



Fair Enough

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive

I was delighted when I received a most interesting letter from Mr Terence O'Kelly about Abinger Fair and old English Fairs. It came a day or so before our last issue. Due to shortage of space in that issue I had to defer publishing until now the interesting points that he made in his letter and the fascinating reports that Mr O'Kelly has found in the Abinger Monthly Record from 1889 to 1892 about the Fair.

Mr O'Kelly wrote: "Presumably your reference to 18th century fairs was to John Aubrey's note that Abinger had a fair "now much decayed". This would almost certainly have been for the sale of cattle owned by the commoners and grazed on the common, far in excess of the numbers needed for milk and meat.

W. J. Evelyn regarded the diminution of the numbers of cattle on the common as due to the cattle plague of 1860, after which the previous numbers were never regained. (At this time there was in Abinger Common, apart from the Manor, Hatch and Rectory, not more than a dozen cottages).

The fair continued in some form, latterly as a "fun fair", until the late thirties, when White's Fair, from Woking, came annually with roundabouts, chairplanes, swing-boats, and stalls including roll-a-penny, hoop-la, rifle range, etc. This fair did not return after the war, and when the "Mediaeval Fair" was "revived" in 1956 it was felt that July 25th was too near the school holidays and an earlier date would be more convenient.

It has always been my opinion that the emphasis placed on the association with pilgrims is totally bogus. In the first place, the "Pilgrims' Way" is a Victorian invention. There is no earlier reference, and I think that the Albury historian Martin Tupper (inventor of the King John and the Silent Pool myth, and the translation of the birthplace of Archbishop Stephen Langton from Lincolnshire to Friday Street) might be responsible for renaming the prehistoric Drove Road along the top of the Downs. The road may well have been used by travellers to Canterbury from the west country, but it seems highly unlikely that they would make a two-mile detour to visit a small village cattle fair, even if they knew it was on".

Mr O'Kelly attached to his letter extracts from the Abinger Monthly Record July 1889, where in the very first issue of that publication there appeared under the Notice of future meetings "Abinger Fair, July 25th".

the second issue August 1899 on page 15 appeared the following report: "The Fair was held as usual on July 25th. Though it has lost the importance which once belonged to it, yet the old custom is still kept up. The Fair generally presents a scene of harmless merriment. On the present occasion, there were swings, there was throwing at coconuts, and a new game called Knives and Rings, which seemed very popular. The Abinger Hammer Drum and Fife Band attended. Dancing commenced in the field opposite to Abinger Hatch at 8 pm. The harmony of the meeting was disturbed by the appearance of Mr John Rowberry, leading a chorus of three or four girls, who sang hymns as a kind of

protest against the sinfulness of the Fair, and endeavoured to drown the music. Mr Rowberry's action being calculated to produce a breach of the peace, he was very properly ordered to leave the field by Mr Muggeridge. The meeting at the Fair broke up about 11 pm, and nothing except the intrusion of Mr Rowberry occurred to disturb the order and harmony which prevailed.

Church Army Inconsistency. The Rector and Mr John Rowberry disapprove of the dancing at Abinger Fair, yet they were both present at the Garden Party given at Abinger Hall two days afterwards, when there was rustic dancing to the music of the same band (the Abinger Drum and Fife Band) which played at the Fair. "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander", and what is right and proper at Abinger Hall cannot be very wicked on Abinger Manor". (Mr Rowberry was a Church Army Captain, and Mr Muggeridge, landlord of the Abinger Hatch, was a Churchwarden).

In the issue dated July 1890 on page 100: "**Abinger Fair.** On St James' Day, July 25th, the Parish of Abinger will be celebrating its annual festive gathering. The term "Fair", as applied to this occasion seems to be a misnomer - no lord of the manor, so far as we have been able to ascertain, having obtained a charter for holding a fair here. Properly speaking it is Abinger Feast, Wake or Hopping. The origin of these annual festivals dates back in this country to the times of Paganism, when the Christian missionaries, finding it extremely difficult to wean their converts from the observance of these festivities held in honour of their heathen deities and heroes, wisely or otherwise, retained them under altered conditions. As the Jews constantly kept their anniversary feast of dedication in remembrance of Judas Maccabaeus, their deliverer, so it hath been an ancient custom among the Christians of this island to keep a feast every year upon a certain week or day, in remembrance of the finishing of the building of their parish church, and of the first solemn dedicating of it to the service of God, and committing it to the protection of some guardian saint or angel".

If, as we surmise, Abinger Fair is the survival of the patronal dedication feast, it must have existed for near upon a thousand years, and popular customs of such long standing are not easily upset. Could the clergy generally see their way to restore these country wakes to their original intention, as is, happily, being done in some parishes, much good might ensue".

In the following issue, dated August 1890, on page 127: "The Fair this year was of an unusually festive character, and lasted two days. It was attended by a large number of persons, in addition to most of the parishioners, who were evidently attracted in the expectation of witnessing a repetition of the fanatical proceedings of last year. The ghost-frightened Captain, it is true, put in a personal appearance. But his stay was brief, for, having taken a careful survey of the horse-pond, he seems to have arrived at the conclusion that discretion is the better part of valour, and forthwith departed. Harmony reigned supreme throughout both days".

Then a year later on page 112, August 1891: **Abinger Fair.** This fair was held as usual on the feast of St James the Greater, to whom Abinger Church is dedicated. There were the usual amusements, such as merry-go-rounds and music, and the fair was kept up from about 8pm till 11pm. There was no interruption on this occasion either from aggressive Church Army people or over-officious police-constables. In consequence of this non-interference the whole affair from first to last, was perfectly quiet and orderly".

Again in August 1892, on page 350: "**Abinger Fair.** This fair took place as usual on July 25th. There were the usual amusements. No interruption from the Church Army or the ex. Church Army Captain occurred on this occasion, and consequently the gathering from first to last was quiet and orderly. An extension of one hour was granted to Mr Muggeridge of Abinger Hatch".

| [From the Abinger and Coldharbour Parish News, September 1996](#)