

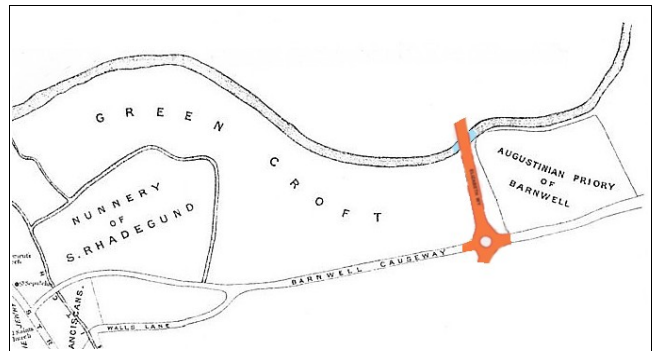
The History of Midsummer Fair

This story of Midsummer Fair begins at Castle Hill in Cambridge. In 1092 the Norman-born Baron Picot, who had been made the first sheriff of Cambridgeshire by William the Conqueror¹, dedicated a church near the castle in honour of St Giles and established six canons there with Geoffrey of Huntingdon as the first prior. The monks describe Picot as a hungry lion, a prowling wolf, a crafty fox, a filthy swine, and a dog without shame, who stuffed his belly like an insatiable beast as though the whole country were a single corpse. He was removed from office when he was found to be depriving the burgesses of the common pasture land to his own advantage².



Pagan (or Pain) Peverel then appeared on the scene. His background is a bit obscure but he was probably the third son of Ranulph Peverel who, the story goes, made his fortune by marrying a Saxon concubine of Duke William of Normandy and bringing up her sons by the duke as his own³. Pain Peverel was a soldier and acted as a standard bearer on the First Crusade⁴. On returning to England he was granted a barony by King Henry I and became the second sheriff of Cambridgeshire.

Peverel decided to move the canons from St Giles, where there was a shortage of fresh water, across the river Cam to the village of *Beornewelle*. Addison⁵ describes *Bernewelle* as a place where athletic feats were performed annually at the burial place of a religious recluse named Godilo⁶. Maitland describes it as "a piece of the green common of the town"⁷. This site had pre-Christian origins and had been used for semi-pagan festivities around the wellhead once a year on Midsummer Eve. The canons moved there in 1112⁸, adopted the Rule of St. Augustine, and the household became Barnwell Priory. The site for the Priory lay just north-east of the present day East Road/Newmarket Road roundabout (see right).



A magnificent vellum manuscript - *Liber Memorandum Ecclesie de Bernewelle*⁹ - begun in 1295 describes in great detail the foundation of the Priory and the rules governing it. Clark¹⁰ has translated this manuscript and given a full historical account and map of the area. The area where the springs were located, where the young folk had their sports and pastimes, and where the traders held their fair each year, was on the common pasture of Greencroft. There was a pond on the common associated with the western edge of the Priory precinct. It is shown to the east of Walnut Tree Avenue and named both Abbey Fish Pond and Page's Pond on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map. By 1903 the pond was replaced by a cross on the map and the name became "Abbey Fish Pond (supposed site of)". By 1927 the cross had disappeared under the houses along Walnut Tree Avenue but the name remained but as the "probable site of" (see left). The houses have since disappeared under Elizabeth Way. This is the area in Greencroft where Midsummer Fair started.



An extract (translated) from *Liber Memorandum Ecclesie de Bernewelle*¹¹ sets the scene:

"From the midst of the site there bubble up springs of fresh clear water, called by the English Bernewelle, the children's springs, because that once a year, on the Eve of St. John the Baptist, boys and lads met there, and amused themselves in the English fashion by wrestling matches and other games, and applauded each other in singing and playing on instruments of

music. Hence, by reason of the crowd of boys and girls who met and played there, a custom grew up that on the same day a crowd of buyers and sellers should meet in the same place to do business."

The majority of fairs held in England trace their ancestry back to charters and privileges granted in the Medieval period. In the 13th century the creation of fairs by royal charter was widespread with the Crown making every attempt to create new fairs and to bring existing ones under their jurisdiction. Fines and stall holders' fees made a charter a valuable possession. Over fifteen hundred charters were issued in that period¹². One of these was for Midsummer Fair.

