

Highdays and Holidays

The Revels

An annual event in the village was the Mortimer Revel, which was held at the Horse and Groom on the Thursday of Whitsun Week. The sport on these occasions must have provided a good deal of excitement for both participants and spectators, for much of it was of a violent nature. The Reading Mercury announced in June 1789 that at the Revel there would be:

"a good hat for the man that breake most heads, the blood to run one inch or be deemed no head, all disputes to be decided by the umpires. Also a good hat to be wrestled for, the best man to have the hat, no disputes about falls, but three go downs. Likewise a good silver laced hat to be bowled for, two pence three bowls, to begin bowling at one & end at eight."

Similar bowling competitions were advertised in 1793, when the prize was a pair of buckles, and in 1798 when it was announced *"every man that bowls sixpence shall be entitled to a pint of beer, no man to bowl more than one shilling at a time"*. These village revels were common in the South and West of England, and are likely to have been a survival of the old Church Ales.

The Reading Mercury also reported small incidents in Mortimer, such as this notice which appeared in February 1795: *"Lost between the Horn at Mortimer & Reading, a bundle tied in a pocket handkerchief consisting of 3 muslin aprons, 2 pounds of tea & other articles. Whoever has found it & will bring it to Mr Bush at the sign of the Horn shall receive 15 shillings reward.."*

Mortimer saw many changes in the years from 1500 to 1800, and in that time the village increased quite substantially in size. Where once it had been a chiefly agricultural community, consisting mainly of small farmers, it was now home to some families of considerable wealth who possessed large holdings of land. The Royal connection had been lost, although the old manor boundaries remained. As the nineteenth century opened, Mortimer remained largely rural, although the surrounding area had already begun to alter with the advent of large-scale mechanisation.

Fairs

Fairs had been held in Mortimer for many years. The names of adjacent fields show that the public house, now the Horse and Groom, was the centre of activity, although it was not until 1802 that the Enclosure Commission formally set aside twenty acres of the common as a Fair Ground. The largest of these events were the two fairs held each year on 27th April



and 6th November. The Mortimer Horse and Welsh Cattle Fair in November was a large affair at which thousands of animals were bought and sold. The drovers from Wales and the West country brought their cattle, horses and geese into the village along the road known as Welshman's Road.

On Fair day there was much excitement. The schools were closed and travelling showmen arrived with swings, roundabouts and stalls. The horses showed their paces up and down the road outside the Horse and Groom, deals being clinched with a handshake in the traditional way. After the First World War there was a surplus of army vehicles on the market; in consequence the horse was no longer in such demand and the last horse fair took place in the early 1920s.

