

The Revel's conception

The origins of civic pageants goes back a long way and some of the earliest were in the form of Passion Plays. One such, at Oberammergau in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria, was first performed in 1634 and instituted as a thanksgiving for the town escaping the bubonic plague. In England during the Jacobean period there were 'entertainments' produced by the City Guilds for the Lord Mayor's show, with processions on religious and secular themes, transported on decorated wagons through the city.

Pageants on a large scale had disappeared by the Victorian period but the less constrained times enjoyed by the Edwardians who followed, allowed for their revival. There was a movement also to educate the masses in the history of the country and engender a feeling of nationality. Mr. Louis Napoleon Parker was the first person to initiate such a pageant when he became the author and director of the festivities held at Sherborne, Dorset between the 12th and 15th of June 1905. He was assisted in writing the pageant by Walter Raymond and the "Sherborne Pageant" took place in the ruins of the old Castle Grounds. This event was so successful that it led to a wave of 'Pageantitis' with at least six other events being staged outdoors, mainly after 1907.



The crucial elements to these pageants were the retelling of the history of the place in a series of episodes, the stage being preferably a place of historical interest itself, and the general public being encouraged to participate in large numbers as actors. The visual aspect of the spectacle was considered more important than the text or spoken word. Louis Parker went on to supervise the Warwick pageant held in the grounds of Warwick Castle from the 2nd to the 9th July 1906. A black and white film was made of this latter pageant.

However, Butleigh beat Warwick on the draw and was the *second* place in England to hold a pageant, and one that in its day was acclaimed as being superior to that of Warwick, though more provincial and entirely amateur in direction. It came about as follows;

Several people of note from Glastonbury and the surrounding villages had travelled to Sherborne to see the first pageant and on their return journey had talked about holding such an event in Glastonbury itself, a place of great historical and legendary interest. Without someone with the drive and foresight to carry such an idea forward, however, the dream would never achieve reality and the vision would fade to nothing. According to Mary Albinia Berkeley, the daughter of the vicar of Butleigh, her mother persuaded her, just before the Christmas Holidays of 1905, to write 'a few scenes of local historic interest that the villagers would be able to act in the garden'. The script she wrote was more complicated than first intended and the leading parts would have to be given to friends of the family who could cope with such prominent roles. A gentleman who accepted one of these roles suggested that they ought to get an audience of at least five hundred people. On that basis they continued with their plans which grew and developed into what became the 'Butleigh Revel' of June 1906.

Another account stated that the idea originated from a conversation between two or three people in the village classroom and was then put to the parishioners at a public meeting and was heartily received. The principals who took the idea forward were Mr. and Mrs. Neville-Grenville, the Rev. G. W. Berkeley and Mr. J. Bradden, the schoolmaster.

Below: Images from postcards illustrating scenes from the Pageants of Sherborne in 1905 and Warwick in July 1906, each held in their respective castle grounds.



Warwick Pageant—The boy Shakespeare embraces Queen Elizabeth.

The use of the title 'Revel' instead of pageant was explained in the "*Gentlewoman*" when it was pointed out that it "has no reference to the riotous feasting usually connected with the word; its oldest meaning is "*a form of innocent out-of-door amusement*" and in this case it was chosen not only because it was less pretentious than "Pageant" but because "Butleigh Revel" was the name of an annual fair formerly held on the village green, long since abolished." No other subsequent pageant adopted this unique title.

To carry out such a large and complicated undertaking required a great many people to perform a myriad of tasks - there was the publicity, the acquisition and manufacture of costumes and props, preparation of the grounds for the performance, the printing of tickets, posters and brochures, the building of stands and seating for audiences, co-ordinating transport to and from the site, accommodation for visitors, refreshments etc. etc. All of these were secondary however to the quality of the performance of the pageant and the ability of the actors, mostly drawn from a rural background, to create an illusion and spectacle that would impress the audiences. The play itself had to be written and a number of principal organizers were needed to bring the 'Revel' to fruition and manage the practices and final performances.

The Principals

Robert Neville Grenville – the Squire b. 16 Dec 1846 Windsor Castle, d. 13 Sep 1936 Butleigh

The Butleigh Court estate had come into the hands of Robert Neville-Grenville's grandfather, **George Neville**, on the 7th July 1825 when he adopted the additional surname **Grenville** from his mother Catherine in accordance with the stipulation of his uncle Thomas Grenville, Catherine's brother, who had inherited the estate from *his* uncle James Grenville, Baron Glastonbury, who had died without issue. **George Neville-Grenville** (b. 17 Aug 1789, d. 10 Jun 1854) was chaplain to Queen Victoria and in 1845 he pulled down the old Butleigh Court and began the building of a new Court. In 1846 he was created Dean of Windsor. The new Court was designed by the architect J. C. Buckler in the Tudor-Gothic style and based upon Windsor Castle and Hampton Court Palace. On his death, before the new Butleigh Court was completed, George was succeeded by his eldest son **Ralph Neville-Grenville** (b. 27 Feb 1817, d. 20 Aug 1886) the latter's infant son **Robert** was present at the laying of the foundation stone of the new Court.



