

Making the most of Merry May

'And along came pretty little May'. Those lyrics, from *Carousel*, are the inspiration for this month's column by our local historian Ruth E. Richardson who's 'going a-maying'!

On May Day, 1st May, the start of summer has been celebrated for thousands of years. Seeds planted, the lull in the farming year gave time for everyone to enjoy themselves. Iron Age Celts called it Beltane and drove cattle between fires hoping to prevent disease. Greeks celebrated Maia, goddess of fields, while bawdy theatre featured in the Roman celebration of Flora, goddess of flowers. Everywhere had a popular feast in May to celebrate well-being and fertility.

In Medieval and Tudor times maypoles were set up in villages and towns. In 16th century Bacton girls decorated the maypole with cowslips (Roland Vaughan). It was fun at dawn on May Day to 'bring in the may' by gathering blossoms, branches and wild flowers - but then came the Civil War. A 1644 Act described maypoles as heathen, leading to abuses, superstition and wickedness! May Day was prohibited and 'bringing in' May blossom became dangerous. No wonder that, even today, some people say this is unlucky! The 1660 return of King Charles II reversed this and maypoles rapidly re-appeared. In 1792 Herefordians 'used to go every May-day to Broomy Hill, and dance round the May-pole, and play at stool-ball and have cake and cider ... every one who could, used to go a-maying'. In 1912 Kingsland, children danced and sang around a birch tree maypole decked with ribbons. (Ella Mary Leather). Then there was the May Fair...

Medieval village and town Fairs, where merchants sold luxury goods, also attracted jugglers, acrobats, and all sorts of side-shows. Fairs were eagerly anticipated and everyone went to them. Permission had to be applied for to hold a Fair. The tolls charged, and fines for wrong-doing, went to the applicant. In 1117 Geoffrey de Clive, Bishop of Hereford from 1115 to 1119, was granted permission to hold a Fair. (He is buried near the Stanbury Chapel in Hereford Cathedral.) It was called Saint Ethelbert's Fair after King Æthelberht of the East Angles, patron saint of Hereford Cathedral, who was murdered on 20th May 794. This nine day Fair was a money-spinner for the Bishop and the Cathedral canons as other shops closed. Fines were a lucrative source of cash as brewers and publicans sold huge amounts of drink. In 1838 a local Act of Parliament reduced it to three days and transferred all rights to Hereford City Council, but, until 1971, an annual payment of 12½ bushels of the best wheat was expected by the Bishop. Now, no longer obligatory, this tradition is still preserved in a colourful ceremony to formally open each year's May Fair.

Hereford's Fair is on the first Tuesday to Thursday in May. One day streets have traffic - then the Fair takes over - then it is gone! Hereford's May Fair is one of the few still traditionally using streets, as most Fairs have been moved to parks or car parks. Stalls are for entertainment, selling souvenirs and food. City shops stay open. Years ago everyone went to the May Fair. Although less true now, the May Fair is still fun.

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