

The Randwick Wap: A Custom of Community

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Abstract

On 7 May 2022 a crowd formed around the war memorial in the village of Randwick, Gloucestershire. The crowd grew in numbers and in excitement, with photographers from local news outlets manoeuvring to capture the event. It was the Saturday of the second weekend of May which, for the inhabitants of Randwick and the surrounding villages, meant that it was the day of the Wap. Through qualitative interviews with organisers, participants, and attendees, as well as field work observations of the Wap and its contemporary format, I will show the custom's importance in the local cultural calendar and investigate how it has become entwined with the village's identity. I will focus directly on the community, through first-hand accounts and use the words of the respondents to explain the ongoing importance of this custom and others like it. On the basis of this exploration of how the Wap is viewed and celebrated by those involved, I argue that the co-creation and observance of a custom allows a community to represent and reassert itself.

Key words

customs, folklore, oral history, community, identity, belonging, locality, co-creation, heritage

Acknowledgment

Thank you to the people of Randwick for sharing your memories and stories with me.

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Introduction

The Randwick Wap provides an opportunity to explore how a folk custom contributes to the strengthening of the local community and builds identity through establishing an active connection to a place and history, demonstrating why folklore, customs and practices are important and valuable for the community (Glassie 1995; Wigley 2021). By midday on 7 May 2022 a crowd had started to form around the war memorial in the village of Randwick, Gloucestershire. The crowd continued to grow in numbers and in excitement, with a contingent of photographers from local news outlets manoeuvring to capture the event. It was the second Saturday of May which, for the inhabitants of Randwick and the surrounding villages, meant that it was the day of the Wap. The 2022 observance of the village's annual custom was elevated in importance as it marked the 50th anniversary of the custom's revival in 1972 by the Reverend Nial Morrison. Furthermore, it was the return of the festival following two years of disruption in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic – the only years in which the Wap has not been held since 1972.

Those participating in the procession or involved in the organisation were easy to identify by their historically inspired costumes. Some had roles, such as the Sword Bearer or the Town Crier, whereas others who had come to view the procession and cheer it on from the sides of the route had taken the opportunity to dress up to mark the occasion, some with floral garlands and others with any fancy dress costume they deemed fitting for the day. At 12.30, the florally decorated sedan chairs for the Mayor and Queen were brought to the war memorial to begin the procession. There was a call for help after the first chair was brought, due to the heat of the day and the exertion of carrying it up the hill. By 12.45, both the Mayor and Queen were seated with the Wap Court gathered around them for photographs before the procession down the hill to the Mayor's Pond started. A member of the Wap Committee announced the commencement of the 2022 Wap, and the Mayor and Queen were anointed with water by their predecessors; the 50th anniversary celebrations were officially underway.

The official website of the Randwick Wap provides information on the history of the custom, which is believed to have derived from the medieval “wappenshaw”, the Old English word for “weapon show”, a gathering of troops for review.¹ The exact origins of the custom are the subject of speculation, as the term “Wap” was only documented in nineteenth century

1 For more information on the Randwick Wap, including the history, photos, and news, see: <https://randwickwap.org.uk/>.

accounts of the custom. Nevertheless, I do not focus on demonstrating the accuracy or authenticity of the custom that the community has established for itself (Randwick 1868: 3). Instead, I look at the ways in which members of the community of the Wap interpret it today. For the purposes of this research, the community refers to the people who are connected by their shared experience of the Randwick Wap and their collective understanding of the significance and cultural value of the Wap to Randwick (Barcus – Shugatai 2022). Through their connection to the village and the lived experience attached to it through the annual celebration of the Wap, residents of Randwick are members of the Wap community (Ramsden 2016; Barcus – Shugatai 2022). The community also extends beyond the geographical village boundaries to include those who are connected to the Wap through their relationship with Randwick as either former residents, or people associated with other Randwick organisations such as the Scouts, Girl Guides, and the church. For all members of the Wap community, annual participation in the custom is a celebration and affirmation of a shared cultural history (Carnegie – McCabe 2008).² The Randwick Wap takes place on the second Saturday of May and begins with a parade of the elected Wap Court from the war memorial to the Mayor's Pond, and then back to the church yard, where cheeses are rolled down a hill by the Mayor and Queen. The parade concludes on the village green, where there are vendors, music, and other entertainment that lasts the rest of the day. With its fixed time in the community's calendar, the custom provides a set moment for the community to reconnect with people and place and take part in an event that has become a part of their cultural heritage.

I grew up in Gloucestershire, in a village roughly 20 minutes' drive from Randwick, but I had no awareness of the Wap until I met people from the village at high school. May customs and celebrations were not unfamiliar in the county, with well dressings and maypole dances a familiar seasonal sight, but when I attended the Wap for the first time at the age of 13, I discovered that it was unlike other customs that I had experienced. I was always an observer, not part of the procession, but the camaraderie and liveliness of the day were fixed in my mind, and I enjoyed visiting the festival with friends until I moved away from Gloucestershire to attend university.

