

Basingstoke Down Fairs

The Basingstoke Down Fairs were not minor events. For what was a small market town at the time the fairs were significant events in the Hampshire calendar.

Until 1670 Basingstoke fairs had been held on the Holy Ghost meadows. On June 24th in 1671 Charles II granted a charter for two fairs a year to be held on Basingstoke Down in the area known as Down Grange and Beech Down.

These fairs were to be held on a Tuesday and Wednesday in Easter week and the 10th and 11th day of September.

The site was probably chosen because it was a large area of common land and lay between the old drovers' road, now called Pack Lane, and the Winchester Road. The fairs likely consisted of lines of canvas stalls, probably similar to Blackbush market today. Other areas were allocated for the sale of livestock and sale of bulk produce such as wheat and other consumables of which cheese was a prominent feature.

The charter granted the right to a fair to the town council but they did not organise it. These rights were leased out to individuals known as Toll Men, who had the responsibilities for running the fairs and maintaining the equipment used, in exchange for the opportunity to turn a profit from the tolls levied

The first lease now remaining extant in the Hampshire Record Office (HRO) is from 1691. The lease was a hand written legal document which begins...

'This indenture made the 20th day of August Anno Domini 1691 and in the third year of the reign of our sovereign lord and lady, William and Mary, by the grace of God, King and Queen of England, Holland, France and Ireland, keepers of the faith, between the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgers of the town of Basingstoke in the county of Southampton and John Walker ...'

The lease to Richard Worrell in 1712 gives us an insight into the nature of these agreements and the roll of the Toll men.

'Indenture dated 22nd September 1712 between the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgers of Basingstoke and Richard Warrell, Glazier, giving a farm lett/lease to run the Down Fair for a period of three years.

The Down Fair - all those thereto granted unto them and their successors forever by his most gracious Majesty King Charles II late King by his hand at Easter and September.

The rent to be £20 per year and to be paid in equal portions on Lady Day (25th March) and Michaelmas Day each year. The rent to be aid within 10 days. If Richard Worrell defaults then the grant of the lease cease.

The Buildings and House to be maintained by Richard Warrell. He is also to maintain boards, trestles, standings, stuff, hurdles and all their materials and things belonging to and to be used in and about the fair in all needful and necessary reparations. Renewing, amending whatsoever as and when required and shall also at the end of every fair layup and store such boards, trestles etc.

At the ends of the lease all buildings, house, boards, etc. will be well repaired and may be leased back to the Mayor etc. of Basingstoke for £6 1s 6d

Not to hinder the fair but to promote it even after the lease ends.

Five indifferent men appointed by the Mayor etc. shall judge at the end of the lease if the buildings, house etc. have been properly maintained....'

From this document it can be concluded that the Toll man took on the right to charge all those who came to sell at the fair or to take a share of the proceeds from each vendor.

Against this he had to pay for the lease and all outgoings to maintain the assets of the fair. If these assets were judged to be in good condition at the end of the lease he could claim the £6 1s 6d as part of the compensation for cost incurred.

The house and other buildings referred to were sited on the south side of Pack lane where the two houses 63 and yy Pack Lane now stand.

The extant records of the leases to Toll Men are listed at the end of this article. In addition there is a record in HRO in Chamberlain's Vouchers of a receipt referring to the advertising of the fair:

'August 23rd 1755 Received of Mr Robert Ricketts the sum of 12s for advertising the fair on the Down'

Notices of Basingstoke Down fair appear in the Hampshire Advertiser from 1770 onwards. One of the primary purposes was to clarify the dates of the Basingstoke fair in relation to other fairs in the region, notably Wherwell (or Horrill) Fair.

The Basingstoke fair was held the day before Wherwell fair unless that fell on a Monday in which case the Basingstoke fair was held on the preceding Saturday .

There is further evidence of the impact of local competition from other fairs in the introduction of prizes to shepherds bringing good quantities of sheep for sale at the fair, and the reduction in tolls to some commodity vendors. The reduction of the rent payable on the Toll man's lease from 1778 may also indicate that the fair was experiencing stiff competition.

