

folkonwight

Island Folk History

Adapted from *Cock & Bull Stories: Animals in Isle of Wight Folklore, Dialect and Cultural History* (2008), by Alan R Phillips

CATTLE



BULLS, BAITING & HARD CHEESE

Numerous ox bones, many of which had been split open for the extraction of marrow, together with the teeth bones of a horse, were discovered in 1936 by Hubert Poole in a Mesolithic deposit on the east bank of the Newtown River. By the Iron Age dairy and beef cattle together with sheep would have grazed the Island's meadows and oxen would have been yoked to a wooden plough, or 'ard'.



Courtesy of Isle of Wight Heritage Service

Regarding the three-branched prehistoric flint implement known as a tribrach, which has remained something of a mystery since its discovery most probably at Ventnor in the 1850s,

Hubert Poole conjectured in 1941 that if displayed with its longer arm pointing downwards it bears a rough resemblance to the horned head of a bull, which could conceivably have been mounted on a staff and carried in procession. This remains arguably still the best interpretation, though whether one would wish to concur with Poole that it might have been part of a phallic cult (all the rage in archaeological circles when Poole was writing) is perhaps less likely. Poole went on to draw an analogy with the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes on the Island, which used to carry at an annual church parade a pair of bull's horns mounted on a staff in much the same way that others carried a banner. The horns were sometimes decorated with a sprig of ivy.



The Bugle, Yarmouth



The Bugle, Brading

Two public houses on the Island still retain the name of The Bugle – Brading and Yarmouth – and another one at Newport used to be so called. They are each represented by the sign of a young ox: this is apparently rare nationwide. The most likely reason for its Island adoption is that the 'bugle' – in this case referring to a 'wild bull' – was the supporter to the arms of Henry Beauchamp, Duke of Warwick, crowned King of the Isle of Wight by Henry VI in 1443.

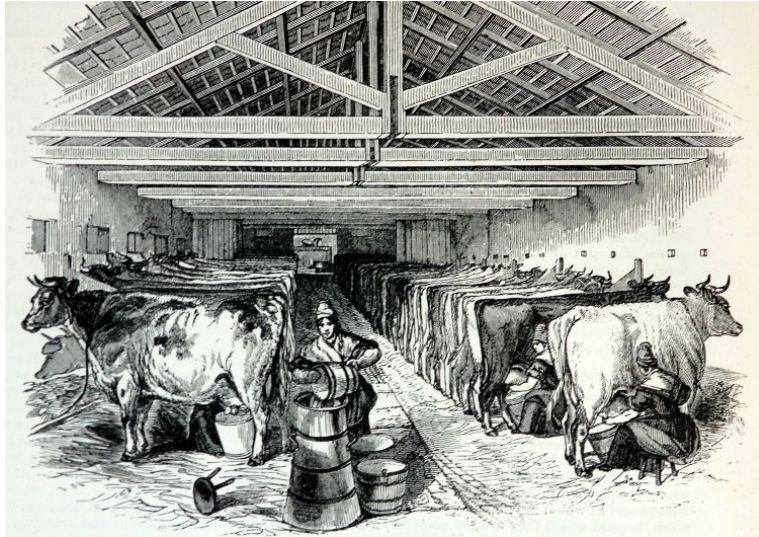
Close to the Bugle in Brading is its famous Bull Ring, the only visible reminder of the former practice of bull-baiting, in which the unfortunate beast would be goaded by large dogs before being slaughtered. This was believed to improve the quality of the meat as well as providing a public "entertainment".



Brading Bull Ring

The custom was particularly common in the 16th century: a large field in Niton is also named the *Bull Ring* and in 1595 had a cottage on it known as Bull Ring Cottage; another smallholding of one acre was known as *Bear Close*, so it is possible that bear-baiting was also indulged in. In the *Assize for Butchers* (1636) we are informed "that Butchers may not kill or sell any bull or bulls unbaiten", and Brading Town Hall records indicate that in 1592 William Smith was fined 6d. for killing a bull *without* baiting. There had also been a long-standing tradition from at least the 17th century for the Governor of the Island to give £5 to buy a bull for baiting on the Mayor of Newport's feast day, after which it was killed and its flesh distributed to the poor. The Mayor and Corporation, with mace-bearer and constables, would all be in attendance, and the first dog let loose at the bull was decorated with ribbons and called 'The Mayor's Dog'.

