BELTON HORSE (& CATTLE) FAIR AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE NEWSPAPERS (1863 -1961)



ABOVE PHOTOGRAPH - BELTON HORSE FAIR 1892



Above and on the right, Mr. J. Cufflin, assistant overseer for Belton, at the time, is seen reading the proclamation at Belton horse Fair in 1913. The fair dates back to 1221, and was held in the first week after Trinity Sunday The proclamation is read five times at different places in the village. The fair used to attract a big crowd and including horse dealers from all parts of the county.

BY SAMUEL T STEWART - OCT 2026

Annie Thompson, (Widow) Lady of the Manor of Belton, Doth hereby give notice, that there is a Fair to be kept within the Town and Manor of Belton, for the buying and selling of all manner of Cattle, Wares, and Merchandize. And that it is not lawful for any person to use any unlawful buying and selling within this Fair, but without forestalling, engrossing, or regrating this day, and to-morrow, and no longer, upon pain of forfeiting double the value of that which shall be sold to exchanged. And also doth hereby require all persons resorting to this Fair to keep just Weights and Measures, and strictly chargeth all manner of persons to keep her Majesty's peace. And also doth require all persons who shall buy, sell, or exchange any Horse, Mare, Gelding, Colt, or Filly, to take notice, that it is not lawful to put them to sale, but between ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day and sun setting, and that in open Fair only, being driven or led there, for the space of one hour at the least, paying the just Toll, bringing them to the Toll-book, that the Officer there attending may enter their names and surnames, mystery, and dwelling-place, of every Buyer, Seller, and Voucher, and the colour, and one special mark of every Horse, Mare, Gelding, Colt, or Filly, so sold or exchanged. And if any Buyer, Seller, Voucher, or Toll-taker do to the contrary forfeits Five Pounds and the sale void, and if the Horse, Mare, Gelding, Colt, or Filly be thief-stolen, the property remains unaltered. And that it is not lawful to buy any Cows, Calves, Steers, Heifers, or Runts, but in the open Fair only, upon pain of forfeiting double the value. And also if any controversy arise between party and party, touching any bargain or contract, for any Cattle, Wares, or Merchandize, the party aggrieved may right himself before the Steward of the Fair in the Court of Pie-poudre at the Manor House in Belton.

BELTON FAIR to be proclaimed the Monday after Trinity Week.

God Save the Queen

COPY OF PROCLAMATION

Annie Thompson (d.1935) was the widow of Charles Thompson who was, until his death in 1888, Lord of the manor of Belton. In Mill Lane, there is a large slab of stone against the wall of the manor house. The Lord of the Manor stood on this stone to open the annual horse fair. Other proclamations and information were read out standing on this stone.

INTRODUCTION

The right to hold an annual horse fair and market in Belton, was, according to 'St. John the Baptist - Belton' website, granted by charter by Henry III in 1221.

Newspaper records provide additional research details not otherwise often recorded. They are a good research tool for confirming event dates with descriptions and names etc. Although it is a rather laborious research task, the results can prove extremely rewarding.

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VARIOUS TRANSCRIBED NEWSPAPER ARTICLES & PHOTOGRAPHS RELATING TO THE ANCIENT BELTON HORSE FAIR

Loughborough Monitor- Published Thursday, 18 June 1863

Belton fair was held on Monday week, the first week after Trinity Sunday, and as is generally the case, not without rain and thunder. The supply of cattle was not so large as usual, and consequently a ready sale was effected. There were plenty of buyers of fat stock, which realised 7 1/4d.per pound. The Horse Fair was large, and some really good animals were shown, but business was very sluggish.

The **'Bush Houses'** on this occasion were closed, and consequently the public-houses and booth proprietors were thronged. A filly belonging to Mrs. B. Barrow being frightened at something, reared up and falling backwards, fractured her skull, which caused her death.

