

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No.16

STOW GREEN FAIR



In July 1915 a decision was made that was to end an ancient Lincolnshire tradition: the annual Fair at Stow Green, near Threkingham, was to be held no more. In the words of a local newspaper:

'Stow Green Pleasure Fair, probably the oldest carnival in Lincoln, has ceased to exist. It . . . has been held annually for nearly seven hundred years. Normally, Stow Fair should have been held this week, but the exigencies of the war have brought about its cessation, which is to be final. At one time the fair lasted for three weeks, but in recent years it has been limited to a few days'.

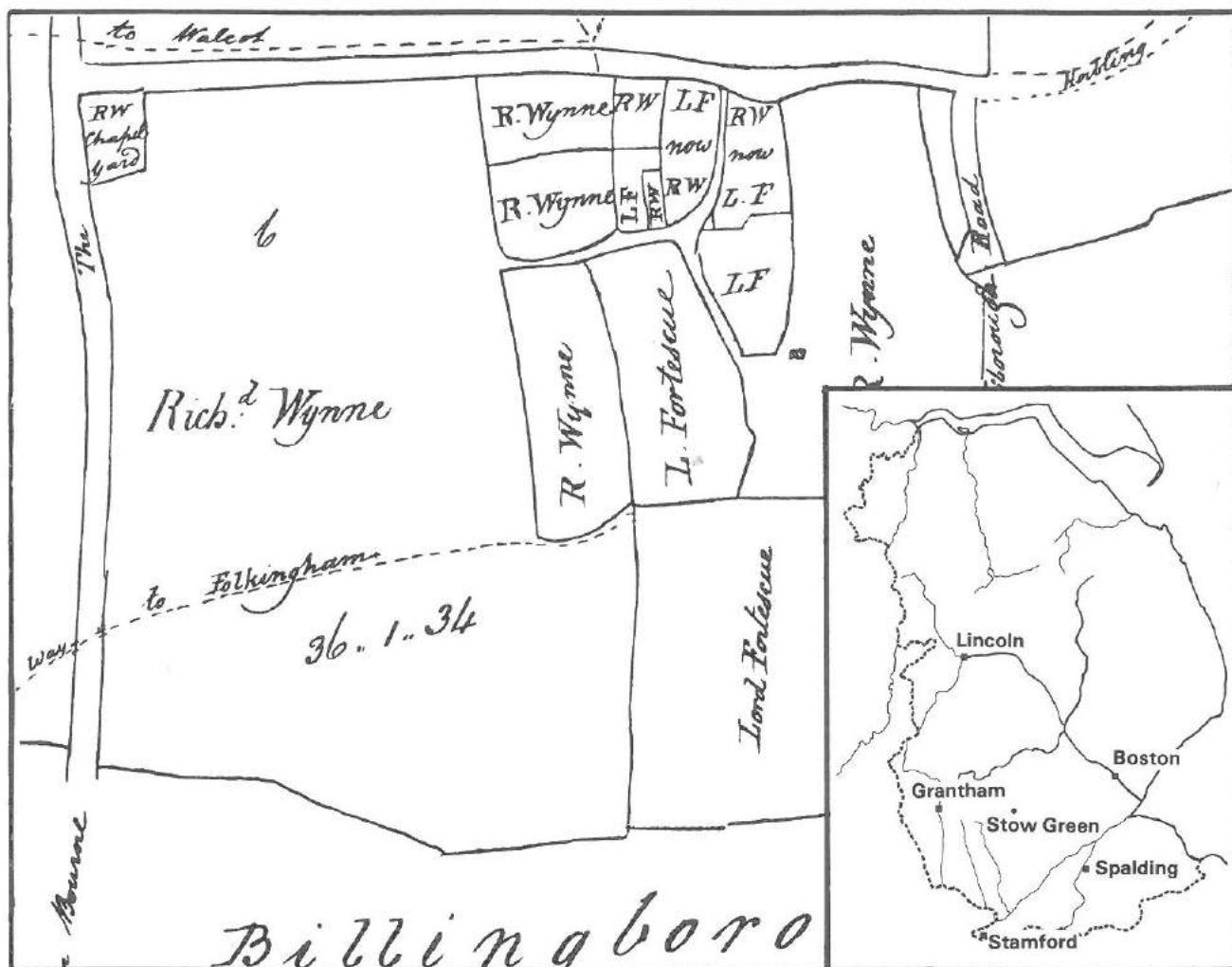
Despite this obituary Stow Green Fair was not dead: it managed to survive — a shadow of its former self — for another 20 years or more.

The Fair was in fact established in 1268, when King Henry III granted 'a yearly fair at the Manor of Stowe, Co. Lincoln, on the vigil, the feast and the morrow of St. John the Baptist (23 - 25th June) to the Prior and convent of Sempringham.'

