

The History of the Midsummer Fair in Cambridge

by Enid Porter

What may be termed the official history of the Midsummer Fair in Cambridge began in about the year 1209, when King John granted, by charter, the revenues of the fair to the Augustinian Priory of Barnwell which occupied a large site between Newmarket Road and the river. Long before this, however, it seems to have been customary for children and young people to gather in Barnwell, on Midsummer Eve, to hold wrestling matches and to amuse themselves by singing

and dancing. With an eye to potential customers, merchants turned up at these gatherings with wares to sell, and so from these simple beginnings a trading fair came to be established.

In 1229 Henry II, by a second charter, confirmed John's grant of a fair on "the vigil and day of St. Etheldreda the Virgin, in the summer, and two days following". Richard II, in the following century, extended the duration of the fair to a fortnight — seven days before the feast of St.

Etheldreda and seven days after it. It would appear from these two grants, therefore, that for some time what we now call Midsummer Fair was associated with St. Etheldreda, whose feast falls at Midsummer. This would explain why, both at the Cambridge and the Ely fairs, were sold what came to be known as "tawdry" laces, which were really St. Audrey's laces. St. Etheldreda's name was frequently shortened to Audrey, and when her shrine in Ely was a noted place of pilgrimage, coloured neck ribbons or laces, which had touched the shrine, were eagerly bought by pilgrims and were also sold as fairings.

Two legends account for the association of the saint with these laces. One related that she suffered, in her later years, from a tumour in her neck which she attributed to being overfond, in her youth, of wearing necklaces. The other tells how she once pleaded so eloquently on behalf of a penitent thief that his chains were struck off and he was freed. He later became a monk in the monastery she had founded in Ely, and in gratitude for his release he hung his chains in the chapel as a votive offering.

16th century dispute between town and Gown

In the 16th century the Mayor and Corporation of Cambridge acquired the rights of Midsummer Fair, which they still hold. But the University, too, had privileges connected with it — the Proctors, for example, had the right to search in it for beggars, vagabonds and "lewd women", and to imprison or banish them. These privileges were often the cause of dispute between the Mayor and the Vice-Chancellor.

Until the mid 19th century the University officials as well as the Mayor and Corporation proclaimed the Fair, and this, too, led to trouble on occasions. The Corporation made more than one unsuccessful attempt to end the University's right of proclamation, while in 1773 they appointed a special committee to take proceedings against certain members of the University who had insulted the civic dignitaries as they went to proclaim the fair. The matter was settled, however, by the offenders apologising for their behaviour.

Old-time proclamations, by both the University and the Corporation, provided an excuse for feasting and drinking. A Cambridge alderman described in his diary how, on June 22nd, 1669:



In the 17th and 18th century the Midsummer Fair caused several disputes between the University and the Mayor and Corporation of the City. In 1773 the Corporation proposed to take proceedings against members of the University who had insulted civic dignitaries. An apology settled the matter.

all the Aldermen in their Cloaks mett about 9 in the morning at Mr. Mayor's house, where wee and the rest of the Company had sack, small beere and Cake, a great Carroway Cake being sett upon the Table, every one tooke what they pleased.

Then the Mayor, the Sergeant-at-Mace, the bailiffs, aldermen and councillors, wearing their cloaks, proceeded to the Mayor's booth at the fair where the aldermen changed into their scarlet gowns and the councillors into their black ones. The proclamation was then read "against the Cock" and again "in the water fayre beyond the soap-barrels near the Iron and next the River Banke". This done, the dignitaries returned to the Mayor's booth where the Crier "proclaimed the Court" in which cases of theft, dishonest trading and other offences

