Feature: The drove ends in our Gaol

Ed Grimsdale

Buckingham was on some of the main droving routes for much of 1000 years. Drovers looked to the green pastures that line the river Ouse to fatten their sheep and cattle during the final push to market in Barnett or London. North Bucks created an infrastructure to support the trade: wide, cool holloways, watering holes, fields of juicy grass and inns to shelter and amuse the drovers. Even today, Welsh Lane stretches west from North Bucks, a memorial to countless men from the principality who passed "Down Our Way" several times a year. Fresh was certainly best and rich Londoners clamoured to eat meat from animals that had walked, eaten and drunk their way from Herefordshire or the Welsh hills.

Spring in our land was not filled not with the gentle buzz of bees but with the din and reek of herded cattle, the barks of welsh corgis and the yells of the drovers as huge columns, hundreds or thousands of beasts, wended their way slowly over hill and down dale. We didn't complain of the cacophony: the noise was a warning to us to lock up our livestock – have you ever tried to separate 1200 sheep into "yours" and "mine"? The smell told us that the head drovers would need a scrub, a bed and a bar stocked with locals eager to hear the drovers' tales and be challenged to boxing matches and trials of strength with the winner paying for the ale.

The Industrial Revolution changed that

way of life. Better roads didn't kill droving because the turnpikes were privatised: toll-gates were pinch-points that caused great difficulty for drovers at the head of a half a mile snake of lumbering beasts and turnpike tolls reduced profits. No, drovers avoided turnpikes like the plague. Railways were different: Wales today, London tomorrow. But, it wasn't that simple, certainly at the outset. The new railway was not a coherent network just a tortuous web of private lines for profit. The Welsh sheep over-wintered on exposed hills with sparse vegetation were hardy, but they were not fat. The market valued moist and tender above lean and scrawny. A role remained for Buckingham's green pastures even if the Duke of Buckingham's concern for his estates delayed the advent of railways in the Buckingham area.

So what does this piece culled from an August 1872 copy of Jackson's Oxford Journal tell us?

[BUCKINGHAM] BOROUGH PETTY SESSIONS, Saturday. Before H. Hearn, Esq., Mayor, R. Chandler, Esq., and W.H. French, Esq.

Mr Shadrach Tompkins of Leckhampstead was charged, at the instance of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, with having caused three sheep to be overdriven, and Isaac Hurst and William Young, the drovers, were charged with having overdriven such sheep. Mr Harris, from the Society, appeared for the prosecution, and Mr Stockton, of Banbury, appeared for the defendants. The case occupied the Court for the greater part of the day and from the evidence given it appeared that Mr Tompkins collected a drove of sheep, numbering about 1000, from Shrewsbury, Hereford and other places, and brought them by rail to King's Sutton, from which place they were driven to Leckhampstead. They had no water until they came to Tingewick, some 10 miles from the station, and the drovers had great difficulty in getting the sheep along, some of them constantly falling by the roadside. On reaching Buckingham one sheep was so exhausted that it died, and another was helpless and was taken by the police into the goal, and another was found lying in a field on the road to Leckhampstead. Evidence of veterinary surgeons was given showing death to have been caused by thirst and overdriving. The Magistrates, after listening patiently to the case, convicted the defendant and ordered him to pay 61.5s. 6d. fine and costs.

God chose to save the Old Testament Shadrach from the fiery furnace; the modern Shadrach put his trust in a lawyer and was confounded. Traditionally, droving had been a good career, not open to all (no single men could become drovers) and subject to control and licence. Drovers gained their reward at the end of the drove and their profits depended on keeping the animals fine: fit and fat. The pace of a traditional drove was little more than 2 miles and hour, perhaps 12 miles in a day, with

foraging en route, frequent stops at watering places and "halfpenny downs" for a good feed at the end of the day. Shadrach was driven by speed and money: pack them into steaming rail wagons, unload them at the rail-head and herd them as fast as possible, 17 miles in a day from King's Sutton to Leckhampstead.

Incidentally, it may surprise you to hear that, for a time, King's Sutton was the rail-head for cattle en route from the west to Buckingham. Is it not curious how the King's Sutton and Buckingham have intertwined through history? Time there was when Buckingham was merely an appendage, a chapel of ease, in the Prebend of Sutton cum Buckingham. Much later, during 1865, George Gilbert Scott, born, of course, in Gawcott, Buckingham, started to remodel Buckingham's Church of St Peter and St Paul by adding a chancel. At precisely the same time, over in King's Sutton's Church of St Peter and St Paul, our "Gilbert Scott" was remodelling its old chancel. Both churches re-opened within a fortnight of each other at the end of 1866 with grand celebrations.

Many of you will have seen the old photograph of Buckingham with its market place full of sheep. That's how it must have looked on this hot day in the summer of 1872. Just imagine the chaos that would occur if 1000 stumbling sheep were to arrive on one day this summer!

The SPCA (later the RSPCA) was founded in 1824 and was the brain-child of "Humanity Dick" Martin, MP. That was the start of an awakening to issues of

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animal welfare. Earlier, animals had been treated as chattels, objects to feed, clothe and transport humanity. Buckingham's court did not have a distinguished history of defending the defenceless beast against man's cruelty. Only 5 years before in 1867, it heard a case of animal cruelty brought against the Vicar of Turweston. He admitted to ordering his manservant to pour turpentine down the tail of a dog into its nether regions. The poor creature's "offence" was to have strayed into the grounds of the rectory. After the Vicar's administrations, the poor animal chased around Turweston yelping in such a distraught manner that the owner locked the dog outside, thinking it had gone mad. Buckingham's bench, in dismissing the case, concluded: "the law has not been transgressed" and, after awarding the Vicar full costs, assured him that he could leave "this court without a stain

upon his reputation as a Christian minister, a gentleman, and a humane man." Was it the coverage of that trial in the Thunderer aka "The Times" that made Buckingham's bench so much more sensitive to the needs of sheep in the following decade, I wonder?

One of the great advantage of stone-walled buildings is that they tend to be cool in summer and warm in winter, so it was good thinking by our local constable when he took the poor ailing sheep into our Old Gaol. A great proportion of our Gaol's "visitors" have been invited in for being "drunk and disorderly". This poor beast may be unique, sent to Gaol as "disordered, having not drunk".

Ed Grimsdale will present a new version of his illustrated talk "Droving through Bucks" to members of the Society later in the year.

The photograph below comes from Tony Coult's archive of the 1960s and shows a lush and pleasant Maids Moreton Avenue. Read the Green Spaces report (pg18) for good news on its future improvements.



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