King Alfred the Great

Ralph had a statue of Alfred the Great erected in the garden of the Court in 1878 to demonstrate the family's illustrious lineage which went back through several lines to this ancestor who is considered the first king of all England. It was sculpted by masons who worked on Wells Cathedral. **Robert Neville-Grenville** was keenly aware of this ancestry and the Revel gave him an opportunity to include his family history in the play alongside that of England and Glastonbury. He made the grounds of the Court available for the Revel and being the major employer in the village encouraged his workers to take part, also taking a prominent part in the Revel himself, principally as the comical Parson Radford who presented the seven men of Butleigh to Monmouth.

The Squire was an unusual aristocrat. He became a student at Eton and went on to study at Magdalene College, Cambridge where his grandfather had been 'master' for forty years. He graduated in 1868 with an MA in engineering, the first student to do so, and practically had to write his own paper. Whilst at Cambridge he built himself a steam boat in which he used to puff up and down the Cam. He was apprenticed to Messrs. Easton, Amos and Anderson, engineers of London who were concerned with developing the Great Western Railway and was registered as a Civil Engineer (C.E.). As a result of this connection he was able to use the Swindon works to produce the "Grenville carriage" in 1875, a steam car which still runs, and at a speed of 24 mph! Later he also built himself a motor car.

He married Gertrude Agnes Portman, daughter of the Rev. Henry Fitzharding Berkeley Portman, on April 24th 1879 and at first they lived at *Corville* in Wood Lane, Butleigh until moving into Butleigh Court on the death of his mother in 1892. Robert was a JP and had been a Captain in the Somerset Yeomanry for fourteen years before becoming High Sheriff for Somerset and holding the office of County Alderman. He considered himself a 'working' peer and he pioneered research into cider production being instrumental in the founding of the National Fruit and Cider Institute. He was awarded a gold medal by France for this work.



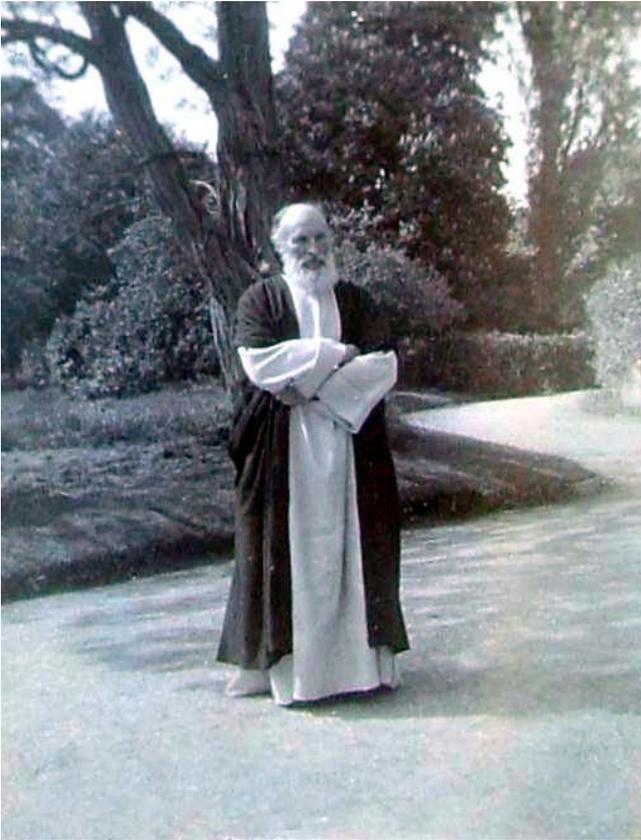
Robert was also head of the Drainage Board for the County of Somerset (stocking the new Blagdon reservoir with trout bred in the Butleigh fish ponds) and a pioneer in the use of steam powered road engines, tractors and ploughs. Above all, he was passionate about the running of his estate, the community of Butleigh and all new ideas and inventions.

The Berkeleys :-

Reverend George William Berkeley b. 1845 Southminster, Essex clergyman, d. 1925 Wimborne, Dorset

Katherine Jane Berkeley b. 1846 Chelsea, d. 1929 Wimborne

Mary Albinia Berkeley b. 1886 Southwark, d. 1961 Wimborne



Rev. George W. Berkeley

Mary Albinia Berkeley was perhaps the major principal since she wrote the script for the Revel and her effort was considered by some professional writers of the time to be of a very high quality - she also played the part of Queen Morgan le Fay and designed the cover for the Revel programme showing the 'Holy Thorn' of Glastonbury with the Tor in the background. She was a major motivating force behind the production of the Revel. More photographs survive of Mary than any other actor. When the Revel was over, all the participants collected a subscription to buy her an inscribed silver pin tray in gratitude for her efforts.

