

# Development of Harborough's Markets

by Douglas Wooldridge



Sometime in or about the middle of the twelfth century, Harborough was created as a new town on the low-lying ground adjacent to the River Welland. Its location at the river crossing on a direct route between the towns of Leicester and Northampton lent itself to trade and in 1203 there is the first evidence of the establishment of a market.

Market Day was Monday and because the neighbouring town of Rothwell also had a Monday market, there were complaints of loss of trade due to rivalry between the two towns. A request was therefore made to the King, Henry III, to change the day of the market. Harborough's market day was changed to Tuesday, where it remained for the next seven hundred plus years. The livestock market was held in the town centre. Sheep were in the town square, henceforth known as the Sheep Market. Cattle and horses were in the High Street.

As well as livestock, other products were traded from stalls set up on the market surrounds. When the Old Grammar School was built in 1614, provision was made to house the Butter Market under cover on the ground floor. Behind the Old Grammar School was the Pet Market. On the site of the Old Town Hall was a Butchers' Shambles and when the

Old Town Hall was built by the Earl of Harborough in 1788, the butchers'

stalls were accommodated in the vaulted ground floor. There was a Cloth Market, amongst other uses, on the upper floor. Across the road was the Corn Market.

The open area between the Old Town Hall and what is now Church Square accommodated market stalls which were at first dismantled at the end of the day's trading; in time these became permanent and eventually were replaced by buildings, creating the block of buildings between High Street and Church Street as we know it today.

There was an Annual Fair in October and additional fairs were introduced at other times of the year. The October Fair was the biggest. It lasted for nine days and attracted large numbers of people.

All changed in 1903 when the livestock market was removed from the street, along with the dirt and smells which it created. The Urban District Council purchased the Market Right from the Lord of the Manor and bought twelve acres of land between Northampton Road and Springfield Street. Six acres were laid out with pens for livestock and the remaining six acres laid down as lairage to accommodate the animals overnight. There were pens for 2,000 cattle, 2,000 sheep, 170 calves and 300 pigs. There were sheds for pigs and also for poultry. There were four auction rings and an open area for the display of agricultural implements and other items connected with farming. In the centre was the Settling Rooms, now a Grade 2 listed building, designed by H.G. Coates, the Town Surveyor and his private architect partner, H. Winter Johnson. Here the farmers settled their payments after the auctions and partook of refreshments. There were some lesser buildings used as offices by the auctioneers.



Sheep Market c 1900

There was an entrance from Northampton Road and two entrances from Springfield Street. By the lower gateway was a commodious house, in similar style to the Settling Rooms, for the Market Superintendent. Further down Springfield Street, near the Kettering Road corner, was a council-owned abattoir. Cattle and sheep were driven into the town from nearby villages. There were occasional escapes when beasts invaded front gardens if gates had been inadvertently left open. For this reason, residents of the houses in Springfield Street facing the market were allowed to keep their cast iron railings and gates at the beginning of the Second World War, while elsewhere, they were removed to be melted down into munitions for the war effort.

There were fair days on the fourth Tuesday in April and the third Thursday in October, attracting large numbers of cattle and sheep to be bought and sold. After the sales, livestock was driven to the railway station to be despatched by rail from the cattle loading docks at the corner of Great Bowden Road. Every village had its own loading dock.

With the departure of livestock from the town centre, there was opportunity to expand the stall market onto the Town Square. The writer is old enough to remember stalls on the square. They were dismantled at the close of business and stored in a disused factory building in the corner of the Commons where the toilets are now.

Traders and customers were exposed to the elements and there was one memorable Tuesday afternoon in June 1935 when there was a violent thunderstorm with a deluge of rain which the drains were unable to cope with and the Square flooded to some considerable depth. Caught unawares, the traders were marooned and boxes and other debris



*April Fair, 1890.*

floated away. The water soon subsided after the storm was over. In a few more years, covered accommodation was provided for the stall market.

In 1937, reconstruction of the Square commenced and the stalls were accommodated temporarily elsewhere pending building of a covered market. The level in the centre of the Square was raised and kerbs laid where hitherto there had only been a double row of granite setts separating pedestrians from the roadway. Traffic islands were constructed at the corners of Northampton Road and Coventry Road. The centre of the Square was subsequently used as a car park and for the parking and departure point for buses. Buses were removed in the early 1950s when a bus station was made on the Old Brewery site next to the river. Car parking was abolished in 1968 when there was further reconstruction of the Square.

Several sites were suggested for a covered market but it was finally decided to build it on the Northampton road frontage of the cattle market. The



*Flooding in the Square was a regular event. The photo is dated c 1900.*



covered market was opened on 25th October 1938. It provided shelter for traders and customers and was an improvement on the old open-air market, although not up to modern standards. It was rather draughty as, for many years, the window openings on the south side were left unglazed.

There was little change until the 1990s when, with the decline in cattle rearing in the Welland valley, the livestock market was less used. The District Council decided it could no longer support a livestock market in the centre of Market Harborough. A decision was made to close the market and sell the site for development. The market closed in November 1992.

A small livestock market was built on the road between Lubenham and Foxton adjacent to the old wartime airfield buildings. Market Day was subsequently changed to Wednesday in order not to clash with Melton Mowbray market, the only other livestock market in the area.

The whole market area was cleared and, with adjacent properties, incorporated into the St. Mary's Place development. The only remaining building of the old market is the Settling Rooms, standing



*The Square after 1938 redevelopment showing parked cars and roundabout at Coventry Road*

isolated in the centre of the car park. It is currently used by voluntary organisations.

A new Market Hall was built on the bus station site next to the river. The old covered market was demolished in October 1993. Trading was carried on in the new indoor market on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, with an Antiques Fair on Sunday.

A few years ago, however, the future of the Market Hall was uncertain. As part of a cost-cutting exercise the District Council proposed to close the hall and relocate the market to an open air site, one proposal being the Fox Yard car park at the rear of the Council offices. The Market Hall was to be sold or leased to a large retailer. There was much public protest at this suggestion and a petition was drawn up to keep the market on its present site.

Eventually, the Council found money to refurbish the Market Hall to make it more attractive to shoppers. Work commenced in January 2014 and while the work was in progress stalls were once again in use on The Square after an interval of 77 years. The newly refurbished hall reopened in April 2014.

As I remember it from the 1930s, Tuesday was the busiest day of the week in town. Shops did brisk business as county housewives came to do their weekly shopping. Extra buses were run from the villages in the days when car ownership was not so common as it is today. Hotels and public houses also did a lively trade when the farmers had concluded their business in the market.

In the twenty-first century, Market Harborough has lost much of its character as a market town. Livestock has been banished to an out-of-town location and no longer do the farmers come into town. There is no recognised market day, the indoor market is open six days a week and the town on Tuesday is indistinguishable from the other days of the week. One link with the countryside, however remains, in the form of a Farmers' Market on the first Thursday of every month.



*The Square after 1968 development*