Midsummer Fair was granted to the prior and canons of Barnwell by King John in 1211. By the charter, he allowed the Fair to be held over 4 days from the feast of Saint Etheldred (the day before mid summer)¹³:

"Dea et Ecclesiæ Beati Egidii des Bernewell et Priori et Canonicis Deo seruientibus, quod ipsi et successores eorum habeant in perpetuum unam feriam apud Bernewell singulis annis per quatuor dies duraturam videlicet, in vigilia et in die sanctæ Etheldredæ virginis in æstate et per dies duos proximos sequentes".



For the next 300 years the Fair belonged to the Priory. Ownership of Midsummer Fair enabled the Priory to take advantage, financially and socially, of the midsummer celebrations under a respectable religious veneer. Henry III confirmed the grant by Letters Patent in 1229¹⁴.

Disputes then arose between the town and the Priory over money. An agreement was reached in 1232: the town would receive compensation (half a mark annually) for an event held on common pasture land from which the Priory drew profit to the possible detriment of the common users¹⁵. About 1294, the University claimed jurisdiction over the Fair but the Bishop of Ely refuted this claim¹⁶. In the same year, the mayor and prior fell out over the ownership of goods left at the fair by a felon¹⁷ which led to a sealed "Composition between the Prior and Cannons of Bernewell and the Burgesses of Cambridge touching the Fair"¹⁸. In 1299 the then prior of Barnwell was summoned before the Justices to show by what title he held a fair. He produced the charter granted by Henry III which had been given to the Priory by Pain Peverell and the case was dismissed¹⁹. In 1394 King Richard II received notice from the prior that commoners and students had caused nuisance at the Fair. As a result, the sheriff was instructed to make a proclamation and arrest delinquents²⁰. Richard II also extended the duration of the Fair to 14 days²¹.

Control of Midsummer Fair gradually shifted from direct management by the Priory to that of the town. In 1483 Richard III granted a charter to the prior of Barnwell respecting the Fair at that place²². In 1496 and 1498 the Priory leased the Fair, which still lasted for 14 days²³, to the town mayor and bailiffs²⁴. In 1505, after great disputes between the Corporation and the prior, a composition gave the Corporation a perpetual right to Midsummer Fair, the Corporation paying 4 marks annually²⁵. In 1506 there were again disputes between the University and the Priory regarding the privileges of the former²⁶. One of the privileges the University proctors claimed was the right to search the Fair for beggars, vagabonds and lewd women; the council members hotly disputed these rights. In 1516 an Award was made for the adjustment of various disputes between the prior and the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses²⁷. Following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538, disputes between the Priory and town ceased to exist and the town took full control of the Fair.

As already stated, we know that the Fair was originally held near the "springs of fresh clear water, called by the English Barnewelle"²⁸. And it must have been held on town land because the Priory was repeatedly asked to pay for its use. This supports the view that the Fair was held on the town's common pasture of Green Croft west of the Priory. The Fair probably remained in this location into the 18th century. Records show that goods were still brought to the Fair by river and unloaded onto the "Greencrofte or Midsomer greene" riverbank²⁹.

Corporation minutes for 29 May 1739 state³⁰:

"Agreed and ordered that the Builders of that part of Midsummer Fair usually built on Midsummer Green shall for the time to come hereafter build the Booths on that part of the same Green on this side of the Spring and upon no other part of the said Green that being the most commodious place, upon pain of forfeiting to the mayor, bailiffs and burgesses of the Corporation five shillings per foot for every Booth built contrary to this Order and that Builders do pay the bailiffs of this Corporation for their use four pence per foot in length of such Booths".

By this time the pasture land was known as Midsummer Green rather than Green Croft (or Greencroft). A little later the same land became known as Midsummer Common.

An Act of 1807 for the inclosure of land in the parish of St. Andrew the Less³¹ and the Award of 1811³² changed the geography of Midsummer Common. The land from what is now Brunswick Walk to Parsonage Street was allotted to St. Peter's College (now Peterhouse College). The next two plots were allotted to James Burleigh. The last two plots up to what is now Walnut Tree Avenue were awarded to Jesus College. The second of these was previously known as Woolpack Close and held 5 properties fronting Newmarket Road which were also in the possession of Jesus College but leased to tenants. Sun Street (now Maids Causeway), part of Jesus Lane, the ditch and wall around Jesus College, and Park Parade completed the boundary around the Common. The Act preserved the rights of Midsummer and Stourbridge Fairs³³.