Towards the end of the 18th century, however, pressure for change was mounting. In 1785 Newport Borough strongly noted its disapproval of "the continued interruption of the peace of this town by the dangerous practise of Bull Baiting. We lament that bills [of prosecution] are preferred against those only in the lower class of life, as the punishment already inflicted on them... must in a measure have done away this evil, had they not been abetted by persons, whose conduct ought to have been an example of strict conformity to the civil laws of this borough" – in other words, the activity was being egged on by upper middle class individuals. In 1815 George Bull was being prosecuted for the act of baiting a bull at West Cowes, and bull-baiting was finally outlawed in 1835.



In her study of the 1630 Swainston Survey, Johanna Jones points out that inventories for the period list relatively small numbers of cows on most farms - between 3 and 13 - but the cowhouse at Swainston Manor Farm was exceptional, with thirty partitions for cows and four stalls: dairy farming here was a commercial activity, with opportunities for selling the produce at Newport market; Sir John Oglander informs us that the beast market had been established in Newport in 1532. Cowhouses are also listed for the various farms on the Swainston estate; Clamerkin had two with 'a little room for calves', the only example of weaning calves by hand, which gave them a gentler nature. There were by comparison just three oxhouses on the estate, numbering 24 stalls, or three ploughing teams of eight oxen apiece.

In his agricultural survey of the southern counties at the end of the 18th century, William Marshall was less than complimentary about Isle of Wight cattle: "The cattle of this Island strongly evince the impropriety of mixing alien varieties... they propagate a degenerate race... Why not propagate the English breed of cattle, pure, and unmixed with foreign blood?" Writing in 1860, Canon Venables observes: "Old persons still living may remember the time when the principal butcher at Newport always went to Salisbury at Christmas for his fat oxen, and on his return paraded his purchases round the town, bedecked with ribbons, refusing to sell any portion of them except to his regular customers during the rest of the year". He is rather less critical than Marshall about the Island's cattle: "for the most part crosses from the Norman breeds, large and profitable milkers, but with no great pretensions to beauty".

Regarding the Island's cheese, however, a notoriously hard kind made from skimmed milk and known as 'Isle of Wight Rock', Venables observes: "A vessel being freighted to London with millstones and Isle of Wight cheeses, the rats ate the millstones and left the cheese untouched!" Reverend Warner had already confirmed the tradition in 1795: the cheese "is extremely hard, can scarcely be cut but by a hatchet or saw, is to be masticated only by the firmest teeth, and digested only by the strongest stomachs". H.I. Jenkinson adds in his Isle of Wight guide (1879) that the cheese was 'consumed by labourers'; it no doubt formed a regular part of 'nammet', still known to all Islanders as the term for mid-morning bread-and-cheese refreshments, and which may lay claim to being the strongest dialect word still in regular use.

Jersey cows reared at Shate Farm, Brighstone, form the second oldest herd in the country and were originally sired by a bull belonging to Queen Victoria.

The last annual cattle market held in St James Square, Newport, took place in December 1927 before moving to the purpose-built venue in South Street, where it lasted until 1983, then switching to Brickfields.

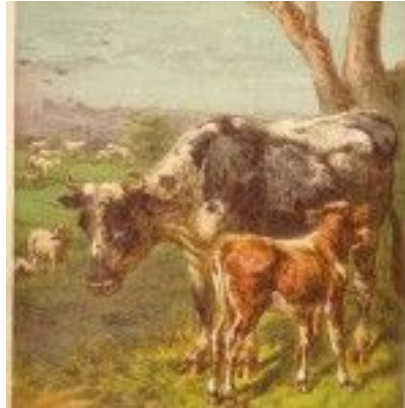


Newport livestock market, St James's Square, c.1910

We cannot say precisely which year the tradition of the Gilten Market began – which as far as one can tell appears to be unique to the Island – but we do know that it is at least 160 years old, as there is a reference to this pre-Christmas market in 1858. The horns of the champion bull, otherwise known as the 'Gilten Beast', are painted with gold leaf – originally by the

Newport mayor, now by the High Sheriff – before being auctioned; it has also been a tradition to hold a Gilten Dinner following the event. The market was suspended for several years following the foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2000 but has since bounced back in style.

