

Enid Porter traces the history of the

# Cambridge Market Place

The protest which greeted the recently proposed alterations to Cambridge market place revealed the high place which this area of the city holds in the minds of both residents and visitors.

A market place is usually the focal point of any town, and this was particularly true of Cambridge before it had become the large sprawling city that it is today. Around the site stood a number of inns which served the needs of market traders and their customers: the Three Tuns, for example, at the corner of St. Edward's Passage, which survived, as the Central Hotel, until 1961 when it was rebuilt as the Midland Bank. The old Grapes Inn stood, with adjoining property, at the east end of Great St. Mary's Church until the buildings were pulled

down in 1850. Opposite, where Wehrle's jeweller's shop now stands, was the Wheatsheaf, while for many years the Bell Inn was a familiar landmark on Peas Hill, its door facing the present bus-shelter.

There were fine houses, too, in this area, most of them built in the 16th century and inhabited by well-to-do merchants. Outstanding among them was No. 5 Market Hill, once the home of the Watson family. Part of this still survives, notably the shell-shaped hood, carved with cherubs and dated 1688, which was originally over the entrance door. It now surmounts a small scrolled iron balcony on the first floor. Still existing, too, is the finest portion of the old house — the elaborate plaster ceiling of the main first floor room. This, also, bears the

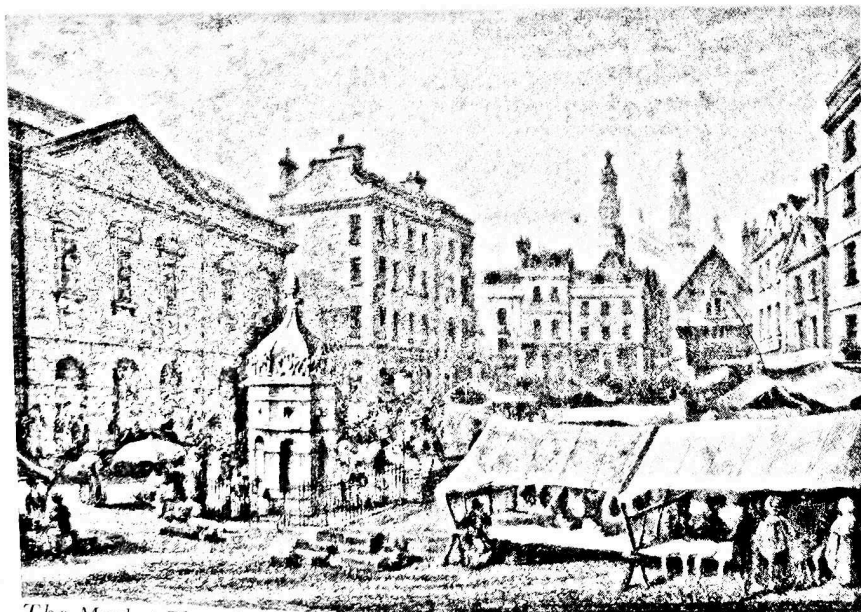
date 1688 and is carved with fruit, flowers, birds and a mask, together with the arms of the Watson family and those of the Drapers' Company of which the original owner of the house was presumably a member. Other panels of this magnificent ceiling are carved with representations of a stag hunt, a boar hunt, birds, and a monkey and other animals. The craftsman responsible was the plasterer Henry Doogood, who also made the even more elaborate ceiling, dated 1690, in the old library at Pembroke College. He did, too, a great deal of work in several churches in the City of London.

At the corner of Market Hill and Petty Cury, where Burton's tailoring shop now stands, was another fine house which once belonged to the Veysy family. It was pulled down in 1899 and the demolition revealed that all of it had been built in the 16th century. It contained some fine carved stone fireplaces, one of which is preserved in the Central Library at the Guildhall. The carvings on these fireplaces included the arms of the Grocers' Company, to which Veysy belonged, flowers, fruit and leaves, the name of Veysy and the arms of Henry VIII.

The early market place, smaller than the present one, consisted of three irregular quadrangles, the southern one of which was, from the 14th century, occupied by permanent stalls until 1747 when the Shire House, which passed to the town in 1842, was built on open arches which still allowed stalls to be erected under them. In front of the Shire House stood, from 1614 to 1855, Hobson's Conduit, while close to the entrance to St. Mary's Passage was the Market Cross at which new sovereigns were proclaimed by the University and town authorities.

## Lead-covered roof for earliest cross

The earliest cross was raised on a flight of stone steps and protected by a lead-covered roof supported on wooden pillars. This roof was destroyed in 1587. In the following century the cross itself seems to have become dilapidated, for only the base and the shaft were standing when the Mayor and the Vice-Chancellor proclaimed the accession of Charles II. In 1664 it was re-built in the form of a square stone pillar surmounted by a gilt orb and cross, but this, in turn, was removed in 1786 when the Town Council ordered its re-erection on a more convenient site to be chosen by a



The Market Place before 1849. On the right is the Guildhall, with Hobson's Conduit in front. On the extreme right is the central block of shops which were destroyed by fire in 1849.

specially appointed committee "if they shall think a cross necessary". It was evidently decided that a cross was *not* necessary, for it was never re-erected and its ultimate fate is not known.