2 At this stage in my research, my data and focus are on the active participants in the community. There will be voices and accounts of village residents who do not consider themselves a part of the Wap community; the tensions between participants and abstainers are an area that I plan to gather data on further into my research. Similarly, tensions between community members over the way that the Wap is observed and reactions to changes, both positive and negative, will be explored at a later point in my research.

In 2021, when I began planning my PhD research into folk customs and community, the Wap was the first custom that came to mind, despite the fact that 15 years had passed. I discovered that it had not been studied or featured in folkloric accounts of May customs with anywhere close to the same coverage and detail as others in south-west England. I was aware that there may have been a tint of nostalgia to my recollections, but when I attended the 2022 celebration I was excited to discover that, if anything, my memory had downplayed the festivities. My position as a non-resident observer did not dampen the reception that I received when I explained my research and my interest in the Wap to its community members. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my identity as a former county resident aided me in my familiarity with the village and its locality, and as an introduction to the Wap. When visiting the Wap, I attended as a researcher observing and recording the day, rather than participating in the celebration.

Through qualitative interviews with organisers, participants, and attendees as well as field work observations of the Wap and its contemporary format, I will show the custom's importance in the local cultural calendar and investigate how it has become entwined with the village's identity (Pearson 2006; Ramsden 2016). The Wap is an example of how folk customs can provide a temporary escape from contemporary life and serve to create and strengthen the local community (Cornish 2016). Using first-hand accounts from those directly involved in the custom, I will place the focus directly on the community and use the words of its members to explain the ongoing importance of this custom and others like it. On the basis of an exploration of the narratives of the Wap and the way in which it is viewed and celebrated by those involved, in their own words, I will argue that the co-creation and observance of a custom allows a community to represent and reassert itself. The ongoing observance of the Wap allows members of the community to express what this custom means to them and to the village, and to connect to other people who share an appreciation of its cultural significance. It allows for personal interpretation and expression, while celebrating a shared cultural history. Focused on a single custom, this research can be considered in parallel with works on other English regional customs by, among others, Helen Cornish and Tom Brown to demonstrate the importance of folk customs in English communities (Cornish 2016; Brown 2017).

Early accounts of the Randwick Wap

The Randwick Wap has been traced back to the seventeenth century in early references to a "Query of the Mayor of Randwick" in *Notes on the Diocese of Gloucester*, c. 1700, but the exact date of origin and the duration of

its observation is unknown (Kightly 1989: 166; Fendley 2005).³ The nature of the custom and the way it is celebrated in the present day have been discerned from sources and commentaries that date back to the eighteenth century, which provide details of the custom as a type of mock mayor ceremony. While variations can be found in other similar ceremonies, the core elements of the election of a ceremonial mayor or leader for the festivities and the subsequent revelry are consistent features (Wright 1936; Stanley 1957). In the entry on Randwick village, *A New History of Gloucestershire*, written by Gloucestershire-based local historian Samuel Rudder, mentions the observance of an annual custom, characterised by “irregularity and intemperance” but provides little detail beyond the election of a mayor (Rudder 1779: 619). A letter written to the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, published in May 1784, provides one of the earliest accounts of the Wap, with details of how it was celebrated:

“As I was last year passing through the village of Randwick, near Stroud, in Gloucestershire, my attention was attracted by a crowd of people assembled round an horsepond, in which I observed a man, on whom I imagined the country people were doing justice in the summary way for which the English mob is so famous... I soon, however, was informed of my error, and learned that it being the second Monday after Easter, the people of the parish were assembled, according to an annual custom (the origin of which no one could tell me), to keep a revel. One of the parish is, it seems, on the above-mentioned day, elected mayor, and carried with great state, colours flying, drums beating, men, women, and children shouting, to a particular horsepond, in which his worship is placed, seated in an arm-chair; a song is then given out line by line by the clerk, and sung with great gravity by the surrounding crowd... The rest of that day, and often of that week, is devoted to riot and drunkenness. The country magistrates have endeavoured, but in vain, to put a stop to this practice.” (Letters 1784: 334–335)

At this point in its history, the custom focused around the election of a mock mayor and the subsequent revelry. The writer’s lack of knowledge of the custom, the assertion that they were passing through, and the characterisation of those partaking as “country people” demonstrates the outsider

3 The position of mayor in Randwick is only ever documented in association with the Wap, it is not an official elected or formal position in the village. As such, references to a Randwick Mayor can be taken as referring to the village’s annual custom.

status of this writer. The timing of this publication also coincides with the rise in antiquarian interest, along with romanticism and nationalism, that would be foundational for the emergence of folklore studies in England during the nineteenth century (Ben-Amos 1973; Sweet 2004).

