

## SMITHFIELD: The In-between Years

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26 October 2009

President, Fellow Historians,

I have pitched these years to lie between 1837 and 1868. In its very early years Smithfield was a peaceful ordered market place as can be seen in the charming view of the 'Metropolitan Cattle Market' by William Davis in the Guildhall Art Gallery. It lay outside the walls of the City but within the 'bar' and thus came under the control of the Corporation which gained a substantial annual income from it. But success led to it becoming the bedlam described so vividly in Chapter 21 of 'Oliver Twist' written by Charles Dickens in 1837. My aim is to try and sketch out the story from that date up to the opening of the Central Meat Market in 1868. This did not happen without some ups and downs, false starts and disputes along the way and the transition took thirty years or so.

The end of the Napoleonic wars had produced boom times for this country. Between 1837 and 1868 the population of London grew by some 70% to reach 3.5 million. But this rate of growth was more than paralleled by the growth of trade at Smithfield. Over the same period the cattle trade increased by some 95% to 277,000 head annually. Taken together with sheep and pigs this resulted in some 5000 animals on the hoof in the market each day. And all this was taking place without any expansion of the area of the market increase.

To say the least of it there was overcrowding; the market was pushing out into the neighbouring lanes and alleys and droving was a menace in all the streets around with cattle coming in from the north and sheep from the south over London Bridge. Despite the efforts of the Corporation, it became a scene of chaos, got a very bad reputation for criminality and bad behaviour and began to be perceived as nuisance. However the Corporation were not quite so concerned with the nuisance aspect of the market as its income came from a levy on each beast, at that time producing an annual income of over £1M, at today's values; thus the expansion of market trade had financial benefits whatever the complaints from the locals. But the insanitary conditions arising from slurry everywhere and waste from abattoirs, clustered along the eastern side, polluting the River Fleet, were becoming intolerable. Then there was the threat emerging from the new railway stations such as Euston 1838 and Kings Cross 1851 seeking to establish alternative markets at these railheads rather than driving beasts to Smithfield. So from around 1837 pressure was growing to do something about it.

Something had to be done; complaints were being voiced from all sides.

Letter in 'The Times', 1837, signed 'Clericus and Lover of Humanity':

*"Few I am sure comparatively speaking are aware to what extent animals suffer at the hands of London drovers since few visit Smithfield at the early hour in which the market is held. If they did, they would see what would shock the feelings of even one having little sense of humanity. The diabolical manner (for there is no other word sufficiently strong) in which the cattle are hurried along, beaten about the head and their hocks with thick heavy sticks, forced by the same means to stand in circles –their heads closely meeting. The sufferings of the poor animals may in some degree be imagined.*

*And why are such barbarities going on week after week in the heart of a city calling itself Christian. Are such things hateful in the sight of God not to be put to an end? It is incumbent on those who have the power to endeavour to cause cessation of such things so heart sickening.*

*Let the market be removed and space found in the suburbs much larger be used, instead of the present confined market which would I firmly believe, in great degree, diminish the cruelties inflicted on the cattle by their ruffian drovers. Those who will assist in this merciful work will not go without their reward. 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy'".*

Letter in the Morning Chronicle, 1839, signed 'A Citizen':

*"The subject on which I now address you is of vital importance to the community at large. From an early hour this morning to a late hour in the evening these nuisances continue, not merely field preaching, but all the riot and disorder of a public meeting. Owenites, disciples of Tom Paine and the notorious Joanna Southgate, catholics and almost all other sects appoint this place as a resort for anti-religious controversy and dispute: in fact the language and conduct of those assembled becomes truly riotous and disgusting.*

*On a late occasion a scene of a most revolting nature presented itself. A man bending under the weight of age and in a strong state of inebriation, was addressing a vast assemblage of persons, who were listening with smiles of satisfaction and shouts of applause.*

*It has become a rich harvest for the swell mob who assemble in clusters on the spot and plunder the bystanders of their property. If not shortly put a stop to by the city authorities it will soon become so great an evil that it will not be easily quelled."*

The pages of 'The Times' and the 'Morning Chronicle' at this time abound with letters in a similar vein; they tended to be very long and detailed letters and presented a very wide range of views on the subject. But two camps were emerging; one to enlarge and re-order the market on its present, or somewhat expanded, site and the other to move it out to an entirely new site. Both had their strong advocates. The idea of moving the market had been first mooted way back in the mid eighteenth century but without gaining any strong support. In 1835 an entrepreneur actually took the plunge and set up a rival cattle market at Islington; it encountered vigorous opposition from the Corporation, leading to its collapse by 1836.