COWS & CAAVES

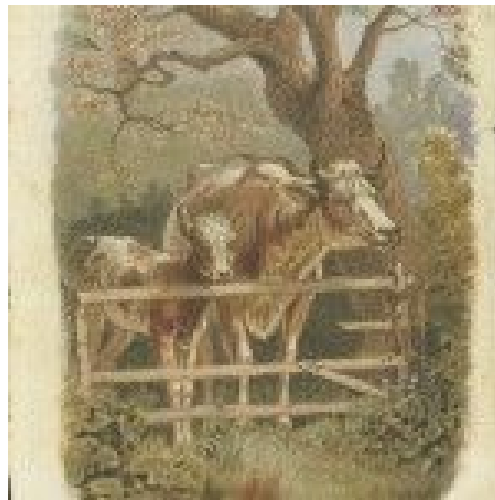


'Billy' was the standard dialect term, not so much for a goat, as for a bull, and 'beeasts' or 'beesties' referred to cattle or oxen in general: "Bist thee gwyne to sar [feed] the beeasts, Jack?" By contrast, an individual cow might be known as a 'hummick', at least at Princelett Dairy in Newchurch in the 1920s: "I must goo git the wold hummicks in vor milken"; and a 'mud calf' was one brought up by hand – such as the hand-reared calves at Clamerkin Farm near Newtown. To 'belve' was to bellow or roar like a bull: "That nipper was belvin' for an hour arterwards"; whereas to 'blare' was to low as a cow: "The wold dooman [old woman] went sniffen and blaren about the plaace, like a wold cow that's lost her calf"; and a complementary saying used to be: "A blaring cow forgets her calf the soonest". 'Cup-cup' was a cry to bring the cows into the yard for milking; 'cowed milk' was, unsurprisingly, milk warm from the cow; and 'strokens' was the last milk drawn, but the spin-off word 'beeastings' was reserved for the first two or three milkings after a cow had calved. When, however, "the cows be gone azew", they had reached the end of their milk-producing cycle.

'Harlens' signified the hock joints of a cow or heifer: "The wold cows got stuck in the keert loose up over their harlens" [The old cows got stuck in the cart ruts above their hocks in mud]. "Mind the wold cow don't hook ye" was a warning that might often have been issued

regarding being struck or gored by any cow or bull with horns. 'Churn' referred to a calf's entrails: "I be gwyne to Athervell to git a caave's churn tomorrow"; whilst 'lebb' signified rennet, the inner membrane of a calf's stomach used in the cheese-making process.

'Taailzoke' denoted a disease in bullocks' tails, and 'skent', or sometimes 'squitters', referred to the looseness of the bowels in cattle: "That 'ere heifer o' your'n es a *skenter*", i.e. an animal that would



not fatten. By contrast, the term 'proof' was applied to cattle food that had shown itself to have some body or fattening power: "There's zome proof in that clover haay, varmer". But animals suffering from eating too much green food were said to be 'blowed'. Cattle or horses were bled with a 'fleyam', an instrument or lancet of an arrow-head shape, which in turn was struck by a short, thick wooden stick known as a 'bloodstick'. 'Varming out' signified cleaning out either the cowshed or stable: "Git the dung prong, meyat, and let's varm out steyabul". And a dealer in cattle or horses was known as a 'jobber'.

A common way of distinguishing Islanders from Hampshire folks in the past was to refer to 'Hampshire Hogs and Isle of Wight Calves'. There is a Calving Close Copse in the Northwood area and a Cowleaze Chine at Brighstone. Bouldnor literally meant 'the shore of the bull': the name may have referred either to the grazing of bulls here, or to the outline of Bouldnor Cliff, which rises steeply to a height of 200 feet and may have been thought to resemble the shape of a bull. However, Bull Rocks off Mottistone and Bulls Wood near Calbourne are misleading:

they have nothing to do with bulls as such but are both named after local families with that surname. 'Oxlays' referred quite simply to a meadow where oxen were kept.

The two towers of St Catherine's Lighthouse have often been known as The Cow (main lighthouse) and The Calf (tower with foghorn), and these almost parallel the original naming of Cowes from two sandbanks off the mouth of the River Medina called *Estcowe* and *Westcowe* in 1413, 'the east and west cow', from their fancied resemblance to those animals. Then when, in about 1539, Henry VIII had two blockhouses or forts built to defend the coast against the French and Spanish, they in turn came to be called the *Est Cow* and the *West Cow*. Finally the plural name 'The Cow(e)s' came to be transferred to the settlements themselves on either side of the river estuary, giving the modern name *East Cowes* and *West Cowes* appearing on Andrews' map of 1769.



Isle of Wight Calves. Courtesy of IW County Record Office

The caption reads: Well what shall us do Bill?
I s'pose there baint nothin else
but to cut his 'ed off.

No nuffin else,
We must cut his head off to save
his life.