We have not heard of any pocket - picking, or any of the horse dealing tricks, so commonly practised upon the credulous on these occasions.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION ON BELTON 'BUSH HOUSES'

In simple terms, ***Belton Bush Houses*** *were temporary unlicensed public houses or Ale houses permitted to sell alcohol exclusively during the village's Horse Fair. Under this ancient custom, any householder had the right to hang a green bush branch or tree branch (preferably Oak) over their front door to signal to passers by that they were operating a temporary Ale House free of licensing duty for the duration of the fair. According to local records, the sudden influx of unregulated alcohol from these homes led to considerable drinking and debauchery. Apparently, it regularly required the village to swear in a dozen temporary special constable to keep the peace.*

Melton Mowbray Times and Vale of Belvoir Gazette - Published Friday, 20 June 1913

Many a man in this district has made acquaintance with Belton Horse fair. Belton is an old world village on the borders of Charnwood forest. The annual horse and cattle fair was held last week when there was a large concourse of purchasers and spectators. The fair was held on an open grass grown space near the old mill. Nearly 200 horses, ponies &c., some valuable animals, and other 'crocks, were on view. There were several herds of Welsh ponies, and it was in connection with the sale of those that the chief interest was aroused. On a probable customer asking to have a pony shown (says a correspondent), one of the attendants makes a dash at the group, and, seizing the halter on the ponies head, attempting to drag it forth, another man with a whip assisted, and yet another applied a coloured flag which was flapped increasingly in the ponies face, to the accompaniment of much

shouting and noise. The terrified animal was then supposed to show off its good points, pulling the attendant hither and thither, and sometimes both of them came to grief. The cattle section of the fair has almost lapsed, and there were not a dozen beasts shown.

The cattle fair is held in the village street, and inhabitants have tales to tell of its former glories. The market-place paved with boulders locally called 'petrified kidneys', enclosed round-abouts, stalls and shies etc. The old church stands at the upper end of the market place, and is a well preserved ancient pile. It boasts an old fashioned clock, having on its face the **date 1722**. Nearby is a tall 'May pole', which used to be garlanded, and was the centre of scenes of merrymaking. The pole was once stolen by a gang of young men from Shepshed, but such a hubhub was raised that it was brought back.



THE MAY POLE (photograph copyright of the originator)

Years ago, it was the custom for nearly every house to 'Sport its Oak', namely to hang a branch of oak over the door, and then the householder was permitted to 'retail' home brewed beer. Some years ago, Belton had a notable character named Jack Onions, who, attired in a scarlet coat, **and mounted on a donkey**, attended the various meets for fox hunting in the countryside.

In a grove of tall oaks and beeches, that crown a terraced walk, just on the skirt of the garden, is an ancient rookery, which is one of the most important provinces in the squires domains. The old gentleman sets great store by his rooks, and will not suffer one of them to be killed, in consequence of which, they have increased amazingly; the tree tops are loaded with their nests; they have encroached along the great avenue, and have established, in times gone past, a colony amongst the pines and elms of the churchyard.

Leicester Daily Post - Published Tuesday, 24 June 1919

BELTON HORSE FAIR

The old-time Belton Fair was held on Monday, and attracted a big crowd, as well as horse dealers from all parts of the country. The fair is stated to have been established in 1100 (*1221*) and up to recent years, a cattle sale was a feature as well as the sale of horses, which survived.

There is much to interest the visitor, and after the horse fair, pleasure is afforded in the Market-place, where a row of show vans and booths are staged. Here, villagers and friends make merry for the rest of the day.

Mr. J. Cufflin, the assistant overseer of Belton, in accordance with custom, read the proclamation authorising the fair at various points of the village, and concluded at the horse fair.



On the right, Mr. J. Cufflin, assistant overseer for Belton is seen reading the proclamation at Belton horse Fair. The fair which is said to date back to 1221, was held about a quarter of a mile from Belton, and the proclamation is read five times at different places in the village. The fair on Monday attracted a big crowd including horse dealers from all parts of the country

