

SMITHFIELD BEFORE THE LONDON CENTRAL MARKETS

In the late twelfth century, probably about 1175, a certain William Fitz Stephen, who had been a clerk in the household of Thomas Becket and was also the great archbishop's biographer, wrote a very famous *Description of London*. The original manuscript is not extant but is known from several later versions of the text which happily survive. One of these later copies is here in Guildhall, in the City's fine illuminated early fourteenth century customal, the *Liber Custumarum*, where William Fitz Stephen's Description has been entered along with many other documents and memoranda relating to the City.

Fitz Stephen, of course, was an educated man. He wrote in the literary Latin of his time, in a highly rhetorical style. He was also a Londoner, as indeed was Becket himself, and very proud of his native City. The result is an account which, in modern translation at least, sounds highly grandiloquent. Here, for example, is the opening of the *Description**.

'Amid the noble cities of the world, the City of London, throne of the English kingdom, is one which has spread its fame far and wide, its wealth and merchandise to great distances, raised its head on high. It is blessed by a wholesome climate, blessed too in Christ's religion, in the strength of its fortifications, in the nature of its site, the repute of its citizens, the honour of its matrons; happy in its sports, prolific in noble men.'

But Fitz Stephen was a good observer with a keen eye for detail and, despite a degree of loyal exaggeration and a certain admixture of mythology, his description presents us with a vivid, if slightly rosy, picture of late twelfth century London and indeed of some of its surroundings as well: its fortifications, its churches, its schools, the great Tower to the east, the ships with luxury goods from far distant parts which came to its wharves, its wine cellars, its public cookshop, the great marsh which we now call Moorfields lying to the north of the walls and the many sports enjoyed by its youth.

He also — and by now you will have guessed why I have begun this talk with Fitz Stephen's Description — tells us something of Smithfield and of the great horse and cattle markets which were held there.

'In the suburb immediately outside one of the gates there is a smooth field, both in fact and name. On every sixth day of the week, unless it be a major feast day on which solemn rites are prescribed, there is a much frequented show of fine horses for sale'.

*Acknowledgement is made for the translation of the following passage to London 800-1216: the shaping of a City by Christopher Brooke and Gillian Keir (1975), p.113, and for that of subsequent passages to the translation of the 'Description' by H.E. Butler in Norman London: an essay by F.M. Stenton (1934).

The show was attended not only by the citizens themselves but by members of the nobility and knights who were in the city, all of them coming at least to look if not to buy. Fitz Stephen speaks of the ambling palfreys, their skins full of juice, their coats aglisten, the horses that best befit Esquires, moving more roughly yet nimbly, the younger colts of high breeding, unbroken and high stepping with elastic tread, and the costly destriers of graceful form and goodly stature. In addition to the horse sale, there were also horse races of which he gives a vivid account.

Horse shows and horse racing have always attracted men of all ranks but more important for the future history of Smithfield was the other, more humdrum, cattle market for cows, sheep, pigs, work horses and agricultural instruments. 'In another place apart stand the wares of the country folk; instruments of agriculture, long flanked swine, cows with swollen udders, and woolly flocks . . .' There were also mares 'fit for ploughs, sledges and two horsed carts', some in foal and others accompanied by young foals. It is quite clear from Fitz Stephen's account that he is describing well established practices, not new happenings, and it is probable that the horse and cattle fairs date from much earlier in the century.

Before Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677 there is no accurate delineation of Smithfield, or West Smithfield as it was often called to distinguish it from East Smithfield at the other end of the City. Before Ogilby and Morgan such maps as we have, and none is earlier than the sixteenth century, are of the nature of bird's eye views. Nevertheless these maps, and also Stow's verbal description given in the 1603 edition of his Survey, accord well enough with Ogilby and Morgan, and one may postulate that this open space was much the same in the Middle Ages. As shown on Ogilby and Morgan it is roughly lozenge shaped with the long axis running north-south and the same shape can clearly be distinguished on the modern map and on the ground, save that the northern part is now lost under the buildings of the London Central Markets.

It seems fairly clear from scattered references in the archives that the City regarded the field of West Smithfield, as it did other open spaces and wastes, as part of the common soil. It claimed pickage, i.e., a toll for breaking the ground for the setting up of stalls, and in the sixteenth century it was taking a strong line against encroachment by building. Even the Master of St. Bartholomew's Hospital was told in 1510 that he must take a lease of the common ground of the City on which he had built a new gatehouse and porch or else demolish the buildings. The City's immemorial title to the market was confirmed by charters of Charles I and Charles II.

