

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Newport

Fairs

This text has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Professor Richard Hoyle. It is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

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Fairs¹

The opening of the new market building at the end of 1859 removed the weekly provision market and the fortnightly cattle market out of the streets. The fairs continued to be held in the High St until the Second World War, their long continuation makes the point that they were viable enterprises although the reports in the *Newport Advertiser* often speak of poor attendance, meagre attractions and give a general sense of decline. There were also elements within Newport Society who deplored the carnival element of the fairs, the minor disorder and drunkenness and the challenge to morality they were alleged to bring.

The number of fairs differed over time. The William Hill survey of c.1680 says five. *The Universal British Directory* of the 1790s says four (the Sunday before Palm Sunday, 28 May, 27 July and 10 December). *Owen's new book of fairs* (1820) gives six: the First Tuesday in February and Saturday before Palm Sunday, 28 May and 27 July (for horned cattle, horses and sheep), 23 September and 10 December (for cattle, sheep and hogs and, in addition on 10 December, fat cattle).

The cattle fairs were subsumed into the fortnightly cattle markets established in 1837. What remained was a May fair and a December fair, held on the Saturday after Christmas Day, which was locally called the Gawby Fair, a 'Gawby' in Shropshire dialect being a person who stands idly around or is in some way useless. These two fairs were licenced by the Marsh Trustees until the creation of the Urban District Council which assumed responsibility for the management of the streets and let pitches for stalls and collected tolls. In fact the council's income from the fairs never seems to have been very large.

In the mid-nineteenth century the May fairs were a mix of local vendors selling foodstuffs (gingerbread is often mentioned) and sweets, toys and crafts, and a range of travelling attractions. Of course, the public houses were an important part of the fair. But there were also commercial entertainments. In 1864 it was reported that the great draw of the fair just held was Wombwell's menagerie, a sort of travelling zoo. This was a repeating attraction which had first come to Newport close to 70 years before.² The 1865 fair included a range of grotesques, a man so thin that his skeleton could be seen through his skin, the smallest lady, the largest horse, a cow with legs on its back. There were two of three theatre

¹ I have been helped in writing this account by a digest of extracts from the *Newport and MD Advertiser* made by the late Malcolm Miles and digests of the paper for selective years made by members of the NHS. See also Miles, *Newport Market Company*, pp. 72-4.

² *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 4 Jun. 1864.

groups and a waxworks. There were camels on display and doubtless to ride. The following year there was a pig of prodigious size.³

The view at the time was that the fair would eventually disappear. Where Wombwell's menagerie had served an educational purpose, it was argued that people could now travel to see a Zoological garden in the Metropolis or one of the larger cities. They could even go to the seaside. Wombwell's menagerie had introduced people to animals they would not ordinarily see, but the new ease of travel had made it redundant. There was also an assumption that improved education would make people turn against the licentiousness and carnival inherent in the show. In 1857

the whole parade of the fair is going down. Education is making an inroad into it. Decay is written upon it, its glory has departed ... we are convinced by it[']s demise. Trade will not suffer and an immense amount of morality and vice will be avoided.⁴

In 1863 the fair was 'dying on its feet'.⁵ In 1867

... the thing is fast becoming antiquated. The spread of education and other elevating influences are giving the young people a taste which these things, even with a visit to the public house into the bargain, cannot satisfy. At the same time country picnics and farther [sic] excursions by rail are so multiplied and cheapened that they find it possible to get a much better return for their hard-earned money.⁶

In fact the train brought people to Newport as much as it allowed them to go elsewhere.