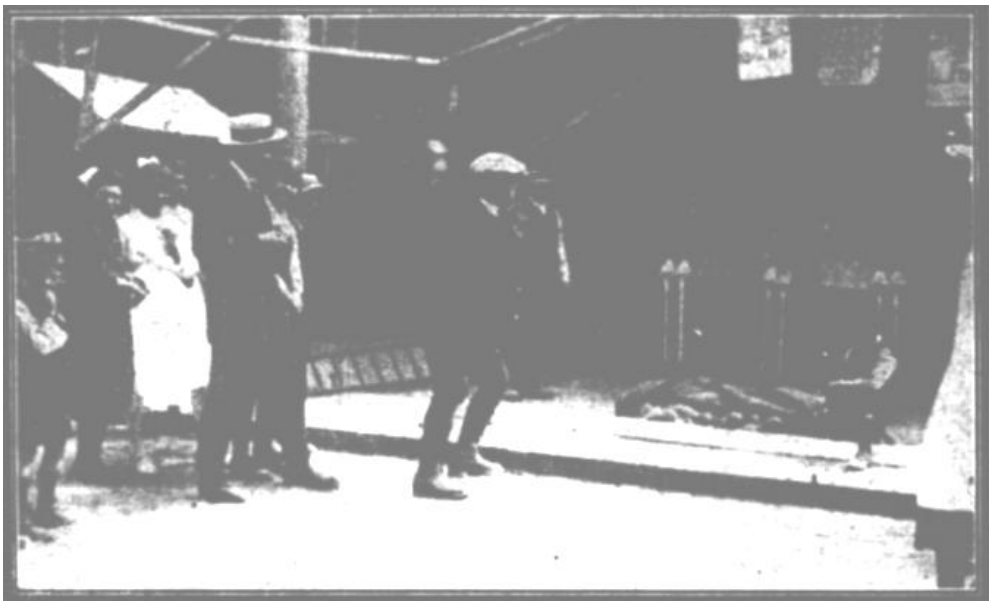


A prospective purchaser inspecting a ponies teeth.



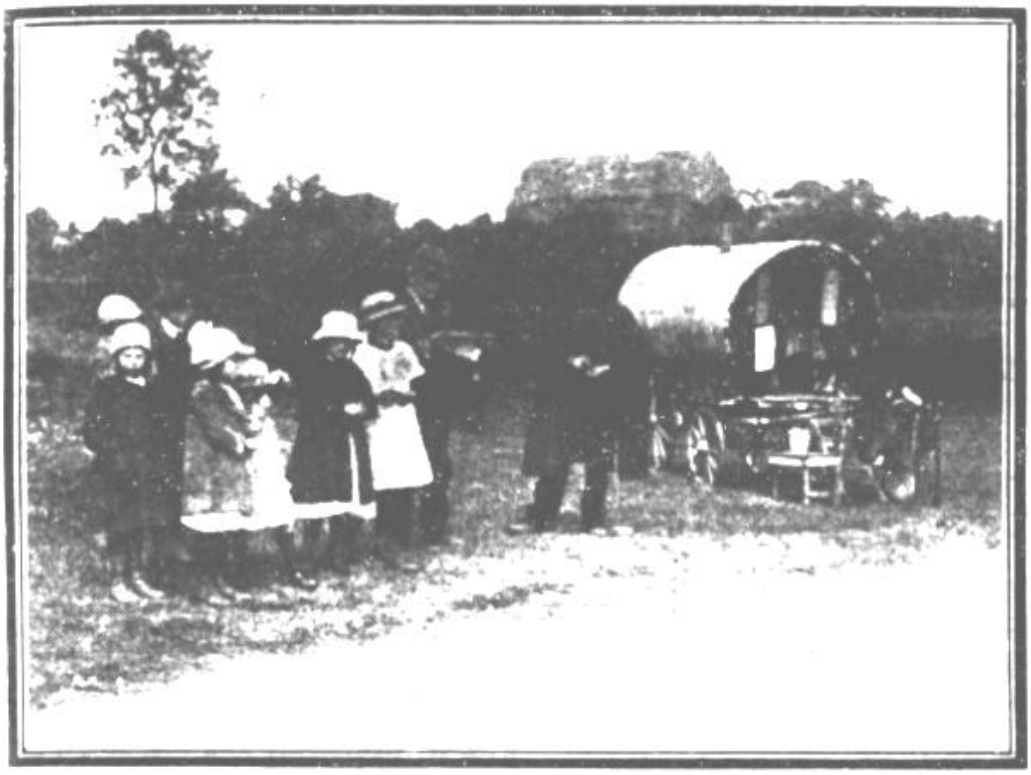
Horses grouped for sale in front of 'Horse Fair Cottage', where a room is available for settling bargains, signing cheques and receiving tolls, four pence being charged for each animal entering the village