How long the great horse sale described by Fitz Stephen continued is uncertain. Stow tells us that the Smithfield pond of his day, which lay on the western side of the market space, had formerly been known as Horse pool and was once a great sheet of water where men watered their horses. This seems

clearly a folk memory of the horse sale but there seem to be no references to it in the archives of the later Middle Ages. There was a horse market of a kind at Smithfield in later centuries but this appears to have been a degenerate affair, being described in 1828, when its abolition was urged, as a very great nuisance, 'many bad characters being in the habit of congregating and stolen horses being frequently offered for sale there'.

The future was to lie with the cattle market. The 'Customs of Smithfield' to be found entered in John Carpenter's *Liber Albus*, compiled by 1419 and containing copies of earlier documents, specify the tolls payable for oxen, cows, sheep or swine sold, for example one penny for a full grown cow or ox and the same amount for every dozen sheep. This great market for live cattle was indeed to continue for some six and three quarter centuries after Fitz Stephen but, before turning to its later history, let us pause just for a moment to note certain other events which have taken place in Smithfield besides the markets.

West Smithfield was the scene of one of the most famous incidents in the City's history, the death in 1381 during the Peasants' Revolt of the rebel leader, Wat Tyler, at the hands of the mayor, William Walworth. The rebels had gathered at Smithfield on the evening of 15th August and the young king, Richard II, with Walworth in his train, rode forth to talk to them. The dagger with which this deed was committed is sometimes, and quite erroneously, said to be depicted in the first quarter of the City's arms, whereas as everyone here knows, the arms show the sword of St. Paul. Smithfield has other associations with death. From the twelfth to the sixteenth century it was on occasion a place of execution. It was, of course, a large open space capable of holding a great assembly of people to witness such a spectacle. Only a few years after Fitz Stephen, one William Fitz Osbert, known as Longbeard, the leader of a popular uprising, was executed here in 1196 together with some of his associates. A memorial on the wall of the Hospital commemorates the death nearby in 1305 of William Wallace, the Scots' leader, captured by Edward I on one of his expeditions to the north, brought to trial at Westminster Hall, and afterwards hung, drawn and quartered at Smithfield. But the worst period of all was the sixteenth century when in the name of religion many men and women, both Catholic and Protestant, were burnt at the stake.

Smithfield was also the home of Bartholomew Fair, an annual fair of equal antiquity with the horse and cattle markets. Originally a genuine trade fair it degenerated in the 18th and 19th centuries into a nuisance, attracting many undesirable characters, and was to come to an end in the mid 19th century at about the same time as the cattle market.

But there is much more to tell of the cattle market before we reach that point. There is no evidence of market buildings in West Smithfield i.e., in the central open space, but from about the mid sixteenth century, possibly earlier, there

were sheep pens with lofts over them lying to the west of the field at its northern end. The pens can be seen clearly on Ogilby and Morgan's map of 1677, less clearly on earlier maps giving a bird's eye view where the roofs of the lofts cannot easily be distinguished from other buildings. They lay north of Cow Lane (which was on a line with Long Lane on the opposite side) extending to Chick Lane and the site is now part of the London Central Markets. In 1567 these sheep pens were paved at the City's charge, with butchers and drovers making a contribution, in order that the cattle owners and buyers might 'walk there handsomely'. The City was accustomed to lease out the sheep pens and the lofts. The rent was £20 per annum in 1584 and £30 per annum in 1601. In 1682 the sheep pens and some other premises were held on lease by the inhabitants of the parish of St. Sepulchre, as trustees for the poor of the parish, at an annual rent of £103.6s.8d. Among the covenants St. Sepulchre's undertook to keep clean not only the demised premises but the whole ground and soil of West Smithfield, and to keep the pavements and rails in West Smithfield as well as in the leased premises in good repair.

The number of animals brought to Smithfield was very high. We have figures only in the later period and, rounding these figures to the nearest thousand, there were, for example, in the year 1790 104,000 cattle and 750,000 sheep, in 1810 132,000 cattle and 963,000 sheep, and in 1821 142,000 cattle and 1,107,000 sheep. These animals were, of course, driven to market on the hoof, often walking very long distances and taking many days on the journey. Great numbers of them would be collected together in enclosures called lairs or layers at certain places outside the City, immediately prior to being driven through the streets to Smithfield. For example, those coming from the north and north west came chiefly to layers in Islington, those from East Anglia to Stratford and Mile End.