However support for moving the market was growing although others continued to argue that it was essential to retain the market in its present location with one correspondent making a quite extraordinary case to support the latter view.

Letter 'The Times' 1837

*"Smithfield for Ever! Long Live the Common Council*

*The Common Council have again stood forward nobly in defence of their own congenial Smithfield. They have treated with a becoming and characteristic disdain, the petitioners of the petitions who have again presumed to petition for some abatement of the sanguinary and stercoraceous glories their ancient Smithfield---some mollification of that slaughter loving giant who wieldeth night and day the pole-axe and the knife in the very centre of civilized and intellectual London: who causeth its conduits to be ruddy with the blood of bullocks and sheep; and ever changeth the complexion of Old Father Thames himself—'making the brown red'-as the immortal Bard of Avon somewhere observed.*

*What would petitioners have? What do they want? Or in the expressive and characteristic query of one of the Common Council---- 'What am they up to?'*

*As Alderman Lucas very observantly remarked—Is there one of these petitioners who would object to put his knife into a smoking sirloin?’ Certainly not; and I have no patience with their maudlin humanity—an humanity that throws them into hysterics at the sight of an honest butcher in a red night cap knocking down a bullock!’*

*That is the opinion of Alderman Lucas; though he is a lighter man than many we could name, there is no man whose opinion ought to have more weight in all matters relating to the beauties of butchery; nor can the Corporation of London boast of a greater ornament than the worthy and carnivorous Alderman---by reason of that magnificent corporation of his own which he buttoneth up so bravely in buff kerseymere every morning and which precedeth him so dilligently wherever he goeth. May his shadow never be less; and may his body tailor look well to his waistcoat buttons!*

*Smithfield aboundeth in stercoraceous squash: and this is another of its virtues—another reason why the great and enlightened Corporation of the first and finest city in the world should stick close by it. For what is stercoraceous squash? What is it but a valuable commodity, producing, as was observed by his worthy worship, much money; and though some carping maudlinists may say such money is peculiarly ‘filthy lucre’, yet as the fine old Roman emperor said ‘it has much the same smell as other money’.*

*And shall the Corporation of London let money slip through its fine fat fingers?—No—we say firmly and emphatically—No—No—No—rather let Smithfield become chin deep in gold producing squash—let us revel in its dark green delights; and let the College of Heralds enrich the civic arms by quartering with a bloody dagger, a shovel and broom saltierwise; and amplify its motto by placing ‘Aurum e Stercore’ before its ‘Domine Dirige Nos’.*

*But it is not for gold alone that Smithfield is to be prized. Gold is great—a grand thing for s as the aforesaid Bard of Avon sayeth ‘Twill, make black white’ and therein loosely resembleth that cast iron patriot and true totter up of totties whom incensed tories denominate ‘A Middlesex Goose’.*

*But the bottle green stercoraceousness of Smithfield has still a higher quality; --it is absolutely necessary for public health:--the ‘salus populi’ is intimately incorporated with it. There is nothing more wholesome than that bottle green squash—and this is the reason that patients at St Barts Hospital get better so much sooner than they do in any other hospital. They inhale the odour of Smithfield and live: where everywhere else they dwindle and die—all of which was clearly proved not only by the aforesaid worthy Alderman but by the enlightened and Common Councilman Mr Stevens, the gin palace proprietor and his colleague Mr White.*

*What then should the Common Council say to the maudlin humanity who are continually pestering them with petitions for its removal? Should they not say ‘Petition us no petitions’. It is our will and pleasure to uphold Smithfield in all its sanguinary and stercoraceous immunities and when the metropolis is ten times as large as it is now Smithfield shall still be its only market for the greater physical relief which walks in oxen and walks out beef.”*

The Corporation stood very firmly on the side of keeping it where it was; the possible loss of market revenues was unacceptable. Would the market even survive a move with the railways companies ready to start up alternative markets? And there was a claim lurking in the background that if the market moved out then a large part of the site would revert to the Crown. Arguments on the other side stressed the benefits to the City through the removal of the nuisance of the market giving the opportunity to create a new urban park or the development of the site for high quality housing.

