

FEATURE ARTICLE

MARKETS AND FAIRS BY NIGEL WARDELL

The research into the markets and fairs of East Ilsley, which is the subject of one of our new publications, started when we discovered the record of the first market in the village in the National Archives, at Kew. This record is from 1222, when King Henry III granted the right to hold a market to Sewat de Osevell, lord of the East Ilsley manor. This record was written on parchment, stitched into a roll and became part of the Chancery Fine Rolls. We were very lucky to spot the word 'hildest' (an ancient spelling of the village name) written in spidery writing.

From this modest start, I was able to find several records of the markets and fairs of East Ilsley, through the centuries and found that I had enough material to justify a publication in booklet form.

A particularly interesting item was Sir Francis Moore's digest of his estates, which was written in 1620. The original document, held in Berkshire Record Office, has a chapter about each of his estates, including the manor of East Ilsley. Part of the document is written in Sir Francis' own hand and the majority by his clerk. It describes his title to the manor, including the grant that he obtained to hold markets in East Ilsley. The grant is itself of interest, not only for its relevance to East Ilsley, but also for the prohibition that Sir Francis obtained for markets at Cuckhamsley Hill (now known as Scutchamer's Knob – a well-known landmark on the Ridgeway).

When it came to choosing a title for the booklet, I eventually decided to use part of an old rhyme about East Ilsley. The Victoria County History of Berkshire records that the rhyme celebrates the failure of Stephen Hemsted, a former occupant of East Ilsley Hall, to induce the women of Ilsley to learn to spin.

*Ilsley remote amidst the Berkshire Downs,
Claims these distinctions o'er her sister towns;
Far famed for sheep and wool, though not for spinners,
For sportsmen, doctors, publicans and sinners.*

Having included the rhyme in the preface to the booklet, I realised just how appropriate it is to the history of markets and fairs in the village:

- Ilsley's remoteness ensured that, after the Black Death, its market was able to flourish, whereas the markets in other villages were supplanted by those of neighbouring towns.
- Ilsley was distinguished by the size of its sheep fairs over many years, although whether it ever ranked as one of the largest outside of the metropolis (as claimed in 19th century directories) is probably a matter of conjecture.
- Farmers brought their sheep (and cattle) from afar – even from Wales, and the wool sheared from the sheep or sold at the wool fairs was taken to Newbury or Winchester for spinning.
- The success of the sheep fairs gave rise to the growth of hospitality (and crime?) in the area, East Ilsley having no less than 12 pubs in 1850. The court of pipowders was instituted in the village about 1620, to deal with the 'sinners' at each fair.