Leicester Chronicle - Published Saturday, 12 June 1920



Coalville butchers trying their luck at the coconut shies

Leicester Chronicle - Published Saturday, 4 June 1921



Travellers at the Belton Horse Fair

Nottingham Evening Post - Published Tuesday, 9 June 1931

BELTON HORSE FAIR

WHEN PEOPLE WERE ALLOWED TO BREW AND SELL THEIR OWN BEER

OLD MAN'S REMINICENCIES

Mr. John Cufflin at the age of 82, honoured an old-time custom by going round the village of Belton, proclaiming the Horse Fair open. Belton Fair is one of the oldest in the Midlands going back many centuries. Yesterday Mr. Cufflin made his 25th consecutive tour round the village, taking an old hand bell to herald his coming. He has the wonderful record of having attended 70 Fairs at Belton. Mr. Cufflin says that Belton Fair is not to be confused with what it was half a century ago. The streets of the village used to be crowded to hear the proclamation red. 'I can remember', he said 'when many hundreds of horses were brought to Belton Fair to be sold'. Every bit of available land was taken days before, for grazing. Droves of cattle, and he states that he has seen the streets so packed with cattle, that the cottage people have had to erect fencing to protect their windows. Farmers used to attend in great numbers coming from places over 100 miles away. On the morning of Belton Fair, the people of the village used to be up by four o'clock, as by special privilege, the residents were allowed to brew and sell beer. Many of them took advantage of the privilege and to indicate they had alcoholic refreshments to sell, they used to hang a bough of a tree (*to Sport its Oak*) over the front door. By that method, the cottagers were able to make almost sufficient money to help them through several months of the year.

Mr. Cufflin says that one reason why Belton Fair is not what it used to be is that cattle markets have been opened in the district, another being the introduction of the bus system, which has done away with the need for horses.

Derby Daily Telegraph - Published Tuesday, 31 May 1932

PROCLAMATION READ BY MR. CUFFLIN FOR 26th TIME

For the 26th successive time, Mr. John Cufflin (83), read the proclamation opening the HORSE FAIR at Belton, near Castle Donington yesterday.

This fair is one of the oldest in England, but yesterday there were evident signs that it is diminishing. There was only one horse, several ponies and one donkey for sale.

At one time, hundreds of horses were sold, and big herds of cattle.

Long Eaton Advertiser - Published Friday, 8 June 1934

BELTON HORSE FAIR

The centuries old Horse Fair was held at Belton on Monday, and attracted a large number of dealers and visitors. The fair was opened by Mr. John Cufflin, who toured the village ringing a hand bell, and reading a proclamation from the Lady of the Manor, authorising the sale. Mr. Cufflin who is over 85 years of age, has opened the fair for the last 28 years. An attempt to revive some of its ancient glories, was partly successful, and there were more animals offered for sale, than at any time during the past ten years.

Spirited ponies were put through their paces on the village green. Quieter horses and ponies were harnessed and driven through the village. Trade was not very brisk during the early part of the day, but improved later.

Coalville Times - Published Friday, 24 June 1938

ANCIENT EVENTS DECLINE

The annual Horse Fair at Belton was held on Monday, when it appeared that this ancient event, one of the oldest of its kind in the Midlands has been shorn of all its old glory.

Time was, when hundreds of horses and ponies were put through their paces up and down the village green, to the frantic shouts of the dealers, for the benefit of the prospective purchasers, but the advent of the motor car has changed all this, and the fair is now one in name only.

A few dealers sat on the green on Monday morning, discussing old times, and there was only four horses on view.

The ancient proclamation declaring the fair open and laying down the conditions on behalf of the lord of the manor, was read by one of the villagers Mr. Joseph Warrington (*a Belton farmer who later became lord of the manor*), as it has been read every year for probably over a century.

Roundabouts and stalls were located in the village square for the pleasure part of the fair, and many people attended on Monday night to make merry in accordance with the old village custom.