An interesting contribution to this debate came from a delegation from the Prefect of the Seine Department sent to over in 1846 to report on markets in England in preparation for the construction of Les Halles in Paris. Its report on Smithfield was pretty devastating –

*“The London markets are more open to criticism than to eulogy”*. The report suggested that at least the slaughter houses should be moved further out and that the area become an expanded Newgate Meat Market. But despite these criticisms of the market itself its products were very much admired.

*“—for although one is aware that meat in England is the principal food, the eye accustomed to the masses of vegetables one sees spread throughout our own markets, one cannot pass these vast exhibitions without surprise remarkable as they are for their quantity but for the beauty of this meat put up for sale”*

The answer to this impasse was, in 1846, to set up a Royal Commission. It submitted interim reports in 1847 and 1849 with a final report in 1850 with clear recommendations that the live cattle market and abattoirs should be moved out and that Newgate and Smithfield markets should be combined to be a single meat market although even after three years of debate two Commissioners submitted a dissenting report. The report praised the efforts of the Corporation to minimise the nuisance caused by the market but concluded this could never be entirely eliminated if it remained at its present location. Surprise, surprise the Corporation immediately rejected the findings out of hand.

Some locals found that rejection outrageous as instanced by a petition presented in that year by a landlady from Smithfield Rents—a small alley to the north side of the market:

*“Lodgings let here—with all tenderness for the Corporation of London, so determined to turn the muck and blood of Smithfield into money—we should like to accommodate some of the Aldermen and Councilmen in some of the kitchens and parlours: at kitchen level there are bullocks, at parlour level sheep and all with a distance of these sheds to the back of the houses being six inches; underneath all there is a cavity where they slaughter pigs even on Sundays*

*We would like to a sufficient number of Corporation worthies to quarter them according to their intelligence*

*The more stolid with the bullocks*

*The more stupid with the pigs*

*The more simple with the sheep*

*We cannot keep our apartments together and our lodgers complain they cannot sleep at night. What is the remedy? None we fear from the Corporation of London.*

*Now shout of this: An Act to compel to residence by rota for every Alderman in a kitchen or parlour or first floor of the Smithfield Rents. As for the Lord Mayor he should be obliged to pass his Sundays there—his only food, one black pudding from the pigs slaughtered on the Sabbath”*

Now enter Mr James Dunstone Bunning born in 1802, appointed City Architect in 1847, regarded by his profession as very much a practical man rather than an artistic designer and his work was criticised for a *‘sometimes vulgar aesthetic taste’*. He was distinctly not in the Ruskin camp but revelled in laying out new streets, re-planning sectors of the City, initiating

the Holborn Viaduct scheme, dealing with railway companies, Bills in Parliament , Charters, and slum clearance.

Dealing with Smithfield was right up his street. Bunning produced a scheme for the enlargement of the cattle market in its present location with some adjacent land acquisitions. This had a plan form of a semi circle with its straight side on the west along the line of the River Fleet with a row of buildings, fodder stores and abattoirs with spokes of tethering lines and pens radiating out from it. It was this scheme which got embedded in the Smithfield Enlargement Act, promoted by the Corporation and passed in 1851.

But in that very same year the government introduced the Smithfield Removal Bill--vigorously opposed by the Corporation which presented a petition containing 23 absolutely irrefutable arguments against the Bill forecasting disaster to the trade and to the whole meat supply to London. The main concern of the Corporation was that it would not have control of a cattle market outside the boundaries of the City and worse still lose its revenues. So it stood firm on retaining Smithfield where it was but was ready countenance its removal on the right terms. In this way it was managing to back both retention and removal at the same time.

The Royal Commission, although strongly recommending removal of the market, ducked the issue of how removal might be implemented as indicated by the sixth recommendation of its 1850 report:

*“Such are the variety and magnitude of the interests involved in the satisfactory settlement of this question, they desire that the Government will take the whole matter into their earliest and serious consideration”*

However the Corporation saw possibilities in the words of the sixth recommendation and quietly opened negotiations with Government. These resulted in the Smithfield Removal Act of 1852 which secured the Corporation’s rights to build, at its own expense, run and retain the revenues of any new cattle market even outside the City boundaries There then followed a bit of a scramble over the selection of a site for this new market but in the end the Caledonian Cattle Market, built to Dunstone Bunning’s design, was opened by Prince Albert in 1855. Today only the central clock tower of that market remains.