Sempringham Priory was one of the most important monasteries in Lincolnshire and was the head of the Gilbertine Order, the only monastic order which originated in this country. It lay only 2 miles (3 km) from the site of the fair and owned a great deal of property in the area. Nothing now remains above ground of this once-great Priory which in its prime had 60 canons and 200 nuns, and which was chosen as the most secure home (or prison) for Wencilian, infant daughter of Llewellyn, the last native Prince of Wales.

Why should Sempringham Priory want a fair? Fairs were an important part of the economy in the Middle Ages. Some, like Boston or Lynn, were international affairs where French,

Flemish and German merchants met and carried out important deals, such as the buying and selling of wool, wine, and exotic goods. Others were of a specific nature, dealing only in one kind of goods such as sheep, horses etc. More localized fairs were organised for the sale of everyday goods, but usually a market would serve this function. In the Domesday Book of 1086 Threkingham appears as the possessor of a market (*forum* in Latin) and this has often been mistaken for an early mention of Stow Green Fair.



The Fair site in 1769. It was held in the large field at the top left of of the plan.

Inset map shows location.

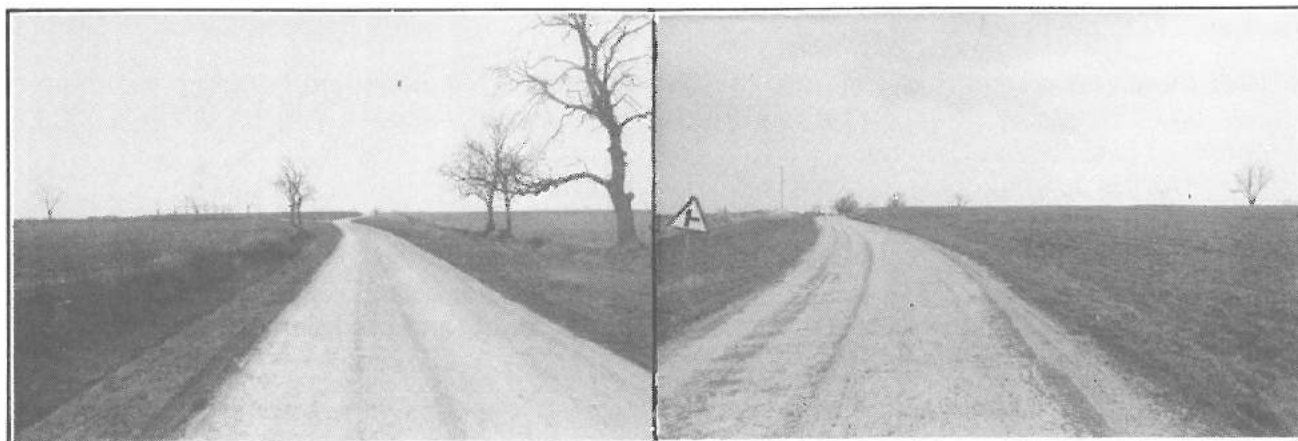
(Lincolnshire Archives Office)

Mediaeval fairs had a number of features in common. They provided a safe meeting place for buyer and seller, without the necessity for shops controlled by the very strict Guild system of the towns, and a source of entertainment for the rural population, a rare thing in their lives. Special courts were held (the courts of 'Pie-Powder' — from the French *pied-poudré* or 'dusty feet') where instant justice could be obtained in cases resulting from cheating, stealing, or violence. Most important to the landlord, such as the Master of Sempringham, who possessed the right of holding a fair was the money to be derived from it. Tolls were charged on stall-holders and a percentage of all sales went to the landlord. To make doubly sure of their profits most landlords used their powers to close all other shops and markets in the area in order to force people to use the fair. Fairs were a very profitable concern, and involved little risk or expenditure to their controllers. Stow Green Fair was worth £7 yearly to its proprietor in 1702, a considerable amount for those days, and it had probably been worth much more in earlier times.

Stow Green is now a very small hamlet of farms, and one can pass it without being aware of its existence. It has not always been like this, however. In the Middle Ages it was a village with its own chapel. Possibly the chapel was dedicated to St. John the Baptist on whose day the fair was held. The fair may have grown out of a local 'Feast' on the day of the patronal festival, which very many Lincolnshire villages used to hold. The foundations of this chapel were still visible in 1791 and its position can be seen on the survey of 1769 where 'Chapel

Yard' is marked at the south-east corner of the main crossroads. The loss of both village and chapel is repeated many times in Lincolnshire as in eastern counties generally, where the population of the countryside was formerly much greater.

The Fair was held in the large field at the south-east corner of the crossroads, though it may at times have extended along the roadside as well. Stow Green lay on the Roman road known as Mareham Lane, which was much used in the Middle Ages. One of Sempringham's granges or principal farms was at Mareham Grange which lay on the east side of the road 5 miles (8 km) further north. Just north of Threekingham is the Bridgend Causeway, a major east-west road in the Middle Ages as today, linking the rich Fenland area with the uplands to the west. In its position on the fen-edge Stow Green could have acted as an exchanging-place for the differing produce of the two areas, while its proximity to two major roads made it accessible to goods from further afield.