Such long journeys did little to improve the quality of the meat. In the 18th century the cattle market at Smithfield was held twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays. There were not infrequent petitions for the changing of the Market days, particularly from Friday to Thursday. One such petition in 1796 pointed out that the busiest day for the sale of meat was Saturday. Beasts purchased at the Friday market had therefore to be killed quickly while they were still hot and unrested from their journeys, and this led to a very quick deterioration in the meat, especially in summer. It also led to butchers trying to buy up cattle and sheep on Thursday evenings while they were still at the layers on the outskirts, which made both for enhanced prices and, since these beasts never reached the market, for a loss of tolls at Smithfield. It was also pointed out that the animals had to be kept alive after the Monday's market for several days 'during which time they are in a state of continual pining and fretting, so that in addition to the expence of fodder they are found on being slaughtered to have lost weight'. Indeed the cruelty to animals occasioned by a great live cattle market would be considered horrific by modern standards and there are dreadful tales of cattle damaging each other with their horns by being tied or

penned so closely. Nothing, incidentally, was done about this particular petition for alteration in the market days, counsel's opinion at the time being that it could not be done without Parliamentary authority. In 1830 the Corporation did move the Friday market to Thursday, by Act of Common Council of 8 April, and such is the perversity of man that they soon received a petition to move it back again.

It was, of course, inevitable that the driving of such large numbers of beasts through the streets of the City and the surrounding part of London could not be done without causing great nuisance. The filth, the noise, the congestion, the obstruction to traffic are obvious. Both Parliament and City were concerned. An Act of Parliament was passed in 1776 "to prevent the Mischiefs that arise from driving Cattle, within the Cities of London and Westminster, and Liberties thereof and the Bills of Mortality", and the following year the City proposed, among other measures, the registration of drovers and the wearing by drovers of badges with their names and numbers. Regulations concerning the driving of cattle and the routes they should take were issued with some frequency by the City authorities.

Nevertheless the nuisance persisted and indeed, as both the numbers of beasts coming to market and other traffic in the streets increased, it was intensified. The market itself, where some thousands of animals were kept at one time, was also a very considerable nuisance. In 1850 the market was said to hold 30,000 sheep, 500 calves, 1,000 pigs and 4,000 cattle. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, therefore, we find re-iterated and growing demands for the market's improvement or removal. There was, as always on these occasions, a conflict of interests. Petitions for removal came largely from the inhabitants; those whose livelihood was bound up in the market, the butchers, the graziers and the salesmen, tended to favour improvement and enlargement. The City itself thought the latter was the best course. It was, of course, very jealous of its ancient market rights and feared for their diminution should the market be removed, as well as loss of income. And it was also true that despite all its ills the Smithfield cattle market was a major source of food supply for the population of the City and surrounding districts. And so during the first half of the 19th century we find the City buying up pieces of property, particularly on the north, for the enlargement and improvement of the market. The result can be seen on a plan of 1850 showing an enormous extension of the pens, particularly for sheep, to the north of Long Lane.

Nevertheless the problem would not go away, and bills were introduced into Parliament and Select Committees of the House of Commons appointed relative to the vexed question of Smithfield cattle market. One such Select Committee which reported in 1828 considered three options (a) removal of the market (b) enlargement of the market, together with measures to stop the thoroughfare through the market on market days (this was the solution the Select Committee

itself favoured) and (c) to leave Smithfield as it was but to establish one or more subsidiary markets outside the City. Having considered this, the Corporation expressed itself ready to purchase property and enlarge and improve the market at an estimated cost of £60,000 (which would be raised by additional tolls on cattle etc.) and itself promoted a Bill in Parliament to this end. This Bill was negatived and it was reported that all measures for altering and improving the market by means of Parliamentary enactments must necessarily for the present be abandoned. It was after this that the City made the alteration in the market day from Friday to Thursday, already referred to, by means of an Act of Common Council.