The Hampshire Advertiser notices are as follows;

1770	Notice is hereby given, that the fair for sheep, horses, cheese, and other commodities which has been usually kept on Basingstoke Down, in the county of Southampton, on the 18 th day of September , will, this year, be kept on the said Down on Thursday the 23 rd of the said month, being the day before Wherwell (commonly called Horrill) Fair, and for the future will always be kept on the day immediately before HERRILL Fair, except when the said fair shall be kept on Monday, and then it will be kept on the Saturday before.
1771	The Fair usually kept on Basingstoke Down on 18 th September will be kept on 23 rd September, being the day before Horrill Fair.
1776	Notice is hereby given , that at Basingstoke Down Fair, which will be held on Monday the 23 rd inst, being the day before Wherwell Fair, otherwise Horrill Fair, for the encouragement of Shepherds, will be given, a Silver Laced Hat of 1 guinea value, t such a shepherd who shall bring to the fair and sell forty of the best Weather sheep; and also a hat of the same value to such a Shepherd who shall bring and sell fifty of the best lambs, by George Taylor, Toll man of the said fair.
1777	The same notice appears but will an interesting footnote: 'NB No toll will be taken for cheese sold at the fair.' Later a note appeared in the Advertiser ' At Basingstoke Fair on Easter Tuesday, new made cheese sold at the exorbitant price of 44s per cwt.'
1779	The fact is reported that 'William Jeffrey has been granted the fair lease on 3 rd August 1779 for the 3 years 1780 – 1782 to apply tolls for the Easter and September Down Fairs and the Markets at £38 per annum.

The 1779 reference is the last that can be found for the fair on Basingstoke Down. With the preparation for land enclosure from 1786 onwards and the passing of the Enclosure Act in 1788 the downs were privatised. With insufficient space being allowed for the fairs by the new landowners the council stepped in and the Down Fair was allocated an area nearer the town. This we now know as Fairfields.

Apart from the comments in the Hampshire Advertiser, I have found no reports of prices at the fairs for the 18th century but in the middle of the 19th century – at a time just before railway transportation of livestock and commodities became common - the scale of the Basingstoke Fair can be judged;

Date	Report
1843	Basingstoke Down Fair on Saturday 23 rd September Was well supplied with horses, cows etc. which met with a ready sale. Between 3000 and 4000 sheep were penned and met a brisk sale at the following prices: Weathers – 38s to 41s Ewes 21s to 38s Lambs 14s to 26s.
1845	Basingstoke Annual Cheese Fair was held on 22 nd May. About 200 tons were pitched, which met with a brisk sale. Skim 24s per cwt. Half coward, 42s to 48s North Wilts 54s to 58s Somerset, 60s to 66s per cwt.

Date of Lease	Toll man	Period of lease	Comments
20 Aug 1691	John Walker (Clothier)	1692 -1698	£10 p.a.
1715	Richard Warrell (Glazier)	1716 -1718	£20 p.a.
20 Jan 1721	Richard Warrell (Glazier)	1721 -1723	£20 p.a.
2 March 1728	Daniel Budd (Victualler)	1728 - 1731	£100 p.a.
24n Jan 1770	George Taylor (Wheelwright)	1770 - 1772	£50 p.a.
29 Oct 1771	George Taylor (Wheelwright) & Spencer Attwood (Carpenter)	1773 - 1775	£50 p.a.
	George Taylor (Wheelwright)	1776 - 1778	Known to be Toll man – no date of lease or lease extension or annual rent
3 Aug 1779	William Jeffrey	1780 - 1782	£38 p.a.



Additional notes:

Basingstoke Market is recorded in Domesday (1086) and since 1214 has been held on a Wednesday. This is quite separate from the Fair below.

Between 1267–8, it was claimed that the Abbey of Wherwell's market at [Wherwell](#), Hampshire (*q.v.*) was damaging the king's free market at Basingstoke (*Abb Plac.*, pp. 163, 173). Nothing changes then...

<http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/gaz/hants.html> - **Gazette of Markets before 1505**

Basingstoke Fair

(Charter) Wed to Fri in Whit week (Easter dep); gr 16 May 1449, by K Hen VI to men of Basingstoke. To be held at the chapel of the Holy Ghost, from mid day on Wed to mid day on Fri (*CChR*, 1427–1516, p. 107). Fair continued until the late eighteenth century (*VCH Hampshire*, iv, p. 133).

At some point this fair moved from Whit week to the week before Easter.

A charter of 1622 mentions a second fair, 'of ancient date', on f Michael the archangel (29 Sept). There is no further information for this fair (*VCH Hampshire*, iv, p. 133).