Within a generation the fair had been mechanised. In 1886 there were hobby horses on wheels, walyzing cars and a musical steam organ as well as the traditional range of human freaks and performing animals (a hare that played a tambourine this year); there were rifle shooting salons, a boxing booth, 'Craddick's photographic studio'. Near the *Advertiser* office was 'a mermaid booth, a Zulu that walked on fire, fat women and other deformities, shooting saloons, swing boats, coconut bowling, [a] boxing booth open to a late hour; glare of lights, noise of gongs, drums and rattles, "squirts" were sold and wet everyone'.⁷

This transformation reflected the commercialization of the itinerant showground. In 1896 the *Newport Advertiser* published an interview with the fair proprietor Pat Collins (1859-1943).⁸ He had already been coming to Newport for 20 years with his travelling show. He had £5,000 worth of equipment in the town. His fairs had been electrified since 1890 (a traction engine running a generator). He had patented the Venetian Gondola, a track ride powered by

³ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 30 May 1865, 2 Jun. 1866

⁴ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 5 Jun. 1857.

⁵ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 30 May 1863.

⁶ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 1 Jun. 1867.

⁷ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 5 Jun. 1886.

⁸ For Collins see *ODNB*.

electricity.⁹ Collins became synonymous with the Newport May Fair (and later the Christmas one too).

In 1911 it was reported that

The annual May Fair is now being held. High Street is largely occupied by Mr Pat Collin's Wonderland, including the Joy Wheel, the Scenic Railway, the Cake Walk, the Haunted House and a thousand and one of the items which go to make up the paraphernalia of a fair.¹⁰

Collin's 1913 presentation included the scenic railway with a real waterfall, employed film and had magicians including Zaro the 'suspended lady', whose final trick was to disappear.¹¹

Given the labour involved in setting up the fair and dismantling it, there was pressure to increase its length. The fair seems to have grown into the habit of exceeding its allocated day. In 1897 there was a request for a second day, which was refused. In 1898 it was held that no shows were to be on the street before 8 pm on the 27th and everything was to be removed by 10 am on the 29th. In 1910 Collins sought permission to hold the fair for a week. In 1913 a public meeting recommended that it ran for three days. This seems to have been agreed upon and became the usual inter-war length. Collins doubtless eased the extension of the fair by donating a day's earnings each year to a Newport charity.¹²

The fair then was a mix of foodstalls, exhibits, animals, grotesques and thrills. It attracted crowds who came by train, the miners being an oft-noted element. In 1920 it was reported that hundreds had arrived by train and there was hardly any room to move about on the Saturday. In 1922 it was reported that it was only the Saturday that was really busy: the Thursday and Friday of the fair were reported to be quiet because of the prevailing unemployment.

Despite the mechanical sophistication, animals remained at the heart of the fair. In 1927 the licensee of the Plume of Feathers sat in the lion's cage (with, one assumes, the lion for company), drank a glass of beer and smoked a cigarette. In 1935, when an electrical fire broke out in the dodgems, 'Billy the world's largest pig' had to be rescued and shepherded into the Plume of Feathers for safety. The world's smallest racehorse broke free in the mayhem and had to be captured.¹³

For all this brought pleasure to the punters and profit to the pubs, there were always those in Newport who found the fairs distasteful and a disruption to their routine. In 1864 a

⁹ *Newport and MD Advertizer*, 1 Jun. 1895.

¹⁰ *Newport and MD Advertizer*, 27 May 1911.

¹¹ *Newport and MD Advertizer*, 31 May 1913.

¹² *Newport and MD Advertizer*, 29 May 1897; 14 May 1898; 17 Dec. 1910; 14 May 1913.

¹³ No reference [Malcolm Miles' notes]

correspondent in the *Advertiser* made a tart comparison between the ‘orgies of the Newport May Fair’ and a counterattraction, a Temperance fete in Lillishall.¹⁴ In 1886 the *Advertiser* almost regretted the large attendance ‘notwithstanding the vulgarity and squalor of most of the entertainment offered’.¹⁵ A decade later it was reported that respectable people visited the fair after dusk so they could enjoy the entertainment more discretely.¹⁶ Attitudes to the fair may have softened with time. In 1936 the *Wellington Journal* told its readers that ‘As usual the town went gay during its brief visit’. And by this time it was normal to have extended pub opening hours during the fair.¹⁷