Leicester Evening Mail - Published Tuesday, 13 June 1939

BELTON FAIR - BELTON HORSE FAIR

One of the oldest fairs in the country and at one time probably the biggest horse fair in the Midlands, was held yesterday. It was opened in the old way by the reading of an ancient proclamation by the Lord of the Manor, Mr. John Warrington, a Belton farmer, and there were about a dozen or more horses offered for sale on the village green, where, before the advent of the motor car, hundreds of animals used to be put through their paces for the benefit of prospective purchasers. Today, the fair has lost much of its old glory, though the pleasure part of the fair still proves popular. The Market - place was full of stalls, swings and roundabouts

Coalville Times - Published Friday, 28 June 1946

WHEN BELTON DOORS WERE BARRICADED

The Horse Fair Belongs to the Past

Belton horse Fair which was officially opened on Monday morning by the reading of the Proclamation by Mr. J. W. Warrington, a local farmer, who is Lord of the Manor, bears no resemblance to its former size and importance.

Time was when a pedestrian could not move on Long street on the eve and morning of the Fair because of the crowding, surging mass of horses and cattle brought from near and far.

Granted by Charter many years ago in the days when Gracedieu Nunnery flourished, Belton horse fair achieved renown throughout the countryside. Even in the days almost within living memory, when Belton had its Tollgate House and its Round House and when Belton was a much larger village than it is today, the Fair was a chaos of excitement, which attracted many hundreds of people from the neighbourhood, those interested in horse flesh, and those interested merely to swell the crowd.

The day before the Fair, Beltonians were busily engaged in barricading their doorways, gateways and windows. For, towards the evening, there began the arrival of crowds of animals, accompanied by their yelling, cursing drovers. They were encamped in the streets throughout the night and the slumber disturbances of the villagers can be better imagined than described.

In earlier years, the Fair, which began on Monday, the first after Trinity week, lasted for seven days, and was opened by the reading of the Proclamation.

Coalville Times - Published Friday, 4 June 1948

BELTON HORSE FAIR

A Centuries-old Function

Gone are the days when Belton Horse Fair was the gathering place for hundreds of enthusiastic buyers and sellers from all over the Midlands, when overnight the village was a turmoil of surging affrighted animals, marshalled by yelling drovers ; when doors and windows and passages all along Long street had to be barricaded for safety, and when home brewed ale and bread and cheese could be had for asking at the larger houses.

Rightly have Beltonians been proud of their Fair, although it could be - and often was - a nuisance to the ordinary law-abiding residents. It dated from the early days when Roesia de Verden, Abbess of Gracedieu (whose remains are now entombed in Belton Church) was instrumental in the granting of a Market and Fair.

On the Monday morning, the Fair was opened by the Lord of the Manor (or his agent) and the reading of a Proclamation with the solemity which went well with the dignity and importance of the occasion. John Cufflin and the reading of the proclamation will go down in history.

But time has brought changes. The dwindling of Belton Horse Fair has been due to the mechanical innovations which have been applied to agriculture. Tractors and cars and lorries have ousted the horse on farms, and even for road transport, that animal is fast disappearing.

This year, there were only three or four animals disposed of at the Fair - in a more peaceful and orderly manner, than obtained in the olden days, when there were, not infrequently lively scenes which added to the interest of the occasion.

The pleasure Fair, for many years held in the Market Place, was quite an incidental part of the proceedings ; patronised out of loyalty rather than a desire for merry making.

But, this side, strangely enough, has increased in popularity and for some years Belton Pleasure Fair has gradually become the centre for young bloods of neighbouring villages, who have never failed to put in an appearance to enliven the surroundings of the old May pole.

But the May pole stands no longer. Indeed, the Pleasure Fair itself has been moved from the Market-place, and for the past two years has been held on the recreation field. This year there appears to be a considerable increased number of amusements.

Coalville Times - Published Friday, 8 June 1956

BELTON HORSE FAIR

Thirty-five horses, the largest number for many years were offered for sale, on Monday, at the historic Belton horse fair.

The event was officially opened by the Lord of the Manor (Mr. J. W. Warrington)

Coalville Times - Published Friday, 9 June 1961

HORSE FAIR AT BELTON

BELTON'S centuries old Horse Fair was opened in the traditional manner on Monday morning by Mr. J. H. Warrington, who read the ancient 'Proclamation'

There was a large attendance at the opening ceremony and at the fair than in past years.