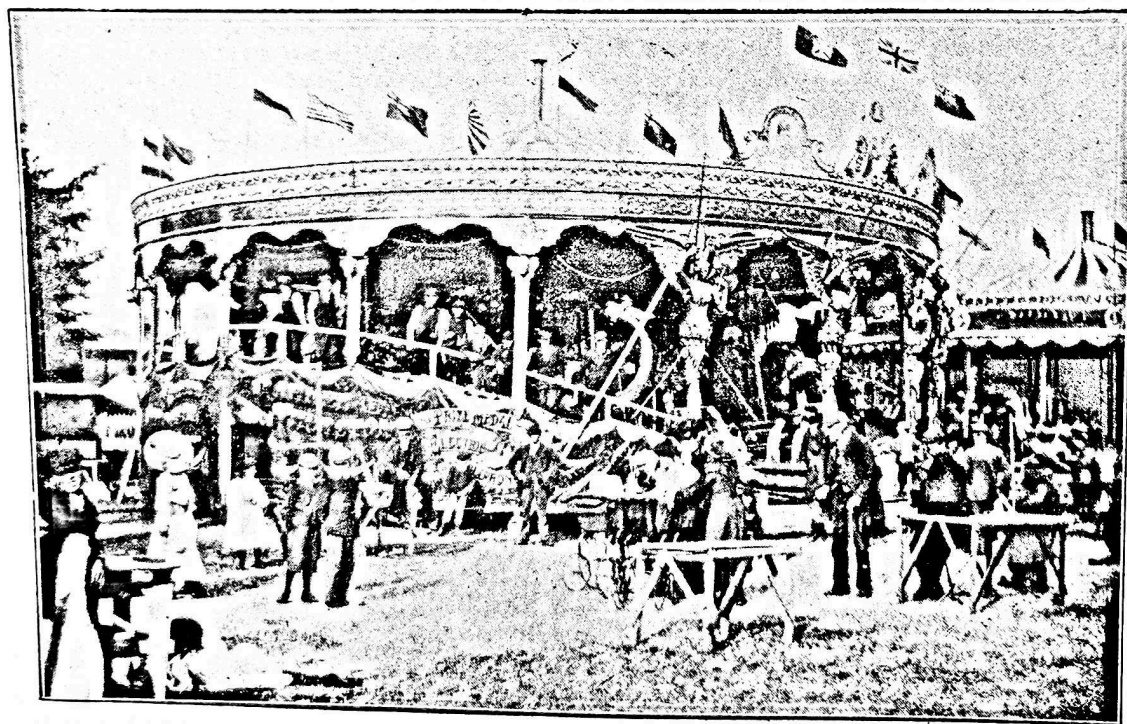
Treasurers ordered that no more than 40 shillings was to be paid out.

The proclaiming of the fair will, this year, be an historic occasion. It has for some time been customary for the Mayor, when the proclamation has been read, to throw handfuls of new halfpennies to the listening crowds. This is the last time he will be able to do this, because halfpennies are to be withdrawn from circulation in August. It remains to be seen whether, next year, pennies will be thrown instead and whether, indeed, the scattering of coins will continue.

Outbreaks of plague in the 17th century caused the fair to be cancelled, by royal decree, on three occasions — in 1630, 1636 and 1637 — for fear of spreading the infection, indeed no Londoners' goods were allowed to be sold anywhere in Cambridge in those years. As late as 1832 some actors,

being called Pot Fair.

At that period Commencement Sunday, on which Masters of Arts' degrees were conferred in Great St. Mary's Church, coincided with the time of the fair. The Sunday ushered in a week of balls, concerts and general gaiety, and on the preceding Saturday evening the gentry of Cambridgeshire and nearby counties, and many members of the University, drove down to the fair ground to attend the raffles for pictures, china and millinery which took place every night. The elegantly dressed county folk, Fellows of Colleges, clergymen, and noblemen of the University in the brightly-coloured, gold-embroidered gowns, paraded up and down Newmarket Road, mingled with the humbler crowds on the fair ground and, doubtless, watched the jugglers and the many sideshows and bought sweetmeats from the numerous



The Fair as it looked probably about 1910. Children will probably enjoy rides on the Merry-go-round this year which will have changed little from the one illustrated here.

would be heard during the course of the fair. To restore themselves after these exertions, the whole company dined together before returning home.