Complaints and comments continued to appear intermittently in the *Advertiser*, and every thinly-attended fair was taken as evidence that it would not survive much longer. In 1897 T. F. Boughey was reported as saying that ‘the fair was a nuisance to every respectable tradesman and person within the neighbourhood of Newport’.¹⁸ It seems that in 1881 the Local Board asked for the fair to be removed from the streets but the residents appealed to the Lord Chancellor and the fair went ahead. In 1887 the fair was sanctioned by the Lord Chancellor but the police still summonsed people for obstruction.¹⁹ In 1906 the Urban District Council discussed whether both fairs should be suppressed. They brought the council little profit. The setts in the roadway were damaged by the showmen anchoring their stalls and marquees with metal spikes. But 263 residents signed a petition asking for the fairs to be continued.²⁰ The Headmaster of the Grammar School made a formal complaint to the Council in 1911 about the noise of the fair interfering with the school’s work, but the Council turned out to be not wholly sympathetic.²¹ After the May Fair of 1913 another public meeting was convened to consider whether the fairs should be allowed to continue: but it appears that opinion was resoundingly in favour of not only continuation but extension.²²

In the interview he gave to the *Advertiser* in 1895, Collins said that he would prefer to hold the fair in a field so that he and his crew could set up at leisure. This finally came to pass. After the 1937 May Fair the Council received a letter from the County Council querying the use of the highway (which was now designated as a trunk road) for the fair. The Council enquired what section of the Trunk Roads Act, 1936, was being invoked. Towards the end of

¹⁴ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 4 Jun. 1864.

¹⁵ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 5 Jun. 1886.

¹⁶ Cited in an article on the fair in *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 13 Jan. 1992.

¹⁷ *Wellington J.* 30 May 1936: reports of licensing sessions, *Wellington J.* 22 May 1937, *SC*, 20 May 1938.

¹⁸ No reference [Malcolm Miles’ notes]

¹⁹ Miles, *Newport Market Company*, p. 74. I have not been able to verify these claims.

²⁰ No reference [Malcolm Miles’ notes]

²¹ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 27 Jun. 1911.

²² No reference [Malcolm Miles’ notes]

the year it was told that the Ministry of Transport was not inclined to intervene where fairs of long standing were held in the highway.²³ It seems that the May fairs in the following three years went ahead as usual but in April 1941 Pat Collins told the council that the chief constable had forbidden him to hold the fair in the street and he was looking for other suitable spaces.²⁴ The 1940 fair therefore seems to have been the last one held as a street fair. The fair then moved to field (which came to be called the Fair Ground) off Wellington Road. It was run there by the Pat Collins company until at least 1951. In some post-war years there was also an August fair on the same site.²⁵

The Gawby Fair, held on the Saturday after Christmas, was, to all appearances a much smaller event than the May Pleasure Fair: for one thing the weather was often against it.

It was explained in the *Newport Advertiser* in 1911 that the fair originated as a hiring fair for servants and agricultural labourers. It certainly served as a holiday for them and they came into Newport to seek a new hire, spend their accumulated earnings and buy clothes for the next year. As infrequent visitors to town, they gawped at its bright lights and shop goods. Townspeople called there ‘gabies’ or ‘gawbies’. The columnist called them ‘simple-minded’.²⁶ By the late 1860s however, no hirings were taking place and the fair was simply a holiday.²⁷

T. W. Picken, writing towards the end of the century but reminiscing of earlier times, recalled

We children on the Christmas Pleasure fair, if a fine day, were sent out into the main road leading into the town to see the Gawbies coming (a service no doubt to get us out of the way on a busy morning). My recollection is of meeting women with large shawls on and the men wearing red plush waistcoats, some with black or other coloured stripe on the tanned skins of calves [which] in those days were often made into waistcoats with sleeves added to them formed jackets.²⁸

Gawby then was a disparaging town dwellers’ term for a particular type of country dweller.²⁹

The newspaper notices announcing the fair in the 1860s refer to it as ‘a pleasure fair for the enjoyment of servants’. A report in the *Advertiser* in 1864 described it as a holiday which

²³ DA11/114/3, pp. 15, 16, 21; Wellington J., 12 Jun., 11 Dec. 1937.

