

OXFORD AUSTRALIA

# WORD OF THE MONTH

November 2010

## Beating the Bounds

–(Of members of a local council, esp. formerly) tracing out the boundaries of a local government area; (of members of a local council) conducting a formal survey of council activities by visiting current projects etc.

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## The story behind the Word of the Month

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that to **beat the bounds** means 'to trace out the boundaries of a parish, striking certain points with rods, etc., by way of a sensible sign patent to witnesses'. The more recent *Oxford Dictionary of English* marks this phrase as *historical*, and gives the definition 'to mark parish boundaries by walking round them and striking certain points with rods'. The **beating of the bounds** is an ancient British custom, where annually the parish priest, later the parson, would lead a procession around the parish boundaries. The major boundary markers were ritually struck with branches. In a time before the widespread use of maps, people had to remember the parish boundaries, and this was especially important to the Church, since the parish received tithes from the people who lived within its boundaries. In Britain, the ceremonies are still sometimes held as historical reenactments.

We have been surprised to discover that the term **beating the bounds**, has, in the relatively recent past, been used in some parts of Australia. The context is local council rather than local parish. In 1983 the *Advertiser* (Adelaide) reports: 'The site for a proposed \$320,000 child-care centre in Berri may be decided on Monday during the council's "**beating of the bounds**" inspection of the town'. In 1988 we have this from the *Sunraysia* (Mildura) newspaper: 'Mildura Shire Councillors will venture into the sensitive Hattah Kulkyne National Park during council's annual "**beating of the bounds**" next month. The tour is arranged each year to allow the outgoing president and councilors to see what work has been done in the shire during the previous 12 months'. This evidence is coming from the Riverina area, so in the 1980s the usage had perhaps narrowed to that area.

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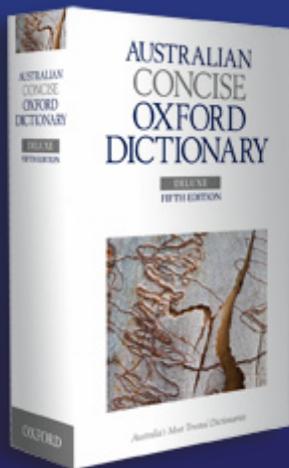
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Slightly further back in time, however, it was more widespread. Here is the Melbourne *Argus* in 1949, referring to the Melbourne City Council:

He intends to '**beat the bounds**' in the new municipal year, when, according to custom, he will tour the city boundaries with the town clerk. The bounds were last beaten 18 months ago by the late Sir Raymond Connelly. Custom says they must be beaten every three years.

And one hundred years before that, in 1849, the Melbourne *Argus* has a similar report:

**Beating the Bounds**—His Worship the Mayor, accompanied by the members and officers of the Town Council, the auditors, assessors, and other officers of the Corporation, commence to day the triennial ceremony of beating the metes and bounds of the city and its different Wards.

It seems that in Australia the British parish tradition of **beating the bounds** was transferred to local government, and that by the 1980s this had become a formal inspection of the local government's developmental activities within its jurisdiction. Did the tradition survive the 1980s? We have been unable to find recent evidence.