

Chesterfield & District Local History Society

HISTORY PAPER NO. 2.

TITLE: "OLD CHESTERFIELD" - Interesting reminiscences by Ex-Alderman Dronfield
Part 1.

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This extract from the Derbyshire Times has been taken by Brian Austin as part of his research into shoemakers of North-east Derbyshire. Alderman Dronfield was the owner of Dronfield and Company, who produced industrial and agricultural footwear in Chesterfield.

The changes referred to in Chesterfield are the boundary extensions taking place at the time.

Taken from the Derbyshire Times, Saturday 27th November 1920

At the present moment when the inhabitants of Chesterfield are preparing another step forward in the history of its development, a glance backward at the conditions of the town in the middle of the last century may prove both interesting and opportune. The appearance of the borough previous to the erection of the Market Hall will be remembered by none except the oldest inhabitants.

Chesterfield always owed its importance to its position as the marketing centre of a large rural area. That the market has always been of first class importance may be assumed from the fact that the Market Place is one of the largest in the country and is surpassed only by those of Nottingham and Yarmouth. The Market Place and its immediate environment being the centre of life and activity, a description of this area from the middle of the last century will serve to indicate the general development which has taken place in the town.

In those days the open space extended from what is now Mr. Dent's chemist shop to the buildings forming the western front of the Shambles, and from the building in High Street to Low Pavement. The entrances to the square were similar to those of today, but naturally more constricted, and a visitor approaching the town, say, from the north, would, after passing along a narrow and tortuous "gate" suddenly have had opened out before him a space whose bounds have just been indicated. The buildings bordering the market place have altered considerably in appearance. Of the existing buildings, only those with the pillars standing on the north-east and south sides, were then in existence. The remainder of the buildings consisted of houses and shops with their low fronts and quaint bow windows. In those days it was the custom, not only in Chesterfield, but in most small towns, for prominent tradesmen and burgesses to live in the town and at their place of business. Therefore, the square contained not only the chief shops but also the residences of eminent townspeople. Where now stands the Telephone Exchange, the Post Office and Crompton and Evans Bank once stood the residences of doctors, town clerk etc., and at the opposite corner of Gluman Gate was the Town Hall. Sanitation was not very advanced nor was the pavement so sacred to pedestrians as it is today. To protect the pathway a long row of posts, connected by a chain was erected. These extended eastwards from what is now the Telephone Exchange and were painted white; these formed a barrier and protection to residents which was particularly serviceable on market and fair days.

On Low Pavements were several bow-windowed shops, the windows containing small panes of glass about twelve inches square. Amongst these shops there were several cookhouses and confectioners and there was also the original tobacco shop of Masons near to Wheeldon Lane, the tobacco factory itself, being at that time, in Wheeldon Lane. The "Crown and Cushion" - a bow-windowed inn, stood on the present site; the host was one Thomas Worsley, the dismounted whip of Mr. Maynard when he gave up heharr.ers?

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Hostelries naturally occupied a prominent place and the "Angel" was perhaps the most important and conspicuous. Here the horses of the mail coaches were changed. Should the roads have been heavy and muddied, horses were taken down to the wash at the bottom of Wheeldon Lane. The writer recollects the awaiting of an incoming mail in order to have the opportunity of getting astride one of the horses and riding down to the brook where it was walked to and fro in the water until the road stains were removed.

In the centre of the square, opposite to Wheeldon Lane and on part of the site where the Market Hall now stands, stood a block of buildings known as the "Cross Daggers". The "Cross Daggers" had a cosmopolitan population. Besides the public house at that name, there was a bakehouse, a confectioner and certain public rooms. In the same block there was also a well-known cheese depot and it was the venue of market carts and farmers with their produce.

Poole's confectionery shop, situated opposite the "Cross Daggers" on Low Pavement, earned notoriety owing to the enterprise of its owner, John Poole. This man gained local renown by the manufacture of huge cakes, some of which approximated a ton in weight. These cakes were made in segments - wedge-shaped tins were used for the purpose - and when the various segments were fitted together and then layered over, a circular cake of huge dimensions was obtained. Famous among these cakes was a huge lottery cake. In the cake was placed a number of discs, each one representing an article to which the finder of the disc was entitled. The cake was sold at one shilling a pound and lucky buyers became possessors of sovereigns, half-sovereigns, watches, rings etc.

There is little doubt that the "Cross Daggers" did represent a phase in the history of the town; and its disappearance and subsequent erection of the Market Hall buildings marked a stage in the progress of the town. Markets and fair days presented an animated appearance; the whole of the sales, including cattle, sheep and pigs, were concentrated in the square. Sheep and pigs were located at the western side of the Market Place on the space known as "Swine's Green". On important fair days the horses and cattle overflowed from the Market Place, and accommodation was then found for them in the neighbouring streets, Soresby St., Gluman Gate and Salter Gate sharing the honour.

Carriers' carts gathered in great numbers; all roads for carriers' carts led to Chesterfield, and the produce was sold either from stalls erected in the square or from the carts themselves. The carts lined up alongside the "Cross Daggers" and the stalls were set to form a street running from thence across the square towards the Shambles. Fair days attracted the usual number of followers, and side shows were erected containing all the curiosities and wonders of the world. Anything calculated to excite the imagination of the crowd and extort their pence was always in evidence. Song vendors, quacks, boxing shows, death hunters were generally present. Their disappearance and the decrease in the gullibility of the people are a good sign.

The first big step in the material improvement of the town was the erection of the Market Hall in 1857. From then progress has been well maintained as the reader may gather from the following figures. In 1850 the approximate number of stalls was 25 whereas today it is 270. The hall itself has not been an unmitigated blessing nor has it always been an asset. Its ugly architecture and peculiar internal arrangements have often been held up to ridicule and it has been the despair of many who have attempted to affect improvements. Nevertheless, its value to the town has grown, and particularly so during the past few years during which time considerable improvements have been made. In 1898 the income from the markets was about £1950 whereas this year it has reached to over £3,300.

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In 1901 the Cattle Market was opened and the sale of cattle removed from the streets. Perhaps this change more than any other was indicative of the breaking up of the old fair days and market customs. The change was for the good and the clearing from the streets of cattle and horses, with the accompanying refuse and filth was a step in the right direction, for the old method was not only a nuisance to the ordinary townsman, but very insanitary.

Chesterfield has had a creditable past. This month ushers in a new order of things, and this year marks a milestone in the progress of the town. Under the new regime may the town still advance and prosper - materially and spiritually.



Chesterfield Market Place c. 1800

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for Mine, Quarry, Factory
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Light or heavy nailed with combination clinker or flat plates as desired.

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CARR VALE—W. Sharman.
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CHESTERFIELD—Central Boot Stores.
 Stead & Simpsons, Ltd.
CLAYCROSS—Haslam & Sons.
CLOWN—O. Hibbard.
DINNINGTON—B. Johnson.
DOE LEA—W. Eaton.
DONCASTER—Co-operative Stores.
EAST KIRKBY—Luther Cannt.
ECKINGTON—P. Harris.
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