

“Sompting Fairs and Markets”

by Mike Tristram

The first Fairs in Sompting?

Nobody knows when Sompting people first started to hold a market fair. Nearby Tarring got their right to hold a market from King Henry VI in the 15th century. They argued that they needed to have their market at home instead of going to Steyning, so that they could be on hand to fight off the French and Spanish pirates. Sompting people probably went to the more convenient Broadwater market, in those dangerous days, as we have no record of them claiming to be worried by pirates.

In the 18th century at least two of Sompting’s manors had a field called ‘Market Field’. Perhaps markets were actually held there, or maybe this is where livestock were gathered before being taken to market.

The 5th of July Sompting Fair

From an unknown date before 1813, up to the 1950’s, an annual fair was held in Sompting on 5th July.

The 5th of July Fair was on the Feast of the *Nativity of Saint John the Baptist*. This date was probably chosen because John was the patron saint of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, also known as the Hospitallers. The Hospitallers (to cut a long story short) followed on at Sompting from the Templars, who had owned the living of the church and other property in Sompting.

St John continued to be seen as important in the parish through the 19th century, maybe because of the Fair. John the Baptist and his parents, Elizabeth and Zacharias, appear in stained glass windows in St Mary’s church. These were commissioned by Henry Crofts - local sheriff, magistrate and squire - as a memorial to his brother John Crofts who built the present Sompting Abbots, and to John’s parents, Elizabeth and Peter (spoiling the symmetry, he had not been named Zacharias).

The Findon folk picked a much less jolly day, their Sheep Fair is on the Feast of the *Beheading of St John the Baptist!*

Sompting’s May Festivals

The ancient May Day Festival tradition was revived in Sompting after 1865, by Ellen Crofts (in a more decorous style than the original). All the schoolchildren used to process up past the church to the Abbots, bearing flowers, rosettes, bright scarves and flags. The May Queen (a child of about 5) and her attendants were drawn by a donkey in a ‘carriage of state’. They processed through the village and got buns at the Rectory, then went back in the afternoon for tea, singing, games and Maypole dancing at the Abbots.

In May 1887 there was an especially fine May Festival, hosted by Henry and Ellen Crofts at Sompting Abbots for Queen Victoria’s Jubilee, in the Upper Park, with a marquee decorated with flowers and banners by the Crofts girls and friends. The newspaper reported:

“There was dinner for about 230 ‘men and youths’, then speeches. A cricket match of married men against unmarried, ha’penny swings and roundabouts, cocoa-nut pitches, a try-your-strength machine and rifle practice at one penny. There were stalls for sweets and toys. Then, tea for the women of the village (about 170), with the Crofts daughters and friends waitressing – and the same speeches again. Finally, tea for the children of the village (about 160). Races, with prizes, for men, boys, married women

and unmarried women. Dancing, a fire balloon sent up, and the Abbots was illuminated, the festivities lasting till 9 o'clock when the Park was cleared."

The papers also report Henry Crofts' speech toasting the Queen and lauding the progress of the country, mentioning steamships, the electric telegraph and 'most recently the telephone'.

The Three-in-One Agricultural Show at Sompting, 15th – 18th June 1936

(Thanks to Andrew Grevatt for collecting much of the information about this Show, and to Tom Smith for passing it on to me.)

This was the first great combined agricultural show of the Royal Counties' Agricultural Society and the Sussex County Agricultural Societies and the Hackney Horse Society (now called the South of England Show, and held at Ardingly). It took place on Sompting Estate land owned by my grandfather Major Guy Tristram, grandson of Henry and Ellen Crofts, in the lower Park of Sompting Abbots (the field east of the Marquis of Granby).

Sompting was crawling with machinery, materials, livestock and produce! On show were Southdown sheep, Red Sussex cattle, and many other breeding lines competing for awards. King Edward VIII himself attended as patron and exhibitor (Shorthorns and Devons) and presented prizes. There were many competitions including children's riding. Winners announced in the papers included Mary Passmore of Church Farm Coombes, for her judging of bacon pigs. The local schoolchildren put on shows of dancing and PE.

Sompting was also crawling with dignitaries: the Mayor of Worthing Mr Tree who opened the show, Lord Leconfield who was the president, and guests including the Duke of Norfolk. The number of spectators was astonishing – over 50,000, spread over the four days of the show. On the busiest day of the show there were nearly 3,000 cars in the car park; most people came by bus from Worthing railway station, some in horse-drawn coaches.

As well as the agricultural and educational sections, there were also horticultural exhibits including potted garden plants, in the largest marquee (which covered about half an acre). Sompting and Worthing were then important horticultural areas. In recent years production has been more to the west, between Littlehampton, Barnham and Chichester – and donated plants from Tristram Plants' nurseries in that area have been sold at the Sompting Festival for the Friends of St Mary's.

Late C20th Sompting Festivals, from 2006 onward, in early June

In a nice coincidence, the new Sompting Festival date fell exactly half way between the dates of the two older Sompting festivals, 1st May and 5th July (also pretty close to the Agricultural Show date). The organisers aimed to include some of the best parts of these traditions, rolled into one, in Sompting's new annual summer fair. In 2020 due to the pandemic, no Sompting Festival took place: but its time will come round again.