Wherwell Fair – was established in 1206 by charter of King John. This was an annual event in September. The name may derive from its bubbling springs resulting in the [Middle Ages](#) place name "Hwerwyl" noted in [AD](#) 955, possibly meaning "kettle springs" or "cauldron springs." Pronunciation of the name has ranged from "Hurrell" to "Wer-rel" to present-day "Wher-well." Horrill is still a family name in the area and subsequently across the English speaking world. It was, until the dissolution of the Monasteries, an important abbey of Benedictine nuns owning lands considerably more extensive than the current parish.

"(Charter) 1+f+2, day of dedication of the ch of Wherwell [Exaltation of Holy Cross] (14 Sept); *feria* gr 25 Oct 1207, by K John to ch of Peter of Wherwell, As Matilda and M (*RCh*, p. 171). On 12 Apr 1215, sh of Southampton was ordered to ensure that the As and M of Wherwell had their fair, lasting 4 days, on 1+f+2 the day of the dedication of their church, as in their charter (*RLC*, i, p. 194)"

On 26 Oct 1260, the charter was recorded on the Charter Roll to preserve the contents (*CChR*, 1257–1300, pp. 30–1). *VCH* states that the fair continued into the twentieth century and gives the date of the contemporary fair as 24 Sept (*VCH Hampshire*, iv, p. 411, n. 6). This could reflect the change of date made to the medieval fair after the calendar change of the eighteenth century. Gazette above

London Evening Post of June 1752 records that the Wherwell/Horrill Fair is moved to 24th Sept this year and future from 13th Sept in the past.

Overton Sheep Fair

1246c. Overton Sheep Fair was established and continued to 20th century..

(Charter) vfm, Trans of Thomas the Martyr (7 Jul); gr 8 Feb 1246, by K Hen III to William, bp of Winchester (*CChR*, 1226–57, p. 312). To be held at the manor. Gazette above.[

[vfm = vigil feast and morrow = afternoon before, saints day itself and the morning after that. Sheep were usually sheared in June so would look clean and healthy and easily evaluated in early July]

Calendar Reform in England, 1752

It is widely known that in September 1752, Great Britain switched from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar. In order to achieve the change, 11 days were 'omitted' from the calendar - i.e. the day after 2 September 1752 was 14 September 1752.

This change was as a result of an Act of Parliament - the "[Calendar Act](#)" of 1751 *An Act for Regulating the Commencement of the Year; and for Correcting the Calendar now in Use*.

What isn't so widely known is a second change which the Act introduced - as named in the first part of the Act's title. The Act changed the first day of the year (or, if you want to impress your friends with a new word, the Supputation of the Year).

Prior to 1752 in England, the year began on 25 March (Lady Day). Lady Day is one of the Quarter Days, which are still used in legal circles. The Quarter Days divide the year in quarters (hence the name :-), and the Quarter Days are: Lady Day (25 March), Midsummers Day (24 June), Michaelmas Day (29 September), and Christmas Day (25 December).

So, in England, the day after 24 March 1642 was 25 March 1643. The Act changed this, so that the day after 31 December 1751 was 1 January 1752. As a consequence, 1751 was a short year - it ran only from 25 March to 31 December. To throw some more confusion on the issue, Scotland had changed the first day of the year to 1 January in 1600 (in 1600, Scotland was a separate kingdom). When King James VI of Scotland became also King James I of England in 1603, the possibilities of date confusion must have been very large.

Historians have to be on their toes with dates prior to 1752. For example, in The Tower of London there is some graffiti scratched into a cell wall by someone imprisoned in January 1642 for his role in the Battle of Edgehill (which took place on 23 October 1642).

Questions:

Why and when did the September Fair move from Michaelmas – 29th Sep (1622) to 18th September and then to the day before Wherwell Fair 23rd September (1771)

Why and when did the Whitsun Fair (12449) move to Easter Week.(1671).

