

All the fun of the fair – or perhaps not....
Sawbridgeworth in the olden days
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Talk about fairs in Sawbridgeworth and the “May Fayre” springs to mind. But fairs in Sawbridgeworth started a very long while ago indeed. The “*Victorian County History of Hertfordshire*” tells us that in 1303 Geoffrey de Say, Lord Say of the manor of Sayesbury was granted a yearly fair on the vigil and feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (8 September). Fairs were a major part of mediaeval life marking the passage of time through the year. Each fair was attributed to a saint and was held on the day of celebration for the saint – a holy day – serfs and others workers on the lord's estate were required to attend church to bless the saint.

Some fairs were given a special purpose apart from that of worship to allow the lord of the manor to change staff, to make deals, and settle disputes, the holy-days marking the start and end of a contract.

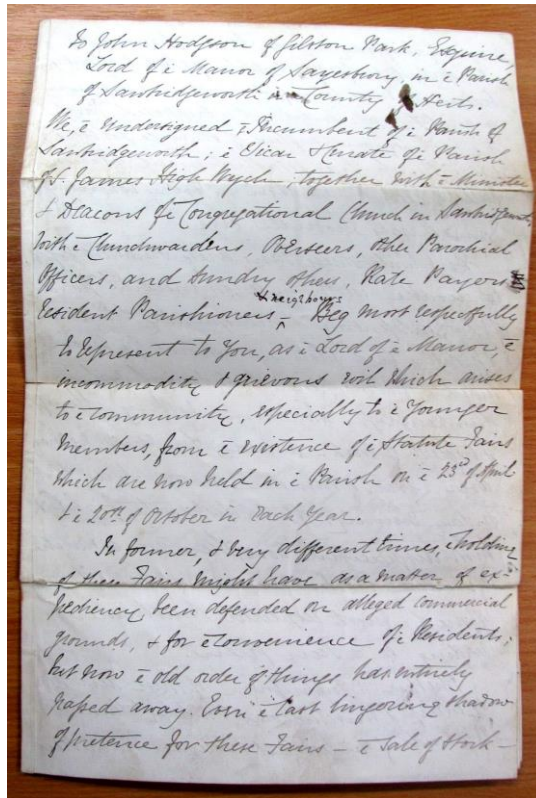
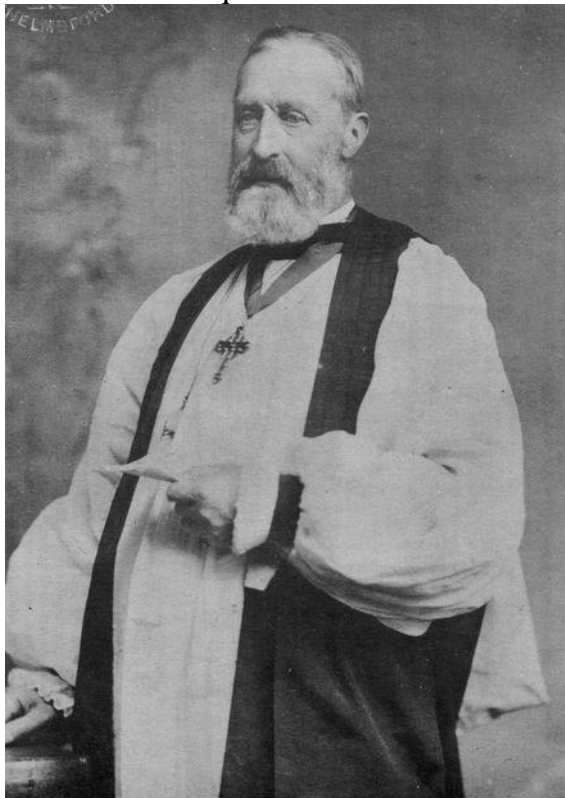
Fairs were granted by royal charter to a person, often the lord of the manor, and could be withdrawn. By 1850 however the financial value to the lord of the manor was small, largely obsolete in fact, due to a reliable mail service and formal legal services.

Sawbridgeworth was granted three fairs per annum whose particular purposes are not known except for Easter when a horse fair was always held, September to trade produce and saffron and October for hiring of staff and settling of agreements,

Fairs were also of course occasions when the hard working ordinary folk of the town let their hair down and had some fun. “*The Story of Sawbridgeworth*”, a publication from 1966 quotes a Mrs. Newey who was born in 1880 and recorded a description of the town where she grew up. Her recollections paint a vivid picture of life in Sawbridgeworth in the last decennium of the nineteenth century. “The Fair Green was where they held April Fair for three days and in October a smaller one. The first day of the April Fair was a horse show. The horses were trotted down from the top of Knight Street to be sold. The public house and shop were still there and a Mrs. Healey, a big fat woman, used to sit in the shop selling fish and sweets. Of course the children could not go to school that day. Mrs. Cockton who lived in Bell Street made lovely treacle sweets and also prize packets, long sticks of liquorice and sugar sticks, bags of sherbet with a liquorice pipe at the end to draw the sherbet out, all for a farthing. Four ounces of sweets and some even six ounces – all the ends of the sweets bottles mixed together; as children only had a Penny a week for pocket money they were a great treat.....”