In the history of a custom that was known only by those local to the area until 1784, the first known eye-witness account of it was provided by a stranger to the community. I mention this not to undermine the community's history of its custom but to demonstrate how external influences have shaped the custom and how the community of Randwick has continued to reclaim and reshape it. The writer of this letter also claimed to be the first person to commit the lyrics of the Mayor's Song to writing: "The song was given to me by the clerk of the parish, who said it had never been written before." (Letters 1784: 335)

1.

*When Arceules began to spin,
And Pollo wrought upon the loom;
Our trade to flourish did begin,
Though conscience went to selling broom,*

2.

*As Helen then sat carding wool,
Whose beauteous face did cause such strife,
He had not then broke through those rules,
Which caused so many to lose their lives.*

3.

*Had too Helen's wanton love
Eaten his food with sweet content,
He had not then disturb'd the peace,
When he to Greece a wooing went.*

4.

*When princes sons kept sheep in fields,
And queens made cakes with oaten flour,
And men to lucre did not yield,
Which brought good cheer to every bower.*

5.

*But when the giants huge and high,
Did fight with spears like weavers' beams;*

*And men in iron beds did lie,
Which brought the poor to hard extreme:*

6.

*When cedar trees were grown so rise,
And pretty birds did sing on high;
Then weavers liv'd more void of strife,
Than princes of great dignity.*

7.

*Then David with a sling and stone,
Not fearing great Goliath's strength,
He pierc'd his brains, and broke his bones,
Though he was nine feet and span in length.*

CHORUS.

*Let love and friendship still agree
To hold the bands of amity. (Letters 1784: 335)*

In writing the song down, the writer became part of the writing of the Wap's history. The lyrics of the song, now known as the "Mayor's Song", are still sung almost exactly as they were recorded in 1784. They refer specifically to the wool manufacturing trade, which the area around the town of Stroud, where Randwick is situated, had become renowned for (Briggs 1974: 23). This means that part of the village's economic past has been preserved through the annual singing of this song; it specifically connects to the industry of the past that was central to village life (Fennemore 1893). The lyrics to the "Mayor's Song" were featured in an 1817 pamphlet, printed in Stroud, titled *The Chronicles and Lamentations of Gotham*. The central theme of this pamphlet was dissent and the celebration of the higher moral character of working men over those in exploitative positions of power (Millard 1817). The lyrics of the song suggest that this sentiment was one felt strongly in Randwick; the lyric "*And men to lucre did not yield, Which brought good cheer to every bower*" refers specifically to the rejection of dishonesty and deception in order to gain "lucre" or ill-gotten money. This sentiment of dissent would likely have only increased following the introduction of the power loom to local industry in 1787, which had a ruinous impact on the employment opportunities in the area and led to a significant economic decline in Randwick (Fennemore 1893). Although the voices of people who are known to have been residents of Randwick or participants in the Wap are

missing from these accounts, the content of the “Mayor’s Song” demonstrates a proud community that was built on a specific trade and rejected the attainment of wealth through dishonesty. The creation of this song demonstrates that the Wap served as a rallying point for the community to come together and vocally express part of their shared culture, as they committed values that they wanted to associate with their village to lyrics.

The Wap faced its own decline in the nineteenth century, with local newspapers reporting the celebration of the custom with an attitude of disapproval towards the proceedings:

“Many years ago it is said the affair wore a respectable character, and almost everyone in the neighbourhood – both rich and poor – came to witness the dancing, etc., of numbers of young damsels dressed in white. But from some cause or other it has sadly degenerated, and the annual election, or “wap,” as it is generally termed, is more a discredit than otherwise to the Randwickians who take part in it.”
(Randwick 1868: 3)

There is a clear condemnation of the celebration as lacking in the behaviours considered proper by the writer of this article. The intoxication of the participants and attendees, and descriptions of swearing and public altercations create an image of a custom that did not fit well with the idyllic notion of the English countryside that had gained traction during latter half of the nineteenth century, as discontent with urban living conditions grew following large population migration to cities for industrial employment (Howkins 1992; Haigron 2017). The dissatisfaction of people living in such conditions, alongside middle class anxieties about urban living and the exodus of those who had the means to homes in the countryside, led to the idealisation of the English countryside (Wiener 2010).