The University party also proclaimed the fair twice, once in the village of Barnwell and once on the fair ground. They usually fortified themselves before the proclamation by drinking egg flip and sack in the Senate House. But these entertainments ended in 1842. The amount of money spent on the proclamation feasting by the Corporation had, sometimes, to be curtailed for reasons of economy; in 1736, for instance, the Town

travelling to the fair from Somersham, were turned away, not on account of plague but because there were cases of cholera in the village.

A great deal of trade was carried on in the past at Midsummer Fair, because goods could easily be brought by river to the fair ground. Large numbers of horses, too, were sold until the latter part of the last century, and even today the fair does not consist solely of amusements. Linoleum, dress fabrics and, above all, china and earthenware stalls do a brisk trade, and it is interesting that the sale of pottery led, in the 18th century, to the fair

stalls.

No one who visits Midsummer Fair today can escape the smell of frying onions coming from the hamburger stalls which have now largely replaced those which once sold saucers of hot peas, pease pudding, stewed prunes, cockles and other shellfish. Sweetmeats — traditional at any fair — are still sold however, especially nougat and highly-coloured rock, but brandy snaps have now taken the place of the old-time gingerbread "husbands and wives" which were once so popular as fairings. These ginger breads or

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biscuits, often covered with gilt paper, gave the phrase "to take the gilt off the gingerbread" to the English language. They were made in wooden moulds carved in the shape of men and women, but it is possible that, in early times, the figures represented the saints on whose feast days many fairs so often fell. Thus the gingerbreads sold at Midsummer Fair in pre-Reformation times, would doubtless have been looked upon as effigies of St. Etheldreda.

The highly sophisticated amusements which are now brought to Midsummer and other fairs are a far cry from the first primitive roundabouts introduced in the 18th century, which were at first propelled by hand and later by horses. Not until the 1870's did steam provide the motive power and so paved the way for the large four-a-side roundabouts, the scenic railways, the switchbacks and the other contraptions which were transported to the fair ground by steam traction engines. Now steam has been replaced by electric and diesel engines, and the machines become more ingenious every year.

Although boxing and wrestling booths are still a feature of the fair,

along with the traditional shooting galleries and the coconut shies, the "freak" shows are tending to diminish in number and so, too, to a certain extent, are the live shows. The cinema, radio and television have all had their effect on showmen who, up to 1914, had only to face the competition of the old-time music hall. Yet even the cinema owed some of its popularity, in its early days, to the bioscopes and primitive moving picture shows which were given on many fair grounds, while the establishment of a permanent theatre in Cambridge owed much to groups of travelling players who attended the autumn fair on Stourbridge Common.

This Stourbridge Fair has now ceased to be held, so it is good that the one held at Midsummer still goes on. Nearby residents may complain of the noise, the arrival of the fair men's caravans and machines may add to traffic problems, but the fair lasts for only a few days. It brings revenue to Cambridge in the form of rents, while many of the fair people spend money in local shops.

Fairs are very much a part of English life, and though it may be fashionable to decry tradition, it would

be sad if these great annual events, which give pleasure to so many, ever disappeared. Their continued popularity today, however, in the face of competition from other forms of amusement, makes this unlikely, while the interest taken in fair grounds and their equipment has led to the formation of many flourishing societies, such as the Fair Ground Organ Preservation Society and the National Traction Engine Society.

The travelling showmen, many of them members of one of the ten branches of the excellent Showmen's Guild, founded in 1889, deserve sympathy and admiration. Their annual incomes are dependent on the vagaries of the English climate; their equipment becomes every year more expensive, so the prices they charge have to go up too, even though this may reduce the number of their patrons. But they bring colour and excitement to the life of any town, and there must be many children who are looking forward to seeing the first lorries and caravans arrive, just before June 22nd, on Midsummer Common and to watching the Great Wheel, the Dodgems, the Jet Planes and the other intriguing machines being unpacked and assembled.

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