The adults also had some fun and naturally when some have fun, others often make a nuisance of themselves! Overindulgence in alcohol, then as now leads to problems and it was against that background that three local luminaries set pen to paper to protest against the fair. As we have already noted above, permissions to hold fairs could be withdrawn so a petition to the lord of the manor to control his fair was quite correct.



They were Henry Frank Johnson, vicar of High Wych, who later became bishop of Colchester, James Wood who served as Minister of the Congregational Church from 1851 until he retired in 1903 and most importantly Samuel Pryer Field, vicar of Great St. Mary's Sawbridgeworth. Field, born in 1817 was a Londoner, the son of an official of the Royal Mint, educated at St Paul's Cathedral School and Pembroke College, Cambridge. Age 24 he was appointed Curate of Emsworth, Hampshire and two years later vicar of the Church of St Paul's High Beech in the Parish of Waltham Holy Cross. There he proved himself a conscientious and dedicated priest, much praised for his work with the schoolchildren. Field was a disciplinarian and kept meticulous records of the alms he handed out to the poor. He left St. Paul's in 1850 after which he served in Woodbridge in Suffolk, Dewsbury, Yorkshire and came to Sawbridgeworth in 1867.

True defenders of "Victorian Values", Field, Johnson and Wood wrote to John Hodgson, Lord of the Manor of Sayesbury under whose authority fairs were allowed. Let us quote this letter here in full:

We, the undersigned the Incumbent of the Parish of Sawbridgeworth; the Vicar and Curate of the Parish of St James, High Wych, together with the Minister and Deacons of the Congregational Church in Sawbridgeworth with the Churchwardens, Overseers, the Parochial Officers, and sundry others, Rate Payers, Resident Parishioners and neighbours beg most respectfully to represent to you, as the Lord of the Manor and incommidity and grievous wish which arises to the community, especially to the younger members, from the existence of the Statute Fairs which are now held in the Parish on the 23rd of April and the 20th of October in each year.

In former, and very different times, the holding of these fairs might have, as a matter of expediency, been defended on alleged commercial grounds, and for the convenience of the residents; but now the old order of things has entirely passed away. Even the last lingering shadow of pretence for these fairs – the sale of stock - is rapidly passing away; for, in the opinion of competent judges, the supply of stock is yearly becoming more limited in extent and inferior in quality; attributable, it is supposed, partly to the insidious Influx of strange “jobbers”; and very much to the establishment of periodic sales of stock by Auction in every county, some of any moderate size.

But whilst these fairs are of the smallest profit conceivable worth in a commercial point of view, indefinitely and indisputably they are the prolific seed plots of occasions of the most hideous forms of moral and social evil – drunkenness – whoredom – lottery – idleness and neglect of work – indeed, this year we may aver – even murder; in so much as, last Friday evening, after a most desperate fight and a disgraceful row, there was a wretched woman all but murdered at the door of one of the most respected Parishioners residing on the Fair Green.

Whether the suppression of these Fairs, now so mischievous, would be detrimental to the trade of our Resident Licensed Victuallers’ purpose abstained from questioning those neighbours on the point. Of this, however, we are sure that let the effect on their business be what it may, the Licensed Victuallers are too respectable and right-minded a body of men to think of raising an objection on the score of private gain against a movement in the success of which to many of their friends and neighbours are so disinterestedly anxious, likening as they do that there can be no moral improvement in the place and the people of this village as long as these pestilential fairs are allowed to be held.

Under these circumstances, we would as respectfully and earnestly appeal to you, sir, as Lord of the Manor, to aid and help us in ridding the parish of these demoralizing abominations. We are aware that recent legislation has greatly facilitated the doing away with these poisonous, open, and public events. Still we determined not to take any action until we had represented the case to you, as we would fain hope not only of gained your sanction but withal your co-operation in putting down these annual fairs which now are only detrimental to property and degrading to the manners and morals of the people and parish of Sawbridgeworth.

The letter is then signed by the above-mentioned three priests and countersigned by a number of luminaries such as William Barnard the maltster who lived on Fair Green, (it was most probably on his doorstep that the wretched woman was all but murdered) Jane Wallis, Robert Reeves, Mary Walker of Knight Street and J.W Truswell, churchwarden (also remembered as a cricketer) Some signatures sadly are undecipherable.

We have to conclude however that the letter was unsuccessful because in 1903 another letter was written on the same subject. The author at that time was H.A. Roberts writing on behalf of the newly formed Sawbridgworth Urban District Council. The addressee was Arthur Selwyn Bowlby who had by that time succeeded John Hodgson as Lord of the Manor of Sayesbury. That letter referred to the first and was altogether more modest in its tone.

Still nothing was done but the horse fairs in particular did not carry on for long. The last one was held in 1913. The event and similar ones like it, were then forbidden for the duration of the First World War and were not resurrected after the war in their previous form.

The illustration shows the horse fair in April 1913, probably the last for all such events.

The first page of the 1875 letter of protest as photographed as county archives.

With thanks to Frances Arnold, Harold Bodley, Gary Hanson, Jack Haylett and the authors of the 1966 booklet "the Story of Sawbridgworth."