Skimmity- Riding

I am a great fan of Thomas Hardy. The Mayor of Casterbridge is one of my favourite novels, written in 1886, so I was most interested to read about the Skimmity-Ride that the Steeple Aston folk enjoyed.

This is how the event is described in Hardy's novel. The townspeople have discovered a scandal, albeit in the dim distant past, between the wife of the new Mayor, and the previous Mayor of the title. As they feel this lady to be too high and mighty for her station they decide this is a good foundation for a skimmity-ride which ought not to be ignored, not having had one for about ten years. A stranger asks what a skimmity-ride is and the reply is that it's an old and foolish thing they do in that locality when a man's wife is a bad bargain in some way, it's the funniest thing requiring planning and funding. It's designed to mock and shame the culprits. Others argue that it is too rough a joke and likely to cause riots. However, one evening the Skimmington takes place. The townsfolk are aroused by a hubbub in the distance and everyone comes out to enjoy the spectacle as a procession makes its way towards the town centre. There are two effigies on a donkey, so clearly identified by clothing and masks that there is no doubt who they represent, their elbows tied together, the lady facing the head and the Mayor facing the tail. Numerous lanterns light up the scene. No one is allowed to miss out on their efforts as the procession is accompanied by a terrible din of cleavers, kits, crouds, humstrums, serpents, rams'-horns, tambourines etc. It is all too much for the lady who swoons and dies shortly after.

William Hogarth also recorded such an event in the engraving at the foot of this page: St. Hudibras Encounters the Skimmington. The scene depicts the knight coming among vagrants marching in a great procession.

In Steeple Aston the culprits were the landlady of the Wheat Sheaf and the baker from Lower Heyford. This was in 1867. "George Coggins, a baker from Lower Heyford, was caught committing adultery with Mrs Thomas, wife of the publican of the Wheat Sheaf in Steeple Aston. A railway guard, named Bartlett, spied the couple through a knot in the wooden partition of their train carriage and then looked through the window for a better view."
Groups from both villages met up "and the rattle was most noisy: all the old tin and iron utensils I should think to be found in both villages were rattling". Coggins, a drunkard, hid in the waiting room. The next evening there was an organised band of rough music. The party from Heyford

went down to George Coggins' cottage, and the Steeple Aston party followed them. The third evening "was a most tremendously noisy lew-balling night again. They had effigies of Mrs Thomas and George Coggins – she with a large crinoline and bonnet, and he a stout fellow with his baking apron on." The effigies were mounted on poles (called stangs) and were made to kiss each other every few minutes. "The place was swarming, the noise to a high pitch."

The eye witness was George James Dew, a poor law relieving officer from Lower Heyford, who fortunately kept a diary. His daughter was Dorothy, the Miss Dew of the village school, and a well-known local character.

Such activities were known as rough music, lew balling, riding the stag, stag hunting, ran-tanning or skimmington, but in Oxfordshire (as in Dorset) skimmity-riding was the expression used. It was the people's way of expressing their disapproval of any perceived moral laxity such as illegitimacy, wife beating, hen pecking of husbands, a man marrying too young a girl, a wife re-marrying too soon after her husband's death, etc. It became illegal in 1882 but continued none the less. (Note the date of our one recorded here, all is well!)

Skimmity-riding has an ancient history and was obviously not a rare occurrence in relatively recent times, as George Dew writes,

"I enjoyed it very much because I never saw one carried out so well before"!

Diana Gardner

From: Valley of the Cherwell and its People, and The Oxford Times.& Oxfordshire Village Life