There is clearer evidence of disapproval in a letter to the *Stroud News and Gloucestershire Advertiser* that was published a week after the above discussed article. This provides a further opinion about the custom and gives some indication of the people who actively participated in it. As the writer of the letter is not stated, it is not possible to tell if this person was from Randwick, but they use the phrase “our village anniversaries”, which demonstrates a personal association with the area (Letters 1868: 2). This may be indicative of someone who is close to the community and was present at the Wap, which is indicated by the first-hand account they provide. This writer’s description of the custom and its attendants provided reveals a strong disapproval of the Wap and of those who participated in it:

“The drunken and foolish performance commonly called Randwick ‘Wap’, the origin of which, I believe, no one can tell, might have entirely faded by this time, if all the people of Randwick were to keep in their houses on that day, and not go out and inspect the drunken rabble. Depend upon it, they would not go through their drunken and foolish performance if there were no spectators.” (Letters 1868: 2)

The behaviours said to have been exhibited at the custom, rather than the custom itself, were the cause of these public denouncements. Indeed, the comment that the Wap had “sadly degenerated” suggests that there would be support for or interest in a folk custom that was perhaps more temperate; such a view was perhaps the result of the idealised notion of the English countryside that had developed in public consciousness at that time. These articles and letters are, of course, only one side of the public discussion of the Wap and its observance, but unfortunately primary accounts and opinions of those who took part have not been found. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Wap had ceased to be observed (Randwick’s Wap 1898: 2). However, the fact that the Wap had continued for decades in the face of public disapproval can be taken as an indication of the support it had from the Randwick community. In her 1893 book *A History of Randwick*, Randwick resident E. Fennemore included the telling quote from “one old Wapper”; “Bury me just inside the churchyard wall; then I shall hear the mayor go down.” (Fennemore, 1893: 60)

The revived custom

The Randwick Wap was revived in 1972 by Reverend Nial Morrison, the vicar of Randwick’s St John the Baptist Church, who wanted to re-introduce the custom as a way for the village to celebrate its cultural history and have a means of representing its contemporary cultural identity (Morrison 1976). The timing of the revival coincided with the cultural trend of folk custom revivals that characterised the second folk revival in England, which began with increased interest in traditional practices in the 1950s (Irvine 2018). With the returning focus on traditions, folklorists moved away from treating these cultural practices as markers of the past and began to approach them more as demonstrations and resources of a community’s experience of living and adapting, and expression (Bronner 2007). Motivated by fears of a decline in national culture, many of the customs revived in this period demonstrated the cultivated and hegemonic idea of “Merrie England” that had been preserved by the folklorists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and allowed for the continuation of the idea of synonymity

between “folklore” and “rural” in England (Bennett 1993; Boyes 2010: 65, 99; Widdowson 2016: 3). This revival movement of the quintessential custom raised concerns of authenticity and the perpetuation of mythology transmitted through revived or reimagined customs, while simultaneously galvanising folklorists to explore the revived customs as a means for communities to communicate their heritage (Dundes 1965; Handler – Linnekin 1984; Davidson 1987; Hobsbawm – Ranger 2012).

When writing about the Wap, Morrison demonstrated an awareness of this cultural trend of custom revival, at least in its local impact: “While many Cotswold hamlets are attempting to revive ancient customs and festivals, Randwick village, which spills down a pretty hillside two miles north-west of Stroud, boasts two Springtime celebrations.” (Morrison 1976: 14) At the time of the article’s publication, Randwick had experienced four consecutive years of the revived Wap, while, according to Morrison, other local communities were only trying to revive their own customs. This article thus serves not only to explain his revival of the Wap, but also to exalt Randwick as a model for custom revivals. In the course of reviving the Wap, the cultivated ideas of rural folk traditions as a legacy of the work of nineteenth-century English folklorists became apparent (Davidson 1987; Freeman 2005). Recurrent ideas and similarities emerged in Spring customs across the country, demonstrating the idyllic nature of the English folk custom as imagined by first revival folklorists (Wigley 2019). One such feature, which was prominent in the revived Wap and continues to the present day, was the election and procession of a May Queen, which became a recognisable feature of many revived customs (Hole 1995: 203). Reverend Morrison’s description of the celebrations presented the custom as a wholesome rural event, with entertainment that is consistent with idyllic constructions of the countryside, such as the Morris dances which “also provide country music befitting the occasion” (Morrison 1976: 14). Morrison wrote that the process of reviving the Wap was not intended as an historical re-enactment:

“The Wap Committee, which manages this festival, is independent of any other village organisation and has been careful to be true, not to all the minute details of times past – which in any case may have varied from year to year – but rather to the main features and the spirit of the occasion that make it unique. As a result the Wap is no fossil, but living, adapting and changing to suit the times.” (Morrison 1976)

The revived Wap was presented by Morrison as a contemporary, evolving event that allowed the community to come together and celebrate a con-

nection to the past through shared practices, symbolism, and recreation, while allowing for change to suit the community's present and future. The additions of a church service and charity collection demonstrated the wholesome nature of the revived event and situated the event as appropriate for all the community, unlike the more raucous event of the past. While concerns have been raised by folklorists over the homogenising effect of the folk revival, resulting in a loss of specifics in customs, the Wap was brought back not as a replica of a historical custom, but as a way for Randwick village to celebrate itself, its heritage, and its inhabitants (Bennett 1993; Hole 1995: 6).

