

FAIRS AND MARKETS

The Bishop of Winchester obtained a royal charter for a weekly market in his manor of Overton in 1218. Winchester Street was a new wide thoroughfare, designed for the purpose. In 1246, Henry III not only confirmed the weekly market, with a change of day from Tuesday to Monday, but also granted a fair on 7 July.¹

The charter was very important. Opening a shop was only permitted in a settlement possessing a market charter. This prevented trade except where the bishopric could charge for the privilege. At this time, none of the parishes surrounding Overton had charters, so Overton became the economic hub for the whole area. Even in market towns, shops did not become common until the 16th century, so the markets and fairs were the only means of exchange.²

Table 1 shows the numbers of selds and stalls for selected years. Selds were permanent shacks. In 1301-2 some of them needed repairs to the roofs and walls using sand (presumably for mortar) and nails. The rent for a stall was 2d. Selds were four times the price at 8d.

	Selds	Stalls	Total rent
1301-2 ³	16	32	15s. 0d.
1310-11 ⁴	16	38	16s 4d.
1348-49 ⁵	8	20	8s 8d.
1409-10 ⁶	16	20	14s 0d.

Table 1. Rents received from selds and stalls, Overton, 1301-1410.

The figures for the years 1348-49 and 1409 -10 show that Overton was suffering from the effects of the 'great pestilence' of 1349 and subsequent plagues.

There are no records of what was traded at the markets and fairs, but it is known in detail what the Manor of Overton produced in 1409-10.⁷

¹ *VCH Hants, Overton Parish*, (1911), 210-19.

² *VCH Hants*, 5, 417.

³ Page, M., (ed), *Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester, 1301-2*, (1996), 91-100.

⁴ *VCH Hampshire, Overton Parish*, (1911), 210-19.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Page, M., (ed), *Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester, 1409-10*, (1999), 209-22.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Produce of the manor	
Wheat, oats and barley	Bread, animal feed, malt and ale
Peas	
Geese, chickens, doves and pigeons	Meat, eggs, feathers for bedding, dung
Sheep, pigs, oxen, cows, horses and rabbits	Meat and dung
	Hides for saddles, harnesses, shoes, coats, hats
	Butter and cheese
	Wool for clothes and bedding
Fish, including eels	
Apples	Cider
Bees	Honey and beeswax
Wood	Charcoal and firewood, wattles and withies
	Timber for houses, carts, gates, beds, tables
Imports	
Iron	Nails, wheel rims, ploughs, horse shoes
Salt	Pickling

Table 2: Tradeable commodities produced by Overton Manor in 1409-10.

All of these were tradeable commodities and it is clear that the manor was self-sufficient apart from two items that would have been brought to the markets by chapmen or travelling tradesmen. Iron presumably came from Sussex, whilst salt would have been brought from salt pans around the Solent.

In 1519, Thomas Wolsey, Bishop of Winchester, obtained a licence to hold an additional fair at Overton from 22 to 24 April.⁸

In 1587, there was a dispute and a court case about the authority to appoint the reeve and whether it lay with the freeholders or the bishop.⁹ The documents reveal that the weekly market was only held at certain times of the year and that the annual fairs were on 22 April and 7 July. Thereafter, it was the bishop who appointed the reeve who was empowered to organise the two annual fairs and the weekly market, to supervise *'the settinge up of standinges, stalles and coopes in the said fayers and markettes and to take all the profyttes and sommes of money arysinge of the same, and pay to the Bushoppe of Wynton yerely the somme of eighte poundes.'*



The amount due to the bishop was fixed: a well-organised reeve could make a handsome profit but if the dues were not collected efficiently he could also make a loss.

Langdon's plan of the borough in 1615 shows a small building in the middle of the road at the lower end of Winchester Street¹⁰ presumed to be the market house, later demolished.¹¹ This is where the reeve would have regulated the fairs and collected the dues.

Figure 3: Detail of Thomas Langdon's plan of Overton Borough, 1615.

⁸ VCH Hampshire, Overton Parish, (1911), 4, 210-19.

⁹ Local Government, below.

¹⁰ HRO, 132M98/N2/6.

¹¹ Universal British Directory of Hampshire, (1796), 185. Reference is made to the market house being 'entirely taken away'.

