

Cockermouth Post 2008

POST ARTICLE MAY 2008

Many landmarks have disappeared from Main Street over the years. Cockermouth Library, which opened in 1904, replaced a row of thatched cottages, and the Blue Bell Inn stood on the site of the present Lesley Cleland's shop. The Waugh Memorial clock, affectionately known as 'Neddy', stood on Main Street from 1893 until its removal in 1932 on the grounds that it was a traffic hazard. The clock was apparently the scene of much merry-making by local people each New Year's Eve. Earl Mayo has stood his ground on Main Street since 1875 despite several attempts to remove him forcefully, most noticeably in 1964 when a tanker scored a direct hit and felled him disastrously but not fatally. Main Street in the past was the location for the Hiring Fairs of Whitsun and Martinmas, which normally took place in the Castlegate/Market Place area, but the accompanying stalls and street entertainment spread right down Main Street. At one time Mr Biddle brought his show to Cockermouth at fair-time, and his Ghost Show was a particular attraction. Given that there were so many 'watering-holes' in Cockermouth, these events were often very rowdy occasions. Crowds are still attracted to Main Street and around by the annual Carnival, which originated in Cousin Charley's Day at the end of the 19th century. This was originally a children's parade through the town, with sports and entertainments and treats for the children. Main Street has always played a vital role in the life of the town.

Gloria Edwards

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The tradition of the twice-yearly hiring fairs existed for centuries in Cockermouth until relatively recent times. This was the occasion when prospective employers and employees met in Market Place to hire or be hired. Those looking for work often wore some kind of token to indicate the employment they were seeking (e.g. a piece of straw in the hat for farm work). Once discussions about wages and living conditions were agreed, the farmer would give a silver shilling to make the deal binding. Thereafter, the rest of the day was free to enjoy the fun of the fair.

We have a fascinating first-hand account from 1914 of such a fair on Main Street and Station Street, where numerous stalls and entertainments spread on both sides of the road, as far as Market Place in one direction and Sullart Street in the other. A marquee housed Paine's Picture Show, showing black and white films with captions, from a hand-cranked projector. There were colourful swing boats holding at least twenty people, with one boat swinging to the left, whilst the other swung to the right to maintain the balance. There were gypsy fortune-tellers, stalls selling food and novelties, and then a large marquee with performing Chinese Acrobats, the Tattooed Strong Man and Indian

Dancers. There were hoopla stalls, a shooting gallery, a coconut shy, Cake Walk and Chairplanes. Then came a roundabout with brightly painted horses, that moved up and down as the carousel went around. Jim Patterson stood outside his Boxing Booth with a megaphone, offering three pound notes to anyone foolhardy enough to attempt three rounds with one of his lads. Biddall's Ghost Show gave the illusion that tongues of fire were resting on people's heads, all done by strategic placing of hidden mirrors. Another show featured a young lady in swimsuit posing on stage. A hushed silence descended with the announcement that the young lady would 'show her bare behind'. The lady reappeared, holding a teddy bear behind her! I wonder if anyone asked for their money back.

The sight and sound of the town, thronged with people having fun, stands in stark contrast to the dark days to come that year with the start of the War. We are thrilled to have this account, a snapshot in time.

Gloria Edwards