

All roads lead to Bampton tomorrow for the famous Fair

CHANGES THROUGH SEVEN CENTURIES

TOMORROW is the last Thursday in October, and over many miles of the West coaches, cars, and cattle transports will be converging on the little town of Bampton, near the border of Devon and Somerset.

For a few hours tomorrow the quiet streets of Bampton will be thronged with thousands of sightseers, and by the evening, as the last revellers squelch their way through the mud of the pleasure fair, Exmoor ponies, sheep, and cattle will have been sold, many thousands of pounds will have changed hands, a good many pints of beer and cups of tea will have been consumed, and the Cheap Jacks will have shouted themselves hoarse.

MAGNET

For a few hours the little town will contain such a crowd of folk as to make it almost impossible to pass through the main street, and wheeled traffic will come to a standstill. This activity is all the more remarkable in that in nine years out of ten it takes place in a misty drizzle that soaks everything and everybody—"proper Bam'n Fair weather" as it is known locally.

It seems a strange attraction that should bring thousands of people together from places as far apart as the Exmoor heights and the Central Somerset plain into this little town a mile or so from the Exe Valley. As one tries to force a way through the thronging crowds, one wonders just what is the magnet that draws so many folk together.

Some come on business, and, indeed, a good many thousands of pounds must change hands in the cattle market and at the auction ring for Exmoor ponies. Many come to settle accounts with local tradesmen, others come to meet friends and acquaintances, a few look as though they never went anywhere from one Fair to the next.

ROYAL GRANT

But the great majority of the crowds are sightseers—Bampton Fair and Rackenford Races are still landmarks on the North Devon calendar—sightseers who have come to throng the streets, to watch the ponies being sold, to listen to the benevolent gentlemen selling pound notes for shillings, to have a drink or two, to meet old friends, and to try out the attractions of the pleasure fair.

Whatever it is that brings people

to Bampton Fair, it is certain that they have been coming there for a long time.

It was as long ago as June 14, 1258, that King Henry III. at his court at Oxford made a grant to Master Osmund, Rector of the church of Bampton, and to his successors, of the right to hold a yearly fair at the chapel of St. Luke, outside the town of Bampton, on the vigil, the feast, and the morrow of St. Luke (i.e., October 17, 18, and 19), as had been done by his predecessors before him.

This is the first mention of Bampton Fair, but it is clear that Master Osmund was only obtaining royal confirmation of something which had already existed long before 1258.

At that time in the mid-13th century, probably much of the countryside had been enclosed from ancient forest, and the sites of many farms and hamlets were much as they are today. Sheep were beginning to be important, and Devon was already noted for its sheep and for the manufacture of woollen cloth.

It is clear that in 1258 a fair under the patronage of the Church already existed in Bampton, and that when Master Osmund obtained his charter he was probably only trying to safeguard his existing rights.

Events showed that his move was a wise one.

DUES AND TOLLS

Nine years later, in September, 1267, Sir John Cogan, Lord of the Manor of Bampton, obtained from the Crown the right to hold a weekly market at Bampton and to hold two annual fairs, one in Whitsun week and the other for three days at St. Luke's tide.

No doubt at Bampton Fair in 1267 there were some arguments and scuffles between the officials of the Rector and those of Sir John as each party tried to collect the fair dues and tolls. But the Rector moved swiftly. Just before Christmas he appeared before the King at the Royal hunting lodge at Clarendon and obtained a renewal of his original charter of June, 1258.

Master Osmund makes his appearance in the records once again, obtaining permission from the Pope to hold another living besides that of Bampton, and then his figure vanishes into the shadows. Was he robust and rapacious, or merely thin and penurious? He has gone, and so has the chapel of St. Luke, where he held his fair, leaving only a memory in

the names of two fields, Luke's Park and Chapel Close.

At some later date the rights of Bampton Fair again passed to the Lord of the Manor, to whom they still belong. Possibly the change occurred at the Reformation.

At some time during the centuries it ceased to be a three-day fair at St. Luke's tide and became a one-day fair on the last Thursday in October. By 1792 it was held on October 24. By 1888 it had settled on its present date. The Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls in that year could find no trace of any charter by which the Lord of the Manor held the fair.

EXMOOR PONIES

There is no doubt that it has been a manorial fair for many centuries, as it still is. In 1951, when the General Election made necessary a change of date, a formal notice giving effect to this was posted, signed by the Steward of the Manor of Bampton.

In the popular mind Bampton Fair and Exmoor ponies are synonymous, but it is only just over a century since the sale of Exmoor ponies moved to Bampton. Before 1850 they were sold at Simonsbath, and as late as 1860 it was proposed to move the sale of ponies to Taunton as being a more accessible spot. However, the ponies have stayed to become one of the chief attractions of the Fair.

Possibly the influence of John Leech, the mid-Victorian artist, had something to do with this. Leech visited Bampton Fair several times, staying at the White Horse Hotel, and his sketches of the Fair appeared both in the "Illustrated London News" and in "Punch" in the 'sixties.

EXTINCT BREED

Anciently, Bampton Fair was a sheep fair. Vancouver, in his "General View of Agriculture in Devon," published in 1803, wrote that "the fair of Bampton is the most remarkable of all for sheep." Many of these sheep were of the now extinct breed of Bampton Notts first mentioned by Arthur Young in 1772 and described as "the best breed in Devon," and stated to have "existed in the neighbourhood from time immemorial."

The breed was described by various agricultural writers early in the 19th century, but by 1855 a writer stated that "like most of the old indigenous breeds of the county, it has gradually been displaced by the improved breeds; and now it is very difficult to find the pure Bampton unmixed with other blood."

Sheep, ponies, parsons, lords, and a king pass through the story of Bampton Fair, an institution which still retains its attraction, though many neighbouring fairs have sunk into desuetude. The scenes on the eve of the Fair when droves of ponies were driven into the town from the Moors are now unknown. Much of the excitement of the ponies' removal from the sale-ring has disappeared.

Under the supervision of the R.S.P.C.A. the ponies are taken to the station in cattle transports, and the wild scenes when Exmoor ponies thronged the streets resisting every effort of their purchasers to drag them along are now no more.

This is a change for the better and one which, together with the disappearance of much of the old rowdyism once associated with the fair, has done nothing to lessen the crowds which flock to the town on the last Thursday in October.

Could he return, Master Osmund would be pleased to see the continuing popularity of his Fair after nearly seven centuries of change.

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