Once the railway came to Cambridge in 1845 it was no longer necessary to land goods from the river and so the Fair moved from the narrow eastern part of the common westwards onto the main body of Midsummer Common. Nevertheless the Ordnance Survey map of 1889³⁴ still shows a wharf on the river Cam where goods were previously unloaded.

More recent legislation has reinforced the Council's ownership and focussed on the duration and location of the Fair. The *Cambridge Corporation Act 1850*³⁵ reduced the Fair back to 4 days, saying that "The Fair of Barnwell commonly called the Midsummer Fair shall commence on the 22nd June and continue for 3 days (exclusive of Sunday)".

The *Cambridge University and Corporation Act 1894*³⁶ empowered the Council to "specify and define the common or open space within the borough on which the Midsummer and Stourbridge Fairs ... shall be held". In 1931 the Council decided to move Midsummer Fair to Stourbridge Common. The showmen refused this location and rented Cambridge United Football Ground instead. However, to preserve the charter, the Fair was proclaimed on Stourbridge Common but with only 1 stall - a nougat vendor. The Fair was back on Midsummer Common again in 1932!

The *Cambridge City Council Act 1985*³⁷ renewed this location flexibility in stating that "The Council may from time to time specify and define the common or open space within the city on which the Midsummer Fair or some part thereof shall be held" (Stourbridge Fair no longer existed). This Act³⁸ also extended the Fair to 5 days:

"The fair of Barnwell commonly known as the Midsummer Fair shall commence at 2.30 o'clock in the afternoon (or such earlier hour as may be proclaimed by the mayor of the city) on the third Wednesday in June, or, if the third Wednesday falls on 15th, 16th or 17th June, on the fourth Wednesday in June and shall continue for the four days (exclusive of Sunday) next following the day of commencement and no longer."

In the year 2000 the Sunday exclusion was removed and the Fair was extended to 6 days in total³⁹.

Although the Fair has been going for over 800 years, that is not to say that it has been held every year in that period. For example, the Fair ceased to function during the war years 1939-42 but resumed in 1943⁴⁰.

The earlier extract from *Liber Memorandorum Ecclesie de Bernewelle*⁴¹ said that "a crowd of buyers and sellers" met at the fair from the earliest days. Like other fairs in the country, it then became a centre for trade. As early as 1287 it was reported that wood for the Castle tower was purchased from the Fair and, in 1288, iron and steel was bought at the Fair for building the Castle prison and locks and keys were purchased for 4s 10d⁴². In 1324 it was reported that the carpenters of Ely Cathedral bought timber from the Fair⁴³. By the end of the 14th century the Fair had grown to become one of the most important in the country (although not in the same league as the nearby and internationally famous Stourbridge Fair). In addition to serious trade, the Fair became a place for the hiring of labourers and servants. Some of these were absenting themselves from other employment. In 1295 three men were fined 3d a day for having been away from work for 3 days whilst enjoying themselves at the Fair⁴⁴.

In the 18th century it was commonly known as the Pot Fair due to the large quantities of china and earthenware which were on sale there to the housewives of Cambridge⁴⁵. Henry William Bunbury (1756-1811) was a graduate of Cambridge and one of the most popular caricaturists of his time. He produced many

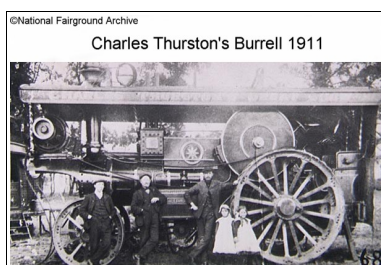


satirical illustrations of social life showing wit and insight. In 1777 the Pot Fair caught his fancy (see left). The Pot Fair is still held today as part of the main Midsummer Fair but it is restricted to a single day⁴⁶ (see right).



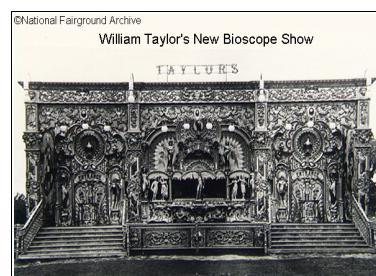
By the mid 19th century fairs were in decline because of the changing patterns of commerce - by this time trade took place mainly through shops. Some trade persisted, and still does. The buying and selling of horses remained important till the end of the 19th century⁴⁷ - June 24th was the date for horse sales⁴⁸. Midsummer Fair contracted again in 1850 but remained an important part of the summer events in the town and gradually the entertainments took over from the trading.

