

A history of The Green Backyard site by Richard Hillier

Bridge Fair

The right to hold a fair - which we commonly call "Bridge Fair" - was granted to the Abbot of Peterborough by King Henry VI in a Charter dated 14 July 1439. As was the custom in those days, very little explicit information is contained in the Charter other than the fact that the fair was to be held annually over the three days, 20-22 September, and could be located either side of the river.

This was not the Abbey's only fair held in Peterborough; indeed, given its prominence now, it is perhaps surprising to learn that the other fairs were of longer duration. The fair granted in 1189 was to be held over 8 days in July and another fair was granted in 1227 for 8 days at Lent.

One of the rights attached to holding a fair was that of charging "tolls", a collective term for the rents for stalls and other charges levied on the traders. Unfortunately the Abbey seems to have leased out the collecting of these "tolls" to the highest bidder in return for a guaranteed annual sum, consequently there are no financial accounts for the fairs which would help to indicate exactly what livestock or other produce was bought and sold there.

In 1539 Henry VIII dissolved the Abbey, and in 1541 used the assets to endow both the newly created Diocese and the Cathedral. To the Dean & Chapter (the corporate body responsible for maintaining the Cathedral) he granted the rights to certain fairs, including Bridge Fair. Again, however, the D&C leased out the collecting of the fair "tolls" to the highest bidder.

It seems likely that this fair was always held on land to the south of the river, in the parish of Fletton, (historically in Huntingdonshire). In 1760 a private Act of Parliament was obtained to enclose the open fields of Fletton and, as the fair was evidently held on part of those fields, it was stipulated that the D&C should identify an area not exceeding 50 acres on which it would be most convenient for holding subsequent fairs. They chose an area totally 49.25ac., although the boundaries of this area are not entirely clear to day. Starting at the Town Bridge the boundary goes west until it meets the parish boundary of Woodston, then south (passed The Cherry Tree) crossing Oundle Road and onwards to the end of Fletton Recreation Ground. Then eastwards along the south side of the Recreation Ground (passed The Peacock) and across London Road, whence the exact boundary becomes unclear, although it does include the Football ground and some of the land to the north before meeting London Road again and then back to the Town Bridge. This is not to say that the D&C became the owners of this land, far from it, their only 'right' was to be able to hold the fair on it this land, hence it had to be kept 'open' and not significantly built upon. It was therefore mainly used for the grazing of working horses and livestock.

Only with the enclosing of this land in 1760 do we begin to get any other descriptions of it, and these mostly in the Fletton Manor Court Books (at Huntingdon Record Office) where they record the buying and selling of the land. Hence we find references to the Beast (or Cattle) Fair, Ram Fair, Horse Fair, Sheep Fair, the Wood Fair and the Pleasure Fair. Now, as the fairground was neatly intersected by two public roads, some of these locations can be attributed to one or other 'quarter' of the fairground. However, they were not

permanently 'fixed', and could be moved round as circumstances required. Matters were made worse when the Gt Northern Railway severed the available land even further. Nevertheless, as will be seen from the names attached to various parts of the fairground, the trading – at least in the late 18th/early 19thC – was largely in livestock. There would have been further sub-divisions of each ground depending (as relevant) on whether the animals were male (and castrated or not), female, yearlings, lean, fattened, in milk or for meat, etc

In the 19thC the land now used as Fletton Recreation Ground was combined with your allotment as one large 13ac field called the Beast Fair ('beast' being a collective term for cows, calves, bullocks etc). Once it had been severed by the railway the allotment land (about 3ac) became the Ram Fair instead (deliberately keeping the rams from the ewes !). The Council bought these 3ac in 1908, but sold the southern end (on which a Drill Hall had previously been built) to the Huntingdonshire Territorial Association in 1936. Within four or five years the Council formally removed the right to hold a fair from the remaining land.

The only reports of the fair and its business are those which occur in the local newspapers, but they do not begin until the 1850's when the trading part of the fair had probably already begun a slow decline. Naturally, these reports treat the fair as a whole, and don't usually refer to exactly what was being sold where in the fairground; indeed, they often tend to concentrate on reporting the 'Pleasure Fair' in greater detail than anything.

For some reason that is not altogether apparent, a "New Ram Fair" was established in 1864. Still held in September, but about 10 days or so earlier than Bridge Fair, and located on Stanley Recreation Ground, it was still going strong in 1919. At the first year's sale some 445 rams (almost entirely Leicestershire and Lincolnshire Long-wools) were brought to be auctioned. The following year the number nearly doubled, but this turned out to be exceptional. The highest price paid for a ram in 1865 was nearly £17; ten years later the highest price was over £100 !