The changing and adaptive nature of the revived Wap espoused by Morrison can be seen in the current celebrations of the custom. Flowers adorn the sedan chairs that carry the Mayor and Queen to the pond, in keeping with other May customs that take place across the country (Hutton 1996: 226). While the elements introduced by Morrison have mostly remained, the spirit of the Wap that was presented in eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts appears to have returned with a vengeance and the celebration of the custom has been embraced by the residents of the village. From speaking to attendants, participants, and organisers at the 2022 Wap, it was clear that the custom provides Randwick with a rallying point for community life and for an expression of its identity.

The Wap now takes place in much the same way each year. It is largely as it was when Morrison revived it and is held on the second Saturday of May. The proceedings start a few weeks earlier with nominations for the Queen, the Mayor, the Flag Boys, the Flower Girls, the High Sheriff, and the Mop Maiden. These roles are fulfilled by people who are residents or work in the parish, or who have a child attending Randwick Primary School, a boundary that allows the Wap committee to ensure that participation is protected and reserved for those who are a part of the community. Of these roles, the Mayor is the only one who is voted for, with the others assigned on the basis of nominations and the decision of the Wap committee. This is a recent change, as there had also been a vote for the Queen in previous years, which demonstrates that the custom is continuing to adapt and change as the community wishes.

The Queen is a young girl, usually pre-teen, and the Mayor is an adult of any gender. Candidates for Mayor publish short statements to support their eligibility for the role, which is circulated through the village newspaper and now on the social media pages for the village and specifically for the Wap. Votes are cast at polling stations set up at different sites in the village, or via email. On the day of the Wap, everyone gathers at the village war memorial for the crowning, or “chusing in” of the Mayor and

Queen. The additional roles form the rest of the procession and help to keep the parade moving forward, with the Mop Maiden taking the lead, clearing the way by flinging water from a bucket with a mop. The new Mayor and Queen are seated in sedan chairs and their predecessors ladle water on their heads for their inauguration. Then, they are carried through the village to the “Mayor’s Pond”. The chairs are placed in the shallow pond, they both give a speech, and the Mayors Song is sung. They are carried back up through the village to a hill and each rolls a cheese down the hill three times. The procession then heads to the village green, where thanks are given and a variety of stalls are open for business. There are other roles in the procession, such as the Mop Maiden (who leads the procession and flings water to clear the way), Flag Bearers, Cheese Bearers, and Princesses.

The following interviews were conducted with attendees, participants, and organisers at the 2022 Wap. There are consistent themes that emerged in these interviews and in my observations about the appeal and importance of the Wap. Hearing views on the Wap and its significance from those who are celebrating it is central to progressing the study of folk customs and their meanings, and allows for personal expression and meaning to be recorded alongside the more collective or “official” meaning (Hutton 1996: 7; Winter – Keegan-Phipps 2015: 157).

Table 1. Assigned initials and roles of interviewees for the Randwick Wap (RW) 2022

Interview initials	Role in Wap	Resident of Randwick?
S8	Attendee	No
A3	Attendee	No
R18	Participant	No
AS16	Participant	Yes
T15	Participant	Yes
S14	Organiser	Yes
S13	Participant	No
A12	Participant	No
S10	Attendee	No
C9	Participant	Yes
M17	Organiser	Yes

A vessel for expression

A theme that emerged from the interviews conducted in 2022 was the notion that engagement in folklore and folk customs can be better under-

stood through the interpretation and meaning expressed by participants and observers (Bauman 1971). For some, the Wap provides an opportunity to escape everyday life – however temporarily – and reconnect with nature and with history. It allows for a connection to observe and celebrate local history and ritual, becoming a vessel that those attending and participating fill with their needs from the event. This opportunity to observe and appreciate a break from everyday life and connect with the rituals of times gone by was expressed by one interviewee:

“The cheese rolling is a very old thing locally, and also the time of year as well, because it ties in with Beltane and the change of the year then, so it’s a fertility festival originally, and the cheese would be part of all of that. It’s all about the agricultural year... Historically, it would have been a full on time of year in an agricultural community, a rural community, to have a day off when everybody could just let their hair down and have fun when the only other thing to do is just go to church on a Sunday.” (S8, RW 2022)

S8 had attended the Wap numerous times before 2022, and for that person it was a means for having a day “*about community and getting together*” while also connecting, or reconnecting, with the ritual year of the past, which was a valuable way of spending the day (S8, RW 2022). There is nothing in any of the existing sources on the Wap to indicate that it was associated with Beltane or a fertility festival. In fact, the Wap records show that, historically, it took place earlier in the year and did not coincide with Beltane or other May celebrations. However, becoming too concerned with “authenticity” in claims, origins, and the “history” of folk customs may detract from what the celebration means for the folk; the process of co-creation and personal meaning that one finds in a custom cannot be understood in terms of accuracy and authenticity (Hutton 2008: 268). For S8, the Wap provides an authentic experience of community and connection with nature, the ritual year, and the chance to relax among friends.

