Reach Fair

By Royal Charter since 1201

A History of Reach Fair prepared by Charles Moseley

Only a century or so ago…

For more than seven centuries, Reach Fair was held on Rogation Monday – the Monday before Ascension Day, forty days after Easter, when travelling was easier and the main Spring work on the land eased. King John's charter gave the burgesses of Cambridge the tolls traders paid for setting up stalls to sell everything, from leather, wool, cheese and other commodities, to cattle and horses. He gave them, too, the fines from the summary court of justice which settled disputes and quarrels. Once this was a very valuable income: but by the end of the nineteenth century the Fair had dwindled to a smallish market specialising in horses, and with lots of amusements to gladden the hearts and lighten the pockets of the people who came from the surrounding villages to enjoy themselves on these few days of relative holiday at the beginning of summer. Enjoyment takes many forms: indeed, tradition has it that the Upware men came up Reach Lode in a body to the Fair, to have their yearly haircut, and then enjoy their annual fight with the Reach men.

Even so, the Mayor and burgesses still made quite a thing of their duty to open the Fair: as they still do. In 1904, for example, a smart cavalcade of gentlemen, in all the pomp of civic robes and silk hats, drove from Cambridge scattering from their carriages a largesse of new halfpennies to

bystanders. The journey would have taken them about an hour and a half with good horses. They began at Barnwell; then through Quy, through the two Swaffhams to Reach: the weight of copper coin must have been considerable. At Quy 'young and middle-aged matrons joined in the jubilant scramble for copper'. One good lady, gleeful at the 'tuppence' she had got the previous year, spread a capacious white apron to receive the flying coins. Schools along the route were given a day's holiday, and cheering children lined the route, even ran to meet the carriages, hoping for a halfpenny or two: more pocket money than they usually had, indeed.

At Reach, the Town Clerk, from the eminence of the banked path, read the proclamation which 'doth straitly charge and command… that idle and evilly-disposed persons should henceforth quit' the Fair. Nobody then or now took much notice of that. Until the 1970s the proclamation was made twice: once outside Hill Farm, the other on the Hythe where tradition has it that a stone, still there beside the lane (possibly an old mounting block) was where the auctioned horses were sold.

After the proclamation the Corporation sedately surveyed the fair. The *Cambridge Weekly* in 1904 commented, 'The greatest attraction before lunch [provided in what was called the 'Great House' by Mr Mayor] was the loquacity of a quack who, after paying one or two people a shilling each for the privilege of extracting their unsound teeth, did a brisk trade among the crowd he thus collected selling patent medicine for most of the ills of mankind…' 'A few frolicsome Councillors and at least one venerable alderman demonstrated to the admiring notice of other visitors how to shie at cocoanuts.' (Some things never change…) Some went for a walk along the Dyke to get an appetite for lunch, while others patronised the shooting galleries, or swing boats, or bought pink and white rock lettered 'REACH' all the way through. There were people who would draw teeth, or cut hair. There were people who sold food, and the pubs (seven, once upon a time) were open all day. There were, of course, scraps and the occasional drunkenness. But the mayor's party were better behaved… on the way home they stopped, as was usual, at the Swan in Bottisham for further refreshment. Well might one of the Cambridge papers comment, 'the fair has still its uses, for by enabling members of the Council of widely different opinions to meet together in a friendly way, it no doubt does

very much towards promoting the harmonious working of the public business in the Council at other times.'

Perhaps so. But… that year, 1904, the Fair was very small – 'poorer than ever' for horses, and there were considerably fewer stalls and booths. It had been in steady decline since the coming of the railway, a generation or so before, to Burwell and Swaffham Prior, and with the increasing mechanisation of agriculture. To be sure, until the Second World War, strings of unbroken ponies, often Welsh, still used to be driven across the roads of a then quieter England for sale at Reach, and Wilf King, who ran the 'White Horse' pub, recalled seeing them penned in the field by the Dyke. These were not the powerful heavy horses, expensive, needing costly high feeding, like those that until the early 1970s ploughed the fen land at Stuntney, but the cheap, wiry little beasts that a smallholder could afford to pull a cart, or a trap, or do a bit of light field work. Long gone already were the days when the Fair drew buyers and sellers, and cheats and mountebanks, from all over East Anglia and beyond.

Think back. Think back to a time, not long ago, when people worked much longer hours and far more days for much less than we do now, when a village fair, however small it might have become, was one of the few breaks in the ceaseless round of routine and work, when for a couple of days you put on your best clothes and pretended an ease and affluence you neither had nor could afford. A time of early summer, when the drawing in of people from villages around and further afield led not only to new quarrels and the reviving of old ones, but also to new meetings and new friendships, and perhaps those slow courtships that might bring new families to the villages. Enjoy the fair, but be grateful; remember how we are the lucky generations, remember how much more valued what we see as a Bank Holiday amusement would have been by those who trod Fair Green before us.

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