²⁴ DA11/114/3, p. 98.

²⁵ Advertisements in the *Newport and MD Advertiser*.

²⁶ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 7 Jan. 1911.

²⁷ This is explicitly stated in a letter in the *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 20 Jan. 1866, in which the Gawby was described as a ‘disgraceful nuisance’.

²⁸ NHS00004 [is this the original Ms?]

²⁹ Market Drayton also had a Christmas Gawby fair which survived into the 1920s. *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 1 Jan. 1927.

‘brought country people into our town’. Other reports refer specifically to servants and deplored them squandering their money.³⁰

It was a low-key event. In 1867 it appears that there was an attempt to neutralise it by diverting visitors into dances in the Assembly Room. In 1868 the fair was ‘a ghost which is seen in some years. ... [F]or pleasure seekers there were few attractions’. In 1869 ‘the name [pleasure fair] was a mockery ... there were no shows nor amusements worth speaking of. But in 1871 there was a merry-go-round and an organ.³¹

By 1887 the fair had mechanised attractions similar to the May Fair (although Pat Collins seems not to have been involved at his stage: the Fairman was a Mr Job Davies). That year the attractions included shooting galleries but also swinging boxes and steam roundabouts. There was a steam-driven organ.³² In 1889 the attractions included a Lilliputian circus, ‘Queen of Magic’, a strong man, swinging boats, hobby horses, shooting salons and trinket stalls.³³ The fair had good years and bad years but even allowing for the *Advertiser’s* negative reporting, the early twentieth-century fairs seem thin. In 1901,

it was not much of an affair. **Cardoman** was there with his ever popular steam racers. There were two or three shooting galleries, a coconut pitch, two sets of swingboats, a peep show, a weight tester and sundry stall.³⁴

That of 1904 was described as ‘the poorest and quietest yet’. Despite the petition for the continuation of the fairs of February 1906, the Christmas fair seems not to have been held that year. ‘[N]either showmen nor visitors turned up and therefore the “annual saturnalia” was not held’. In 1908 the weather was against it.³⁵

And yet the Christmas fair continued into the 1930s although it is not clear whether it was held every year. The fair needed a Fairman to come to Newport and offer entertainments. In some years the minutes of the Council’s Street and Building Committee, which controlled the streets, was record that no proposals had been received.³⁶ In other years the fair passes by unmentioned. In 1920 and 1922 Mr **Caroloman** took some of the High Street for his show. In 1923 Pat Collins was approached but could not attend.³⁷ He was, however, providing the entertainments in the early 1930s and became caught up in the dispute between the Council and the Market Company over the street market. In December 1933 it was reported within the

³⁰ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 24 Dec. 1864, 23 Dec. 1865 etc., 7 Jan. 1865, 5 Jan. 1867.

³¹ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 5 Jan. 1867; 4 Jan. 1868; 2 Jan. 1869; 30 Dec. 1871.

³² *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 7 Jan. 1888.

³³ *Newport and MD Advertiser*, 4 Jan. 1890.

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³⁶ DA 11/111/1, pp. 14, 32.

³⁷ DA11/111/1, pp. 94, 140; minute 12 Dec. 1923.

Market Company that the council had let the Market Square to Pat Collins for a fair on 29 and 30 December. The Market Company then demanded compensation from Collins for its loss of tolls from the stalls it set up in the Square. It was subsequently reported that because of the Market Company's intervention the Fair was not held. No further references to it have been found.³⁸

³⁸ See 'Markets' for this dispute. Miles, *Newport Market Company*, p. 73: *Wellington J.* 26 Oct. 1935.