The value of the Wap for these reasons was also felt by other attendees. Connection to the passing of time and to the physical landscape was expressed as a reason why the Wap and similar customs remain important:

“It clearly brings people together including locals and others of us that don’t live in the parish. I think it’s important to celebrate the turning of the wheel of the seasons, especially in this automated age when so many especially younger people are cut off from the rest of nature and are more familiar with their screens than with wildlife. It’s the

whole ‘Lost Worlds’ project flags up, so, yeah, it’s important for the community for the connection with the rest of nature, the cycle of the seasons and the awareness that nothing is static, we’re all, nothing lasts but nothing is lost.” (A3, RW 2022)⁴

The ideas of time and place expressed demonstrate the points of connection that the Wap offers to its attendees as ways of further strengthening the community. This feeling, along with the ‘mainstreaming’ of some folk music and dancing and increasing attendance at national folk festivals, has been identified by Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps as the twenty-first century folk resurgence (Winter – Keegan-Phipps 2015: 2). This engagement, and the temporary detachment from screens and normal routine offered by the Wap, demonstrates a need felt by some in attendance to re-enchant everyday life (Waters 2020; Wigley 2021). In Wigley’s research on wassailing practices, he found that there was an emphasis on local, folk and heritage that created a place of magic during the custom; the authenticity of origin is here considered less important than the link that is established to the past, whether that be real or imagined (Wigley 2021). The focus is instead placed on the connectivity, interpreted meaning, and feeling of belonging that is stimulated by the active practice of, and participation in, the custom.

Situating the past in the present

Connection to the past, and the meaning of it as a point of importance was one of the recurrent themes that emerged; interestingly, this meant very different things to different people. For some, this connection was to the history of the village that was told through the Wap. The exact details, or “authenticity”, of this history was of lesser importance to how that story or legend made people feel about the custom. Attending a custom such as the Wap allowed for a connection to an earlier way of life, which was described to me as an event that represents “*lots of old fashioned things*” (J11, RW 2022). Elements of the celebration that have a demonstrable connection with the past provide points of interest and engagement for some attendees. A former Wap Queen mused on her personal history with the custom and the village, and how that fit with a more academic consideration of the Wap’s history:

4 The “Lost Worlds” project aims to protect and preserve natural landscapes, along with work to explore and raise awareness of the natural world. More information can be found at: <https://www.lost-worlds.org>.

“I moved here just before I started primary school, so I was four, yeah so we’ve got video footage of our first Wap in the village... I think the lyrics to the Mayor’s Song are meant to be authentic, at least Victorian, and I think prior to that there was maybe a different Mayor’s song... We’ve just, within the last few weeks, moved back to Randwick and we’re house sitting at the moment, but we’re looking to buy somewhere in this sort of area. It feels like it draws you back and when you move away you realise how special it is and how different to anywhere else it is, really. It claws you back in!... I look at it from the point of view of having studied history and I love all of that and obviously it’s fascinating as well too. It sounds silly, but having watched because it was revived in the 70s, and I always sort of assumed, because it is so similar to things like ‘The Wicker Man’ and things like that, which I think came out the year before it was revived. But then reading books from the Victorian period about when it was back then, actually it is how it was back then, it’s not a pastiche, it’s real, which I think is really nice.” (C9, RW 2022)

For C9, the Wap is a part of her personal history and is woven through her childhood; the sense of community that she grew up with did not lessen when she moved away from the area, and proved a factor in her decision to move back to the area after over a decade away. With her personal and academic interests in history, the sources of the Wap from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created a positive feeling that not only is the custom special for her, but it is also “real”. There was an obvious feeling of pride for the custom that she had grown up as part of, and its heritage is a part of that.

As an annual tradition, the Wap serves as an unofficial narration of the village’s life and shifts. As Morrish stated, it is not a re-enactment of a historical event, but a changing celebration of Randwick’s community. Having a continuing custom that has a centuries-long history serves to tether those engaging with the Wap, at least in an organisational capacity, to their village and its heritage. Being part of an ongoing story of a village allows people to see how far they have come, and what has remained constant (Cornish 2016: 632–634). A member of the Wap Committee spoke about that history, but also about the future of the custom:

“It all seems to start when the church was being built, and the dunking of the mayor comes from when the masons were building the church and they’d had a bit too much to drink, so they’d dunk them in the pool to sober them up. And it stopped in the 1800s through

the drunk and debauched behaviour when the Bishop of Gloucester came through the orchards of the village and saw lots of people sort of lounging around drunk... This was all revived back in '72 by the late vicar Nial Morrison, who I'm sure you've heard about. And he did lots of research into the history... and somehow managed to fuse a pagan May Day ceremony with the church, which I think is a really unique thing to have done and quite brave in some ways... The adults that I grew up with are now turning into the older generation and there's a young generation coming through and making it all happen, which is really great. And with that comes change and obviously not everyone likes change, but if we can still keep the tradition, which is great obviously, it's a tradition not a re-enactment, so traditions are allowed to change and be tweaked, but as long as we've got the components in there that make the Wap." (M17, RW 2022)