Then Dunstone Bunning turned his hand to designing a Meat Market for the old site. It was Bunning who first saw the opportunities arising from the Metropolitan Railway and also the Chatham and Dover Line both coming up to Farringdon. He set about persuading these two very reluctant railway companies to take up the idea of a branch off into the new market. The negotiations were long and difficult; there were awkward legal, technical, design and financial problems to overcome. Over ten years Bunning kept up the pressure, cajoling and persuading the railway companies to participate in the new market scheme. The railway companies’ reluctance was based on their concern that the freight traffic to the market would inhibit them exploiting the full potential of the more profitable passenger traffic on the new line and all this was complicated by the fact that the two railway companies had a number of disagreements between themselves along the way. In the end Bunning did get overall acceptance for a scheme and managed to produce a design for a new meat market building, sitting over a crisscross of subterranean railway lines. The final tri-partite agreement was complex and amongst other matters set out that everything below ground was to be the responsibility of the railway companies and everything above ground that of the Corporation,

producing an odd situation in that one party had the responsibility for the foundations and another the responsibility for the building resting on them.

A rather sad footnote to the Bunning story is that he died in 1863 just as the end of the Smithfield saga was in sight; this is an extract from his obituary:

*“It may be truly said he has been the victim of the bad organisation of the Corporation offices in the surveying and architectural departments as well as the defective arrangements for the traffic in the streets of the City which he had made such efforts to improve. His health suffered through overwork and his last illness came from his exertions for the reception of the Prince of Wales in March 1863 from which he was laid prostrate from exhaustion in dealing with the crowds which impeded him”*

Immediately following Bunning’s death, to save expense, the Corporation decided not to appoint a City Architect but soon after decided by a narrow majority to re-establish the position on the same expensive basis but reserving the right to employ other architects, if they saw fit. And they did see fit because, although they had just appointed Horace Jones as City Architect in 1864, with the passing of the Smithfield Building Act in 1865, the Corporation launched an open design competition for the market building. This was won by the architects Knightley and Mews with a fine enough design with a central tower; they received the advertised premium for it and started work.

But rather mysteriously in 1866 Horace Jones was commissioned for this work. He was a man brimming with self confidence and certainly someone to be reckoned with as can be sensed from the bust on the lower landing in the Guildhall Art Gallery where he has the air of Edward VII. He quickly took up the earlier Bunning designs and developed them into the building we have today. He was a speedy operator having the benefit Bunning’s earlier work and the foundation stone was laid in the December of the year of his appointment.

One might have thought that after thirty years or so of furore about Smithfield that there would be goodwill and celebration all round on that occasion. But not a bit of it, the procession of the Civic Party coming to lay the foundation stone was greeted by an intriguing poster, full of quips and less than flattering descriptions of some of the participants. Some extracts can convey its general tone

*“Heralds sounding their own trumpets by playing a fantasia on the Horns of a Dilemma  
Sir George Grey, mounted on his old hobby horse ‘Centralization’  
The Markets Retarding Committee  
Pages, bearing Loving Cups, containing the tears of Ruined Smithfield Tradesmen  
Several members of the Corporation slowly waddling, replete with turtle soup and Madeira  
P(a)unch, meditating on what is (not) next to be done  
The Comptroller, City Solicitor and Town Clerk attended by their usual Brass (Men in Armour) on their magnificent Dun Brown Rocking Horses ‘Vagary’, ‘Slow Coach’ and ‘Tiresome’-----  
The Uncommon Serjeant  
The rear brought up, with an Improved Plan, by THE CITY ARCHITECT, BUILDER and Delegates from other markets consisting of Fishfags, Drovers, Costermongers, Tag-Rag and Bob-Tail, Whipper-Snappers, Arabs, Niggers, Roughs, Flunkies, Cadgers, Fumblers,*

*Grumblers, Growlers, Williams, Susans, Johns, Sarahs, Snivellers, Welchers, Wretches,  
Downcasts, Sneaks and Fiddlers  
The Beefeaters will not join the Procession for obvious reasons”*

But despite this welcome the Foundation Stone was laid and the Central Meat Market opened for trade one year later.

And that, President and Fellow Historians, is the end of this brief tale about the happenings at Smithfield between 1837 and 1868.