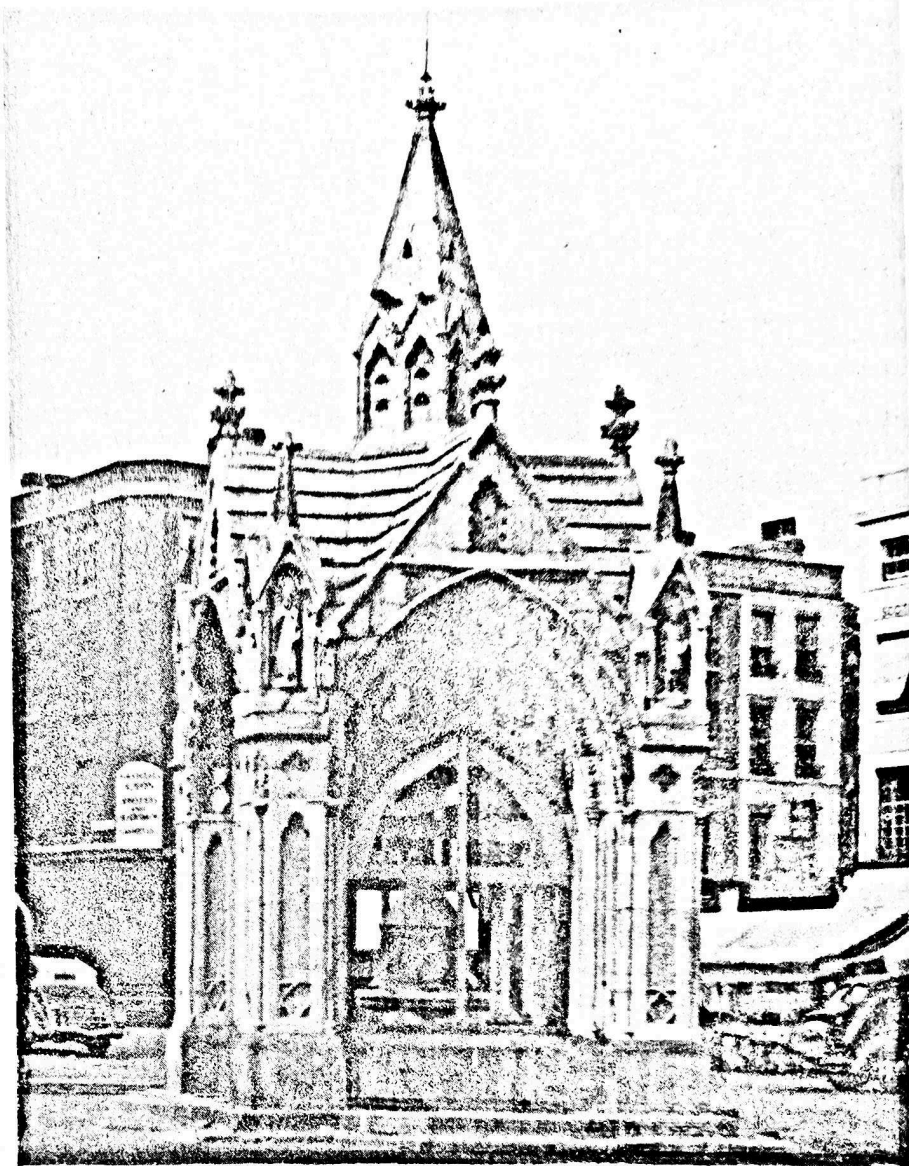
Around the cross assembled the milk sellers and the herb sellers, while the vendors of butter and poultry set up their wares in front of the present Victoria Cinema. The corn market, until the first Corn Exchange was built in 1842 on St. Andrew's Hill, was held opposite the entrance to Rose Crescent. The Shambles, that part of the market devoted to the sale of meat, was in Guildhall Street, once known as Butcher Row, and in Wheeler Street, once called Short Butcher Row. On Peas Hill, as its name implies, was the peas market which extended into the oats market, while sellers of fish set up their stalls near the site of the bus shelter at the end of Peas Hill. It is only in comparatively recent years that the pressure of modern traffic has made the use of Peas Hill as a Saturday market area impossible.

## Yards of butter

Some idea of the goods which could be bought at Cambridge market in the 18th century is given by Carter in his history of Cambridge, published in 1753. "On Saturdays," he wrote, "the Market Hill is well supplied with the best of butter (made up into pounds and half pounds, each being a yard long for the convenience of the college butlers cutting it into what they call sizes), cheese, fowls, eggs, pork, suckling pigs (which last are always sold alive), wild fowl etc."