The 1972 revival and Morrison have become part of the Wap's history as it continues to grow and change along with those who organise and attend it. Adaptation has been identified as a necessity for the continuance of a custom and not a threat to it (Handler – Linnekin 1984). As with so many communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions and lockdowns forced either the postponement of the customs or a different approach to marking the occasion, which allowed for the loosening of certain rigidities in practice for the sake of the tradition, but also highlighted the most important elements:

"It was important to mark the occasion, so I think the first year we played the Mayor's Song on loudspeakers across the village and everyone stood in their gardens and had a bit of a sing-song, which was probably the only way we could really do anything that was a community event. And then last year we did a when the pubs started opening back up we did a walk through the woods... it was just nice to get people back together and mark the occasion, but I think the reason the Wap has gone on for fifty years is just because of the love of the community, and I think everyone in the village or the majority of the village think it's a really important thing, which I wholeheartedly agree with." (M17, RW 2022)

The continual reinterpretation of the performance of the Wap allows for the representation of contemporary organisers and participants, while still offering a connection to the past (Handler – Linnekin 1984). Adaptations serve not only to better reflect the community, but also to re-authenticate the

custom, from being an invented or imagined tradition to becoming folklore again through the ongoing practice and changes (Brown 2005). Through these changes, a community like Randwick influences and defines its own folklore and customs, placing its cultural identity back as central feature in its practices.

Belonging, identity, and individuality

The evolution and ongoing practice of the Wap has meant that those involved continue to feel represented by it. Having an annual custom to participate in gives people an event that they can use to celebrate their community and having a place to call home (Behar 2009: 251). Having a custom that is unique to Randwick has also facilitated a culture of individuality in the village's identity and affirms aspects of the village's culture (Carnegie – McCabe 2008: 355). The nature of Randwick and the attitudes of the active community that it fosters were often mentioned when people spoke about the Wap:

“The culture of the village is quite tight knit and the people that live here just keep it going, like, we’ve got a lot of niche stuff that just keeps going on, and, like, the people that live here just kind of kept it alive.” (A12, RW 2022)

“Definitely the community, I’ve noticed since moving away, you don’t get it everywhere else, do you? Like, everyone is so friendly here and even if you’re, like, an outsider they’re, like, yes absolutely get involved, like, if you’ve just moved to the village they’ll, like, force you to be involved with everything, so it’s really nice everyone is super friendly. And they’re, like, it’s a way of showing that the village is still like a big community.” (S13, RW 2022)

“I think Randwick is very a doing sort of village, and so strangely it’s not everyone that, you know, we weren’t born here, and there’s lots of people on committees that weren’t born in the village, but there’s a certain sort of mindset that ‘lets do it’ sort of thing, and that’s why it’s continued. There’s lots of doers, you need doers in a village.” (S14, RW 2022)

“It is a very community driven village. I guess in a lot of villages you just have the pub or the village hall, things like that, but they do seem to have quite a lot of stuff on in Randwick, and everyone comes together.” (R18, RW 2022)

“Well, it’s the community spirit really. I think people are, as I said I’ve only lived here for four years and I’ve come from near London and customs like this are very very rare, and the village community, the sense of belonging here and friendship, I mean my family was immediately accepted into the village. I mean we’ve never experienced such a friendly place, and one of the first things that people said to us was ‘Oh, have you heard about the Wap?’ in an opening paragraph or sentence whatever, everyone’s ‘Oh, we’ve got our Wap’ everyone is immensely proud of it.” (T15, RW 2022)

The frequency with which the idea of community and place emerged in my conversations with members of the Wap community created a clear idea of how central this was as a keystone of the custom and its ongoing observance. For the people that I spoke to, the Wap is an expression of the unique and community-focused nature of their village. It serves to help people integrate into the community when they arrive and gives those who have moved away a reason to return and reconnect. It certainly raises something of a “chicken or the egg” deliberation as to whether the Wap exists because of the nature of Randwick’s community or whether Randwick has such a strong feeling of community because of the Wap, which is an issue that will drive my future research on the custom. One resident suggested a symbiosis in the relationship, stating *“I think the communities were here before the Wap was revived, but I think it’s contributed to keeping the village community life going, I’m sure it has.” (AS16, RW 2022)* It is, of course, true that the sample of interviews presented here are from people who had chosen to be at the Wap, and so it may be that what is being represented is the Wap community within the Randwick community, rather than the custom being an indication of the social connections of everyone in the village. The custom, then, is the social organisation of a community identity that provides the opportunity for the making and remaking of a group identity that can be opted into (Leal 2016). If accurate, the inclusivity of the Wap and of the village expressed by the interviewees also ensures that the custom does not rely on the same individuals to keep it going, or risk the gatekeeping or feeling of ownership by key figures. It is intended to create a community experience, which, in turn, represents the community and its aspirations for the future of the custom (Glassie 1995).