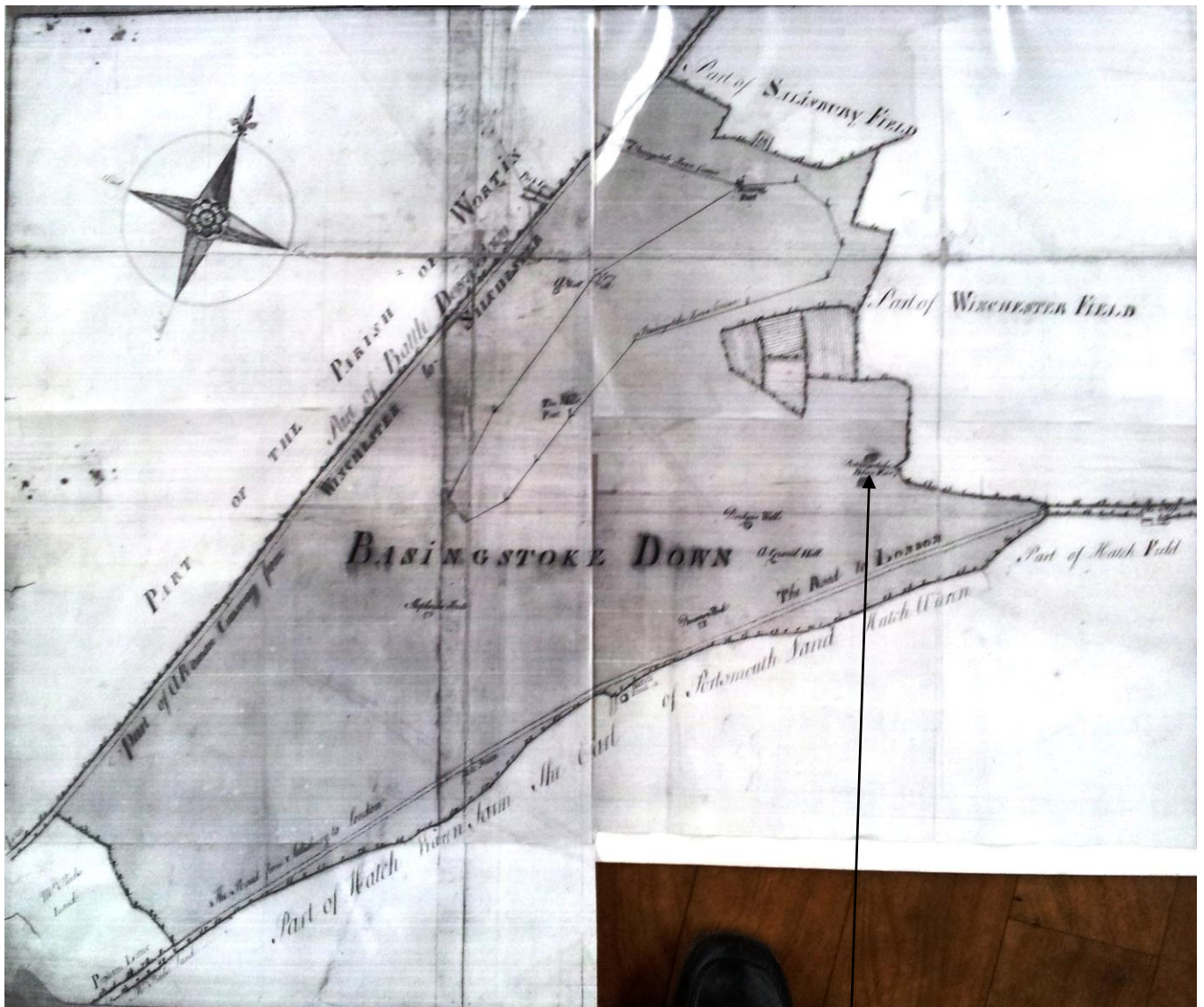
Whit Week was, in mediaeval times, one of the holiday weeks in the agricultural calendar being 7 weeks after Easter.– so it would make sense for fairs to be held in that week.

The mechanics of hiring at a Hiring Fair

Farm workers, labourers, domestic servants and some craftsmen would work for their employer for a year at a time, from October to October. At the end of their employment they would attend the Hiring Fair dressed in their Sunday best clothes. The prospective workers would gather in the street or market place, often sporting some sort of badge or tool to denote their specialty; shepherds held a crook or a tuft of wool, cowmen brought wisps of straw, dairymaids carried a milking stool or pail and housemaids held brooms or mops, hence the derivation of the term "Mop Fair".

