

THE ROWELL CHARTER

A BRIEF HISTORY

Custom has it that the feast or fair of a particular town is usually linked with the patronal festival of its church. Rothwell, in Northamptonshire, is no exception. The Parish Church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity and hence the fair is proclaimed open early on the Monday morning following Trinity Sunday. There have been several variations in the town's name during its long history and, indeed, it is still known locally as Rowell, but there is no doubt that it was named Red Well by early settlers from Northern Europe. The Danish "rod" and German "rot" both mean red which could easily mean the water was discoloured by the deposits of ironstone found in the area.

To understand more about the present day fair, we have to go back in time to when the town fair and the town market were one and the same event: ie a trading fair. In the Middle Ages when shops first began to take their place in the commercial life of the country, towns were often small and walled (as was Rowell) and it was decreed that only walled towns could have a market. So, the only towns in this area qualifying for a market were Northampton, Stamford and Rowell.



It was at this time that the inhabitants of Rowell claimed to be free from all tolls and taxes throughout the whole country!

One of the first references to a market at Rowell is in 1154. This was when Roger, the **Earl of Clare**, acquitted the monks and canons of Sulby Abbey from paying any toll on articles bought and sold at Rowell Fair.

The Clares were a rich and powerful Norman family having vast estates which stretched right across England to Wales. Rowell, situated about half way



Rothwell Market House from an original watercolour by Brian Austin.

to these Welsh lands, became a town of some importance for trade and also for pilgrimage to the great parish church.

When Roger died in 1173 he was succeeded by his son, Richard, and it was he who had the market and fair confirmed by the Charter of **King John** in 1204.

In early times the fair was of a far greater importance than today because it gave people, especially in the country districts, a time for merry-making. This, of course, was a most welcome event in their hard lives. In fact, it might well have been their only holiday of the year!



Horse fair field, Kettleing Road.

It attracted cattle dealers from Wales, horse traders and sheep dealers from far and wide. Tradesmen brought their leather, cloth, boots, farming implements like rakes and scythes to add to the business.

Visitors brought the latest gossip from distant places, friendships were renewed and new ones made. Most people could not read in those days, so local inhabitants who had accommodation to spare, and wished to advertise the fact, hung a branch of a tree over their doors to attract the passing trade.

From the seventeenth century up to the early part of



Traditional rum & milk consumed by the bailiff.

the twentieth century, Rowell was a very well-known horse fair and was noted for its low prices. But, as the years went by, the trading fair decreased in popularity. This was due, in part, to the coming of the railways and the improvements in the roads. People became more

mobile and dealers and tradesmen were able to do their business on a more regular basis.

As the horsefair decreased, so the pleasure fair increased. Late in the nineteenth century saw the beginning of the steam driven rides, bioscope



This is The Cake Walk which visited Rothwell for many years.

shows, the forerunner of the cinema, and showmen's engines which also generated electricity.

Lords of the Manor of Rowell have

included some very famous names, apart from the Clares. **William Parr** in 1551, **Sir Thomas Tresham** in 1560 and his son **Francis** (implicated in the Gunpowder Plot) in 1605. Then, in 1614 **William Cockayne** purchased estates at Rushton and, in so doing, obtained a market and fair from **King James the First**. It is this Royal Charter which is still read today by the Bailiff on Fair Monday morning.



Bailiffs party at the Manor House.

The Manorial Rights have remained in the same family ever since that time.