In 1679, the lease of the fairs was granted to Laurence Jackson and others.¹² A lease on the same terms was granted to Moses Farmer for 21 years in 1749.¹³ By this time the amount due to the bishop had risen to £10 2s. 0½d. and the reeve also had to pay the churchwardens £4 for the benefit of the poor.

Neither document mentions a weekly market and it seems that by this time it had died out. There are no records to tell us why this happened. It may be that Whitchurch, less than 3 miles away, had also acquired a charter for a weekly market and that Overton lost out in competition.¹⁴ Another cause may have been that shops selling cloth appeared in Overton in the middle of the 16th century.¹⁵ If there were other shops selling their commodities every day, the profitability of the weekly market may have been undermined.

In 1778, there were three annual fairs, on 4 May, 18 July and 2 October.¹⁶ It is not known whether a charter was ever issued for an October fair and it is possible that the regulations had been relaxed or were ignored. A gazetteer of 1795 claims that there were four annual fairs on 4th May, Whit Monday, 18th July and 22nd of October, '*all principally being for sheep and lambs*', the July fair being '*the most capital fair for lambs in the county*.'¹⁷ It seems unlikely that there would be two Spring fairs so close together, since Whit Monday can be at any time from 11 May to 14 June. By 1827, fairs were being held on 4 May, 18 July and 22 October, all for sheep.¹⁸

The *Hampshire Chronicle* was published from 1772 and carried reports of sheep fairs in the county, notably at Alton, Alresford, Appleshaw, Stockbridge and Weyhill, three miles from Andover, all of which were in early October.¹⁹ The Weyhill fair was certainly the largest, serving all the home counties with stock ewes for the next season. In 1795 it was recorded that 140,000 sheep were sold every year at the Weyhill fair and about half that number at Appleshaw but the Overton fair was not mentioned.²⁰

The first newspaper report of the Overton fair was not until 1812.²¹ All this suggests that whilst in the late 18th century, the Overton July fair may have been 'capital' for quality, it was not big enough to attract farmers and dealers from an area wider than Overton and the adjoining parishes.

The Overton fair was constrained by being held in Winchester Street. By 1809 this had become a great nuisance to residents, farmers and dealers alike. The rector of Overton sent a petition to the Bishop of Winchester to get it moved to a more convenient field, saying that the inhabitants '*would rejoice at having so great an inconvenience removed*' and, if it was not, the fair '*would decrease from the great aversion the farmers had to penning their sheep in the streets*'. Those who signed the petition were all from Overton and neighbouring parishes.²² Since loss of trade meant loss of

¹² HRO, 11M70/B7/76/1.

¹³ HRO, 11M70/137/79.

¹⁴ VCH Hants, Whitchurch parish, (1911), 4, 299-305.

¹⁵ HRO, 1577/AD/77.

¹⁶ Gatehouse, T., *Hampshire or A Short Survey of the County of Southampton*: manuscript dedicated to James, Duke of Chandos, 1778; HRO, 10M91W/1.

¹⁷ Universal British Directory, Hampshire, 1792-1796, 56.

¹⁸ Owen's *New Book of Fairs in England and Wales*, (1827), 27.

¹⁹ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 15 Oct. 1796, 18 Apr. 1785, 15 Sep. 1788, 30 Oct. 1780, 19 May 1798.

²⁰ Warner, R., *Collections for the History of Hampshire, and the Bishopric of Winchester*, 1795, 3.

²¹ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 20 Jul. 1812.

²² HRO, 11M59/F/BP/E/B56.



Poster advertising the sheep fair in 1850

revenue for the Bishop, he evidently acceded to this request since, in that year, the fair was held in the field south of Greyhound Lane, later known as Fair Close.²³

In the 1820s, the great sheep fair was sometimes in July but was also held on 4 May or 21 October.²⁴ It was not exclusively for sheep, since horses, cows, pigs, cheese and hops were also on offer.²⁵ The first available record of the number of sheep penned was in 1822 when 40,000 sheep changed hands.⁹

In 1837, William and John Portal initiated major changes. Thereafter, the fair was always held in July and it was exclusively for sheep and lambs. They formed an 'Overton Sheep Fair Society' amongst