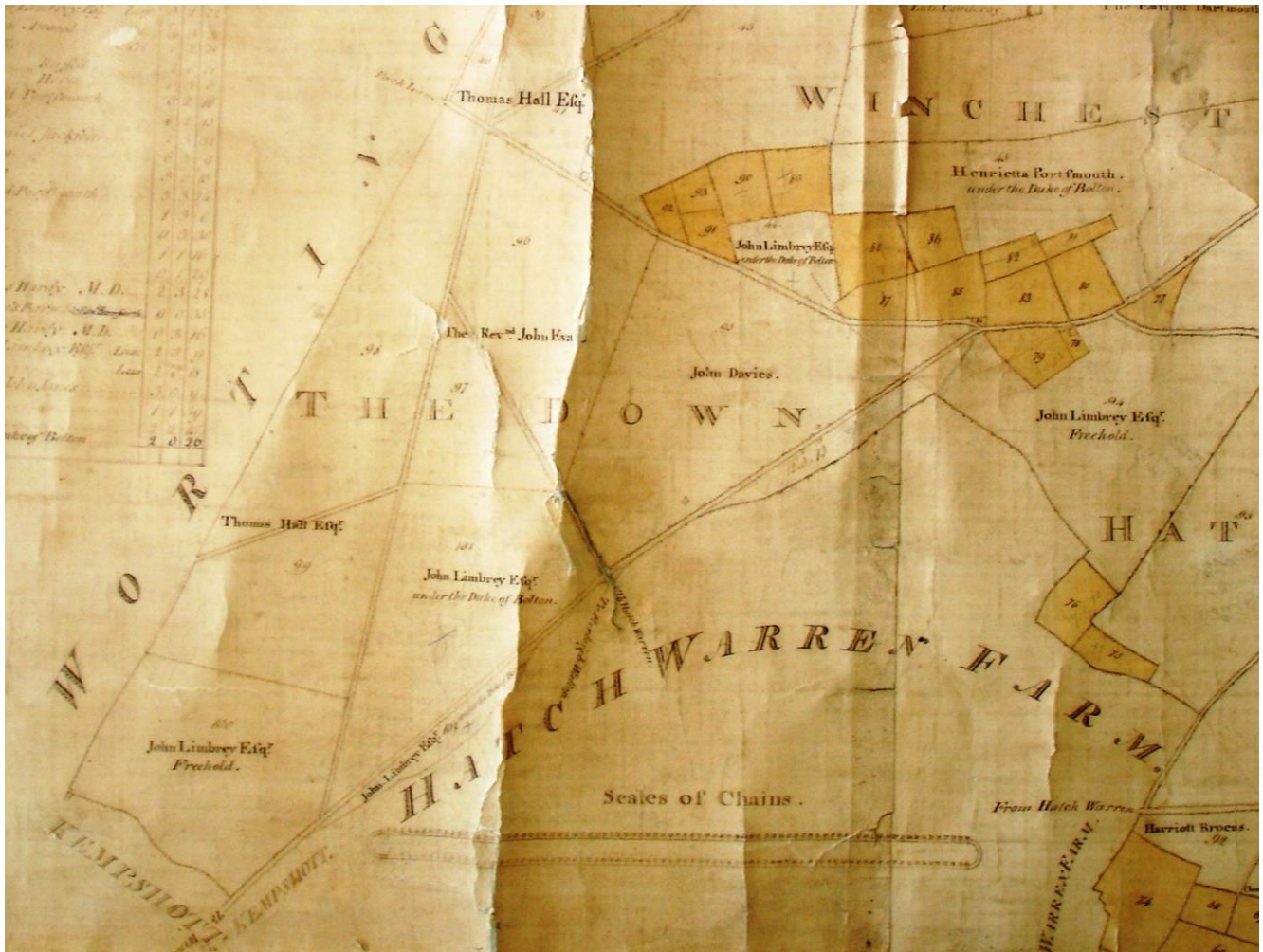
Potential employers would move amongst them discussing experience and terms and, if they were thought fit, hire them for the coming year. Once agreement was reached the employer would give the employee a small sum of money (the "Hiring Shilling") and the employee would remove the item signifying their trade and wear bright ribbons to indicate they had been hired. They would then spend the money amongst the stalls set up at the fair which would be selling food and drink and offering games to play. The yearly hiring included board and lodging for single employees for the whole year with wages being paid at the end of the year's service. These fairs attracted all the other trappings of a fair, and they turned into major feasts in their own right, and attracted poor reputations for the drunkenness and immorality involved.

Basingstoke Down in 1762



Basingstoke Down map from the Estate Papers of the Duke of Bolton (Hampshire Record Office), showing the buildings to the south of Pack Lane where the Fair equipment was housed.

It seems highly desirable that a cattle fair should have access to water for the animals and there is indeed a well – Dredges Well just to the south west of the Fair Buildings.



This map of 1786 is an extract from the papers relating to the Basingstoke Enclosure Act of 1788 and indicates how the area previously known as Basingstoke Down (The Down) was divided into land holdings.