All the costumes for the Revel were made locally and the vicarage was the centre of production with Mrs. Katherine Berkeley supervising. Mrs. Berkeley also took several of the photographs which have survived.

A plaque in St. Leonard's Church, Butleigh gives thanks for the safe return of the Berkeley's son John Ernest Lee Berkeley from the Great War in 1919. John had married in 1915 but neither he nor his sister, who never married, had any children. It is possible that the pin tray and a further collection of photographs from the Revel may still exist in the possession of whoever were Mary's next of kin.

The Reverend George William Berkeley was born in Southminster, Essex, in 1845, the son of George Campion and Caroline Albinia Berkeley. His father was a clergyman. In childhood he had lived in Southminster with his parents but after schooling he became a lay reader in St. Olave, Devon before taking the position of vicar of All Hallows church, Southwark, London in 1875. He married Katherine Jane Lee in 1884 and their only daughter, Mary Albinia, was born in Southwark in 1886 and a son, John Ernest Lee Berkeley, two years later.

By 1892, under the patronage of the squire, Robert Neville-Grenville, the Rev. Berkeley became the Vicar of Butleigh and remained so until 1913. He played the part of St. Joseph of Arimathea in the Butleigh Revel.

The Rev. Berkeley ran a school for young ladies at the vicarage, with six young pupils residing there in 1901. In 1906 some of his pupils took parts in the Revel with one, Beryl Friend, assisted in producing a vellum bound volume as a memorial of the Revel which was presented to Mrs. Katherine Jane Berkeley in 1907.



Mary Albinia Berkeley



View of the Vicarage in 1906



John Joseph Bradden b. 1866 St. Pancras, schoolteacher, d. 1939 Bathavon

John Bradden had been school-master at Butleigh village school since 1903 and was also the village organist and choirmaster. The village school children played an important part in the Revel and a great deal of time must have been spent in coaching them, especially in the dance scenes. John's wife Mary and his two daughters Ethel and Violet [who played Ethelfleda in the 'Peace of Wedmore' scene] also took part in the Revel while John himself took a great many photographs of the players. Most of the latter, over 90 in number, were in the possession of his granddaughter Ruth Bevan, the daughter of Violet, and are included in this work. John Bradden's colleagues, teachers Sarah Ann Baker and Nina Brown also coached the children and played parts in the Revel.

Noah Haddock b. 1854 Bury, store manager, d. 1926 Bury, Lancashire

In any group of people one always finds someone with unusual and often hidden talents and Noah was such a person. Born in Pilkington, Lancashire in 1854 he was the son of an engine driver at a cotton factory. He had married Sarah Stott in Bury in 1876, the daughter of a grocer. Perhaps it was this connection with his wife's occupation that led to his new career in Butleigh.

In 1880 the Co-operative Society had bought the shop at 13, High Street, Butleigh (see photo of the High Street) and the squire, as president of the local committee, had advertised for 'an experienced married man, of unimpeachable character, a churchman,' to fill the position. Noah applied and got the job, which included accommodation in the managers house next to the store. He and Sarah arrived and moved in, together with their daughter Bertha who had been born in Whitefield, Lancashire. By the time of the Revel they were long established residents of the village and it must have been noticed that Noah, in his fifties, was light of foot because he was put in charge of coaching the Morris dancers as well as teaching the school-children who performed the maypole dances. As the Co-op representative, Noah also acquired for the Revel the old-fashioned sandals and shoes which were specially made for the performers at the Co-operative works in Leicester. Noah and Bertha both took part in the Revel.



Noah Haddock



Daniel Mildred b. 1870 Preston House, Cirencester, Glos., army officer, d. 1923 Cirencester



Daniel Mildred was the nephew of Gertrude Agnes Neville-Grenville – his mother was Emma Lucy Mildred, nee Portman, Gertrude's sister, who was left with six children when her husband Daniel, a brewer and landowner, had died in 1874. Daniel never married but lead an interesting life and his hobby was photography. In 1895 he sailed to New Zealand to visit relatives there and in 1899 sailed with the 6th Battalion Middlesex Regiment to South Africa. He maintained his military links and in the Great War was a Captain with special duties in the Gloucester Regiment. He seems to have been connected to the early Boy Scout movement and also made several trips, abroad according to

his photograph collection, plus he made several trips aboard the Squire's steam yacht, the Otter.

The Mildreds seem to have kept close ties with the Neville-Grenvilles and Daniel's older sister, Rachel Neville Mildred, had stayed with them and appeared on the 1891 census at Butleigh Court. Daniel must have been of an artistic bent since he turned a cast of amateurs into what was generally regarded as an almost professional company. In some scenes he was directing as many as 300 people at one time, all done with good humour and great skill. For his efforts he was rewarded by all participants with enthusiastic adulation, appreciation and an engraved silver tankard. This tankard and the camera he used to take the photographs in this work are still in the hands of his great-nephew, Peter Awdry.