The inscription on a silver cup donated by Melville Portal in 1856

the gentry of the area who donated silver cups to the value of 10 or 5 guineas for the best quality entries.²⁶ In 1838, Sir Thomas Baring gave a 10-guinea cup as a premium (prize) for the best 100 South Down wether lambs. John Portal gave his 10-guinea cup for 'the 100 best South Down ewes, fed only on grass, hay and roots.' There were 12 prizes altogether which went to the landowners; the shepherds responsible for the winning entries received new hats. The cups were presented after a venison dinner with wine starting at three o'clock after the fair. There were numerous toasts with lengthy speeches of mutual congratulation and, on one occasion at least, '*the company did not separate until a late hour*'.²⁷

The aim of giving prizes was stock improvement but these initiatives also attracted farmers and dealers from a wider area and dramatically increased the numbers of sheep sold. In 1838, forty gentlemen and farmers sat down to dinner; by 1853, buyers were coming from Norfolk, Suffolk, Dorset, and Berkshire. Sellers from Fovant in Wiltshire, Vernham Dean and Sherborne were amongst the winners.²⁸ Competition for the prizes was intense. In 1856, the caterers provided dinner for 130.²⁹

²³ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 26 Jun. 1820. Reference is made to the new fairground having been in use for eleven years.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 26 Jul. 1820, 3 May 1824, 16 Oct. 1826.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 8 Jul. 1822.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 27 Jul. 1844. Reference is made to this being the 7th anniversary of the formation of the Society.

²⁷ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 23 Jul. 1838.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 23 Jul. 1853.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 19 Jul. 1856.

1853 saw the opening of Overton Station, less than a mile from the fairground. By 1861 most of the farmers and dealers were arriving by rail and special trains were put on for the occasion. By then, most of the sheep also arrived and departed by rail.³⁰

1821	1833	1838	1840	1858	1867	1876	1881	1889	1915	1927
40	60	90	100	90	70	70	30	11	7	2

Table 1. Numbers of sheep penned at Overton Sheep Fair (thousands), 1821-1927, as reported in the *Hampshire Chronicle* and the *Hants & Berks Gazette*.

There was great consternation in 1881 and in the subsequent decade when the numbers sold dropped by half. In their after-dinner speeches to depleted numbers of diners, the landowners blamed the general agricultural depression, the weather and unjust taxation.³¹ Some also realised that farmers were increasingly sending their lambs by rail directly to the rapidly expanding new cities

where higher prices were to be had.³² The railway, which had been such an advantage to provincial fairs thirty years before, may have become their downfall. In 1897, things were no better.³³ After 1900, the *Hants & Berks Gazette* rarely reported on the fair and in the last report in 1927 only 2,000 animals were said to have been sold.³⁴

This is the only known photograph of the sheep fair, probably taken in the 1920s.³⁵



When the sheep fair was removed from Winchester Street, a pleasure fair was held there on the same day.³⁶ One of the first resolutions of the new Overton Parish Council in 1895 was to have it

removed because it was considered to be a nuisance.³⁷ The councillors were evidently unsuccessful since, in about 1901, a young girl, Winifred Rutley, recalled,

'One important day in our calendar was Fair Day. A pleasure fair would be set up in Winchester Street with roundabouts, swinging boats and coconut shies. I was not allowed the rides and the fun of the fair because my grandfather considered such things worldly and sinful. How I longed to be allowed just one ride on the roundabout. The only thing permitted



Overton pleasure fair, 1906

³⁰ *Ibid*, 20 Jul. 1861.

³¹ *Ibid*, 23 Jul. 1881, 22 Jul. 1882, 23 Jul. 1887.

³² *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 21 Jul. 1883.

³³ *The Times*, 24 Jul. 1897.

³⁴ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 9 Jul. 1927.

³⁵ Oram, R., *A Pictorial History of Overton*, (1996), 34.

³⁶ Photograph: Tony Morris contributed by Irene Tungate.

³⁷ *Hants & Berks Gazette*, 23 Mar. 1895.

*was that Aunt Nell should take me for a walk through the fair in the day time and buy thin syrupy gingerbread sold on one of the stalls.*³⁸



Through the initiative of Ian Crombie, the pleasure fair was revived in July 2000 as Overton's celebration of the millennium. It has been repeated since as a two-day event every four years and attracts thousands of people from the surrounding area.³⁹ The Sheep Fair once again became the most important event in the village calendar.

³⁸ Griffiths, W., *One Woman's Story*, (1979), 22.

³⁹ Photograph: Overton Pictures. www.overtonpictures.com. (accessed 31 May 2017)