On Wednesdays and Fridays the Fish Market was "sufficiently stocked with fresh-water fish from the neighbouring Fens, and sea fish from the sea coast in Suffolk." Prices were reasonable, "considering the many miles the fish are brought," and, so Carter tells us, in June and July, 1749, salmon was so plentiful that it was sold at 4d. a pound, "which was never known before." Fish, however, was scarce on Saturdays, but butter, cheese, eggs and vegetables could be bought every day except Monday, while the Herb Market was open on every week day.

But the sale of goods was not the only sight to be witnessed on Market Hill in the past; exciting events went on there, too, from time to time. Near the old cross, for example, was the bull ring where, especially in the week after Easter, bulls were baited before a large crowd of townsfolk and



*The Market Place fountain which was erected in 1855. The superstructure was removed in 1953 and the four corner pinnacles which each contain two statues of Cambridge worthies, now stand in the yard of the Cambridge Folk Museum.*

undergraduates, although the last-named were strictly forbidden to attend such spectacles. Not far from the bull ring were the stocks, and doubtless many a Cambridge citizen amused himself by jeering at the luckless offenders imprisoned in them.

On Shrove Tuesday crowds gathered on Market Hill for the traditional cock fighting and throwing at cocks — that is, hurling sticks at the birds until they died. On Plough Monday the Hill was enlivened by the presence of the teams of morris dancers who had made their way from such neighbouring villages as Coton, Madingley, Histon or Girton. At the end of the 18th century the Cambridge Volunteers, one of many groups formed in

the country at that time to withstand the threatened invasion by Napoleon, used the Market Hill as a drill ground, large crowds gathering to watch their performance. In more recent times equally large crowds have gathered to watch the undergraduate rags which, in the 1920's were so often staged on the Market Place.

In 1875 a noisy group of undergraduates burned an effigy of the Mayor on Market Hill. They were annoyed with the eminent citizen because he had expressed his intention of dealing very severely with the many outbreaks of Town v. Gown rioting which were occurring at that time.

But a more macabre burning took

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place on the Market Place in the reign of Queen Mary. In 1557 the Papal Legate, Cardinal Pole, sent a number of bishops and clergy to visit the University in order to re-establish more completely the Catholic religion. They ordered that the bodies of two German divines, Martin Bucer and Paul Fagius, who had been sent by Edward VI to lecture in Divinity and Hebrew, and whom they declared to have been heretics, should be exhumed from their resting places in Great St. Mary's and St. Michael's churches and publicly burned.

At 9 o'clock in the morning of January 6th, the two corpses were carried in coffins on to the market place, fastened with stakes and bound by iron chains to a tall post "as if they had been alive". A great heap of wood was set alight beneath them while "a great multitude of country folk (it being market day), seeing men borne to execution and learning that they were dead before, partly detested and abhorred the extreme cruelty of the Commissioners towards the rotting carcases, and partly laughed at their folly in making such preparations . . . for to what purpose served the chain wherewith they were tied, since they

might be burnt loose without peril, for it was not to be feared that they would run away."

The present layout of the market place dates from the great fire of 1849 in which a block of shops and houses which, until then, occupied part of the space opposite Great St. Mary's, was badly damaged. The extent of the devastated area made the Town Council decide to re-design the whole site. The ruined block of shops was demolished along with the Grapes Inn and other houses and shops at the east end of Great St. Mary's; a similar group of houses built close to the east end of St. Edward's church had already been removed in 1840. Hobson's Conduit was removed to its present site in Trumpington Road, and a fountain was erected in 1855 in the centre of the site of the central block of shops.

### **Pinnacles removed from fountain**

This fountain had an elaborate superstructure of four pinnacles but it was destined to last for less than a century, for in 1953 the pinnacles were found unsafe and were removed. They

are now in the yard of the Folk Museum. In niches in each pinnacle stand two carved figures of famous Cambridge men: Sir John of Cam-bridge, Justice of the Common Pleas; Sir John Cheke who revived the study of Greek in the University after the departure of Erasmus; Thomas Thirleby, Bishop of Ely; Godfrey Goldsborough, Bishop of Gloucester; Thomas Cecil, Earl of Exeter; Orlando Gibbons, the musician and composer who entered King's College choir in 1596; Thomas Hobson, the famous Cambridge carrier; Jeremy Taylor, the author who subsequently became Bishop of Down and Connor and who is reputed to have been born in the old Wrestlers Inn in Petty Cury.

The new look of the market, with its gaily-striped awnings, is pleasing and attractive, although the metal stalls are not to everyone's liking. A wider variety of goods than ever before is now on sale, and it is to be hoped that this little area of Cambridge, which so enchants our overseas visitors, will long remain with us. Perhaps, one day, the truncated fountain could be rebuilt to provide a more eye-catching centre piece; this would make it a more worthy successor to the Conduit.

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