In addition to serious trade, Midsummer Fair has long had an entertainment element. Wrestling, singing and music was always present. In 1714 the Fair included Punch, a giant, a dwarf, wild beasts, dancing dogs, three legged cats and a female rope dancer. The introduction of steam to the Fair in 1870 enabled the rides to become more exciting and adventurous. The steam engines themselves became a notable feature of the Fair as they became grander in design and function. An old Henry Thurston engine turned up to the 2019 Fair.

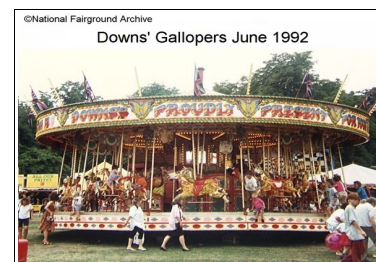
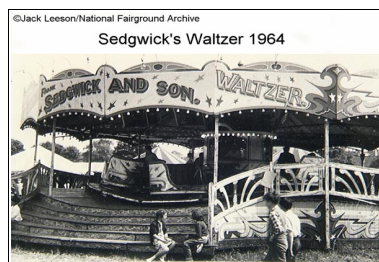
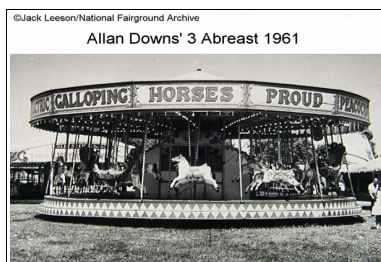


Freak shows, moving pictures, wrestling and boxing were all part of the amusements according to the reports of the times⁴⁹. A newspaper description in 1901 commented on the level of "the stir, the noise and the mirth making" and these are things that have not changed⁵⁰. (However, in 1954 the Council decided to prohibit "drinking booths" as it was considered they were the cause of excessive drinking on the fairground.)

Charles Thurston's No 1 show first appeared in Cambridge in 1902. It was of the two-wagon front type with a rather small but very sweet toned Gavi organ and was attached to a Burrell engine. Like all shows at this time, there was no cover over the front stage⁵¹. According to reports it was "England's Greatest Show". Taylor's Show of the same time had a projector, organ and light engine. Reports said that "the lovely Marenghi organ was fitted with hundreds of coloured electric lights which changed with the music of the two figures playing the drum".



It is hard to say when riding machines first came to Midsummer Fair. It is known that such machines existed in this country about 1800, so it can be presumed that some of them found their way to Cambridge⁵². Before 1906 Henry Thurston & Sons brought his 4 abreast Gallopers to Cambridge. Steam-driven switchbacks were brought by John Barker in 1907 and by Charles Abbott in 1911 and 1919⁵³. Charles Thurston brought The Golden Dragon Scene to the Fair in 1920⁵⁴. It was claimed that Charles Thurston's Golden Dragon Scene was the most beautiful machine that travelled this country⁵⁵.



The Merry-go-Round magazine⁵⁶ describes the Fair in the war year 1941:

"The firm of Chas Thurston and Sons have brought to Cambridge nearly every kind of ride that ever existed, including flying pigs, waltzing balloons, bicycles, gallopers, cakewalk, tower slip, joy wheel, steam motors and dragons, chair-o-planes, electric dragons, peacock scenic, swirl, Noah's Ark, dodgems, waltzer and electric speedway."

Two years later they introduced "Bioscope Shows" with moving pictures⁵⁷.

In 1905 Midsummer Fair was described as a "Bacchanalian orgy" as people were behaving "like maniacs". There were 14 tents supplying intoxicating liquors and the behaviour in the tents was "indescribable". Five perambulators were seen standing unattended outside one tent.

Today the Fair attracts large numbers of people each June to its various rides, stalls and sideshows.



The mayor and other members of the Council still continue the tradition of parading and proclaiming the Fair open and scattering pennies to the crowd. Before Health and Safety intervened, the pennies were thrown into the air.



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