A few years later there was, from the City's point of view, an alarming development. On 19 September 1833 Mr. Remembrancer informed the Court of an impending Bill to establish a new cattle market in or near Lower Road, Islington. Such a proposal, of course, might materially affect the City's rights in respect of markets. The Corporation received a number of petitions against the proposal, the petitioners instancing recent improvements in Smithfield Market, such as the prohibition on the passing of carts and carriages through the market during market hours (one beneficial effect of which was a lessening of cruelty to the cattle) and better policing. The Corporation decided to oppose the Islington Market Bill and at the same time to inform the Committee of the House of Commons that it was willing to acquiesce in any eligible plan for the enlargement of the Market. It was, in fact, willing to spend some £71,000 to this end.

This particular Islington Market Bill failed in the summer of 1834 but the proposal was revived in the next Session. Hitherto matters concerning the City markets had been the responsibility of the City Lands Committee but as from January 1835 a standing Markets Committee was established which at once took measures to oppose the Islington Bill and to complete several purchases of property for enlargement of Smithfield. Nevertheless on 3 November 1835, Common Council was informed that the Islington Market Bill had passed into law. The market so established was a private one belonging to a certain John Perkins of Betchingley, Surrey. The Corporation was much relieved that a further bill the next year to enlarge the powers of the Islington Market Act, 1835, and which contained provisions for the abolition of Smithfield, was lost. In the three years 1834-36 the Corporation had spent £6,997.15s.3d. on opposing bills respecting Islington Market.

Matters hotted up again in the 1840s. Several Bills were introduced into Parliament on various matters affecting Smithfield. All failed but they kept the market in the forefront of the Corporation's concerns. Two further Select Committees of the House of Commons were appointed in 1847 and 1849. Meantime the Corporation was still acquiring properties towards enlargement. On 10 October 1849 a Special Ward Committee was appointed to consider the question of the need of enlargement of Smithfield, Newgate (which was a

dead meat market) and Leadenhall Markets. This Committee, the Markets Improvement Committee, as it became known, was to remain in being until 1874. It must surely have been one of the busiest of the 19th century committees, so many of the City markets being substantially rebuilt or enlarged during this period. Responsibility for administration of the markets remained with the Markets Committee.

One of the earliest of the new Committee's tasks was to attend before a Royal Commission relative to Smithfield. The Committee continued to express the desirability of the market remaining in the locality and laid before the Commissioners a plan, subject to the approval of Common Council, not for further enlargements but for a large enclosed market lying to the north west. The plan for this market had been prepared by the then City Architect, James Bunstone Bunning, whose architectural and other schemes were always devised in the grand manner. The enclosed market, which would be surrounded by a road linking with the principal thoroughfares, would comprise both a live cattle market and a dead meat market, while to the north provision was made for slaughterhouses. These proposals would cost £467,000 which at 1850 prices was no small sum. Furthermore, freeing of part of the old site of the market would enable Baths and Washhouses and some Lodging Houses for the Poor to be erected there and these are indicated on the plan.

The Commissioners were unmoved, a majority report favouring removal of the Market, although it was hoped that any new market might be conducted and supervised by the Corporation. The owners of the Islington Market in Lower Road, who were doing very badly, offered in terms of the greatest nobility and concern for the public good, to sell their site to the Corporation. But the Corporation was also stubborn. In 1851 the Smithfield Enlargement Bill, sponsored by the Corporation, and the Smithfield Removal Bill were both before Parliament. The former failed, the latter passed into law on 1 August 1851.

The Act provided for the appointment of Commissioners who would act as the Market Authority with full powers to construct and run the market unless the Corporation signified within six months from the passing of the Act its willingness to take it on. The Corporation's long struggle was over. At the Court of Common Council on 27 January 1852 a signification to carry the act into effect was sealed. Matters then moved swiftly. In May 1852 an extensive site of about 72 acres, allowing space for future development, at Copenhagen Fields in Islington, between Maiden Lane and the Caledonian Road, was agreed. The raising of monies on the security of the City's revenue was put in hand, plans and estimates for the building, also by Bunning, were agreed in July 1853, and byelaws for the regulation of the new market were sealed in May 1855. Smithfield Market was closed on 11 June 1855 and the new Metropolitan Cattle Market at Copenhagen Fields was opened by the Prince Consort two days later. The cost, including purchase of the site, was about £440,000.

It was to remain as a cattle market run by the Corporation until 1963 when the site was sold to the London County Council for housing purposes.

The cattle market at Smithfield had been in existence for about 700 years. On 30 July 1855 the Markets Improvement Committee sought authority to confer with the Government about the site of Smithfield. The decisions they came to and the establishment of the London Central Markets I must leave to the writer of another paper.