Manchester and the Textile Districts in 1849* (Helmsore, 1972) pp. 98–109.
- 8 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin edn, 1968), pp. 620–1.
- 9 Samuel Bamford, *Walks in South Lancashire* (1844; reprinted Brighton, 1972), p.260
- 10 J. Fielding, *Rural Historical Gleanings in South Lancashire* (Manchester, 1852), pp. 239–43. Lady Assheton stayed on in the Hall after its sale.
- 11 Samuel Bamford, *Some Account of the Late Amos Ogden* (Manchester, 1853), passim; Bamford, *Early Days*, pp.140–3; Fielding, *Gleanings*, pp.229–43; *Manchester Courier*, 6 April 1850 (Black Knight Custom).
- 12 *Middleton Albion*, 21 August 1886.
- 13 Middleton Churchwardens' Accounts, 1641, 1651–79, MRL L56/2/1, entries for 1661 (ff. 49 & 51), 1669 (f.182), 1672 (f.236). Also in Shaw MSS, MRL, vols ix, x, xii. (including further accounts for 1738–47, which show disappointingly little about the rushbearing).
- 14 *St Chad's Parish Magazine*, Rochdale, September 1870 (Rochdale Library).
- 15 *Middleton Albion*, 21 August 1886, 15 May 1895 (obituary of Thomas Thorp).
- 16 Bamford, *Early Days*, pp. 150, 153–4.
- 17 J. Aikin, *A Description of the Country from Thirty to Forty miles Round Manchester* (1795), pp.243–6; Bamford, *Early Days*, pp.23–4. Bamford disliked these obtrusive renovations.
- 18 MRL, MS.F.926.3.P6.
- 19 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1836.
- 20 *Ibid*, 29 August 1840, 24 August 1842; *Manchester Courier*, 29 August 1840; Bamford *Walks*, pp.xiii–xiv and 228.
- 21 *Manchester Guardian*, 30 August 1845; *Manchester Courier*, 31 August 1844, 30 August 1845.
- 22 *Manchester Examiner*, 24 Aug. 1847.
- 23 *Manchester Guardian*, 23 Aug. 1848, 25 Aug. 1849, 28 Aug. 1850.
- 24 Poole, thesis, esp. ch.4; Walton & Poole, 'Lancashire Wakes'.
- 25 *Oldham Chronicle*, 29 Aug. 1869, 26 Aug. 1871, 31 Aug. 1872; *Oldham Standard*, 26 Aug. 1865; *Middleton Albion*, 26 Aug. 1865.
- 26 *Oldham Chronicle*, 31 Aug. 1878, 26 Aug. 1882, 30 Aug. 1884; *Middleton Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1884; *Middleton Albion*, 30 Aug. 1884.
- 27 *Oldham Chronicle*, 27 Aug. 1870, 26 Aug. 1871, 31 Aug. 1872, 30 Aug. 1873.
- 28 *Ibid*, 25 Aug. 1883, 29 Aug. 1885; *Middleton Albion*, 25 Aug. 1883.
- 29 *Middleton Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1884.
- 30 *Oldham Chronicle*, 18 & 25 Aug. 1888, 30 Aug. 1890.
- 31 *Ibid*, 31 Aug. 1872, 18 & 25 Aug. 1888, 30 Aug. 1890.
- 32 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Aug. 1847; *Manchester Examiner*, 24 Aug. 1847; *Oldham Chronicle*, 31 Aug. 1878.
- 33 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Aug. 1849, 28 & 31 Aug. 1850; *Manchester Examiner*, 22 Aug. 1849, 28 Aug. 1850.
- 34 *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Aug 1845.
- 35 *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Aug. 1845, 27 Aug. 1853; *Manchester Courier*, 30 Aug. 1845; *Manchester Examiner*, 27 Aug. 1853, 26 Aug. 1854.
- 36 *Middleton Albion*, 27 Aug. 1859, 25 Aug. 1860, 16 Aug. 1865, 30 Aug. 1884.
- 37 *Manchester Examiner*, 26 Aug. 1854; *Oldham Chronicle*, 28 Aug. 1869, 30 Aug. 1884, 29 Aug. 1885; *St Chad's Parish Magazine*, Rochdale, Sept 1870.
- 38 *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Aug. 1847, 28 & 31 Aug. 1850; *Middleton Albion*, 27 Aug. 1859; *Oldham Chronicle*, 18 Aug. 1864. On coal carts generally, see Poole thesis, pp.77–8.
- 39 *Middleton Albion*, 16 Aug. 1865. 'Smoot-bowts' were presumably 'smooth bolts' of rushes.
- 40 *Ibid*, 16 Aug. 1865, 21 Aug. 1886, 25 Aug. 1883.
- 41 *Middleton Albion*, 25 Aug. 1883.
- 42 *Ibid*, 26 Aug. 1865.
- 43 *Ibid*, 25 Aug. 1883, 26 Aug. 1895 (obituary).
- 44 *Middleton Albion*, 10 Oct. 1863.
- 45 Samuel Bamford, *Diary*, 24 Apr. 1858 (MRL MS 923.2 B99).
- 46 Samuel Bamford, *Walks*, Walk VIII, 'Township of Blackley'.
- 47 Martin Hewitt, 'Radicalism and the Victorian Working Class: the Case of Samuel Bamford' *Historical Journal* 34 (Dec. 1991).
- 48 Samuel Bamford, introduction to *The Dialect of South Lancashire* (2nd edn, London, 1854), p.xi.
- 49 Bamford, *Diary*, 15 Sept. 1858; *Early Days*, p.118.
- 50 Bamford, *Diary*, 21 Aug. & 1 Sept. 1858, 18 Aug. 1860, 25 Aug. 1861.
- 51 Fielding, *Gleanings*, pp. 67, 76–8.
- 52 Bamford, *Diary*, 1 Oct. 1858 and accompanying cutting from *Manchester Examiner*.
- 53 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Aug. 1858 and *Manchester Courier*, 7 Aug. 1858, the latter inserted in Bamford's diary.
- 54 Bamford, *Diary*, 19 Oct. 1858.
- 55 *Ibid*, 20 Aug. 1858, and cutting from *Middleton Albion*, 4 Sept. 1858.
- 56 Bamford, *Diary*, 24 Sept. 1859.
- 57 *Ibid*, 18 Nov. 1858, and accompanying cutting from *Middleton Albion*.
- 58 Bamford, *Walks*, pp. 172–3, 246, 260–3, 285–8; *Diary*, 24 Apr. 1858 (inc conversation with Alexander Duff Gordon at Somerset House).
- 59 *Middleton Albion*, 21 August 1886.
- 60 James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Scarsdale* (3v., 1860), ch. VIII; Bamford, *Diary*, 15 & 29 July, 1 Aug. 1859.
- 61 Hewitt, 'Samuel Bamford'.
- 62 See, for example, Bamford, *Walks*, pp. 172–3, 262–3, 286–7; *Dialect*, introduction; *Diary*, 24 Apr. 1858.