Stow Green from the north and from the south

It was not only the buying and selling that made the fair. An important element was that of entertainment, ranging from excessive drinking to wagers and fisticuffs, with raree shows thrown in for good measure and in 1832 we even hear of a troupe of travelling actors. One can easily imagine the wonder and amazement of the simple country people at the patter of the cheapjacks and at the rows of tawdry goods. Probably the atmosphere was similar to that captured so well by Thomas Hardy in his Wessex novels such as 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' or 'Far from the Madding Crowd'. As time went on the serious selling probably declined and the drinking and entertainment grew in importance. Most modern fairs have entirely lost the selling element and the former 'side-shows' have taken over completely.

The only shelter for the sellers was provided by booths, probably ranging from tents to market-stalls, and it is probable that the wooden skeletons of these were stored locally and hired out for the occasion, but some may have been of a more permanent nature. One of the wealthier inhabitants of Folkingham, a nearby village, who died in 1697 left property including stalls in Folkingham Market and at Stow Green Fair. In any case the booths appear to have been left standing between the Horse Fair in June and the main fair later in June or early in July. On 25th June 1791 John Byng, later Lord Torrington, paid a visit to John Cragg the antiquary at Threekingham, and wrote;

'... from his house a lane brought me to a green, call'd Stow Green, on which were many skeletons of booths, it being the spot whereon large fairs are held ...'

The dates on which the fair was held seem to have varied considerably. The original grant was for the three days 23-25th June, but by the end of the 18th century it had changed to the 3rd or 4th July, while a Horse Fair was held some time between the 7th and 15th of June. Very probably the two fairs were held on the same days of the week each year, resulting in a gradual shift of dates, in order to avoid falling on a Sunday. The *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* for the 30th May, 1728, states:

'This is to give Notice, That the Horse Faire will be on the 7th and 8th of June next; and the Head Fair the 21st and 22nd of the same Month, at Stow Green in the County of Lincoln. It is to be hoped that the season will be much better

than we have had three Years last past, if so, it will be a great encouragement to all Tradesmen, as well as other Persons concerned therein'.

It is possible that the fair once continued for the whole period. John Cragg, writing to the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1791, makes one or two interesting points.

'At Stow Green Hill . . . a great Fair is annually held for cattle and all kinds of tradesmen's goods on July 4th besides another on June 15 and 16 for horses only. These fairs, it is thought, were both as one, and formerly held the whole time of the intermediate days; and a toll is still paid for all carriages which happen to pass over the hill between the above days . . . '.

By the 19th century the fair had begun to fall into disrepute. It had always been necessary to maintain law and order at the fair; halberds were kept at Threkingham for the Constables to carry on these days and in 1776 the Constable put in a claim for 1s 4d 'spent when I set out the watch at Stow Feast'.

In 1826 there was a serious scuffle resulting in a death and a subsequent hanging. Victorian morals were inevitably offended by the drunkenness and violence. In William White's 1856 *Directory of Lincolnshire* we find;

'At the July fair many publicans erected booths on the green for the sale of beer and spirits; and the fair has usually been visited by so many gipsies, pedlars, and other disorderly persons, that the magistrates have found it necessary to send a number of constables to keep the peace, and to see that the booths are closed by eleven o'clock at night, and not opened before five in the morning'.

Perhaps it was its reputation as much as the wartime restrictions and the changes in the economics of the countryside which eventually closed the fair down.

Archaeological excavation of a fair-site has never been attempted in this country. If it were to take place at Stow Green it would no doubt reveal remains of houses from the earlier village, together with thousands of post-holes resulting from the building of booths. The finds would be of rather unusual kinds, consisting of broken fairy-lights, drinking-mugs, moulds for gingerbread, and thousands of animal bones representing cooked meats, plus of course lost small change including all the forgeries usually associated with the rapid exchange of money in crowded places: in 1937 a hoard of silver bank tokens of the early 19th century was found nearby.

It is highly desirable that the site should receive some local protection as soon as possible to preserve the fragile evidence from destruction.

SOURCES

Newspapers: *The Lincoln Rutland and Stamford Mercury*
The Nottinghamshire News

Periodicals: *The Gentlemen's Magazine* (for 1791)

Books: W. White *Lincolnshire Directory* (1856)
C. Foster *The Lincolnshire Domesday and the Lindsey Survey*. Lincoln Record Society Vol. 19 (1924)
C. Bruyn Andrews *The Torrington Diaries* vol. 2 (1935)
W. Cragg *Threkingham History* (1913)
Public Record Office: Calendar of Charter Rolls II (under 52 Henry III)

Others: Lincolnshire Archives Office: Probate Inventories
Lincolnshire Museums: Sites and Monuments Record

WRITTEN BY

Andrew White
City and County Museum
Lincoln. March 1979



Lincolnshire