The audience for the Wap has expanded beyond people local to the village and its surrounding areas; as with other customs, the increase in folklore interest, as part of the folk resurgence, has led to traditions often being performed in front of a large audience (Winter – Keegan-Phipps 2015: 10). This offers communities a chance not only to explore their own

ideas of identity and belonging, but to express these as an open statement of the nature and heritage that they have chosen to embody (Cornish 2016: 632). By choosing to organise and participate in folk customs, communities are indicating their shared idea about their own history, which may be real or imagined, and are demonstrating their regional sense of identity (Wigley 2021: 886). While the details and presentation of traditions may appear to be invoking a rustic time of the past, they are serving as markers of the contemporary identity of the community and facilitate feelings of belonging (Cornish 2016). The attitudes expressed at the Wap in 2022 were largely celebratory of the size of the event and its growth throughout the twenty-first century. Even given the pride in the size of the Wap and of the community that comes together, it is still clear that the event is for Randwick. In S13's comment about the community of the village, there is a reference to people who do not reside in Randwick as "outsiders" in the same breath as mentioning that they are welcome to get involved. People should feel that they can attend and participate, but there is a distinction between outsiders and Randwickians; the Wap celebrates Randwick for the village first and foremost. There are necessities that have accompanied the increase in audience and attendance that may be the source of some tensions. When discussing the Wap of their childhood, C9 mentioned:

"When we first came here it was really big, and I think they... it was suggested that it got a bit too big and too commercial, so it was scaled back for a while. Now it seems, I think it's getting bigger again, and the amount of people here is wonderful." (C9, RW 2022)

The concern over the possible commercialisation of the Wap is one that has presented itself in folk customs following the growth in popularity and interest in folk culture (Winter – Keegan-Phipps 2015: 42). While the importance of the custom is not necessarily diminished by an increase in the commercial elements of the proceedings, there is a possibility of exploitation of culture for capital gain (Everett – Parakoottathil 2018: 42). There is a balance that needs to be found, and the organisers of the Wap are aware of it. As a member of the committee, M17 commented that there is a necessity for income:

"Back in the olden days, as it were, you probably would just have the village and a few family visitors, so it wasn't as widely advertised as it is today. But obviously we need to make money to be able get it back again for the next year." (RW 2022)

There were no suggestions that the Wap should become smaller or more restrictive in its celebrations in order to refocus on the village with exclusivity, but concerns were raised about the growth of the influence and presence of ‘outside’ organisations:

“It’s a lot busier, I’d say four times, five times busier than what it was. So before it used to be just stalls from the village, the school and, you know, the playgroup and whatever, and now it’s people from outside the village see it as an opportunity to make money and do things... what the committee is really. So there’s no hard and fast rules, but I prefer it just kind of community really, but and also allowing other organisations to come in.” (S14, RW 2022)

It will always be necessary to balance between the pragmatic needs of a custom to make money in order for it to continue and ensuring that the symbolism, meaning, and practice of the custom does not become compromised (Winter – Keegan-Phipps 2015; Everett – Parakootathil 2018).

Conclusions

Through the Randwick Wap, the community can explore its own ideas of identity and belonging and express them as an open statement of the nature and heritage that they have chosen to embody. The individuality and localised aspects that have developed in the performance of traditions that had been homogenised in the initial revival of 1972 demonstrate the ways in which the community has reclaimed its culture. The Wap demonstrates the role of a folk custom in contributing to the strengthening of the local community and building identity by establishing an active connection to place and history. As it is a custom in the early stages of concerns about commercialisation and homogenisation, the Wap provides an opportunity to explore how a community will continue to represent and reassert itself, while navigating the relationships and tensions in relation to external influences. The roles of the Wap are for the community of Randwick, but all are welcome to celebrate. In my conversations with organisers, participants, and attendees, it was made clear that I was very welcome there, for which I am truly grateful. I was honoured to have been trusted to record their feelings and thoughts on their custom.

When speaking to the participants, attendees, and organisers of the Wap, it became evident that while the meaning, motivation, and understanding of the custom varied, a clearly expressed key theme was that the Wap is “*very Randwicky*” (S10, RW 2022). Folk Customs such as the

Wap provide a rallying point for connection, expression, and the formation of identity and are best understood through the ways that they are represented by their “folk”. The past can be used to look forward, and the feeling of community and belonging can be created or enhanced by the ongoing observance of traditions and customs. By understanding them and their importance to the people that observe them, there is much to be gained in the academic understanding of history and folklore studies. In the ever-shifting academic focuses related to folklore customs and the quest for meaning and authenticity, the question of “why?” should perhaps be tempered with “why not?”.

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