

BYGONE

BY



**WAKES
FAIRS**

No. 12

SILEBY WAKES IN VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN TIMES

The older people in the village remember the Wakes Fair being held in the field by the Wash-pit, at the south end of Swan Street. In days gone by, this field where sheep were washed and sheared was regarded as the "playground" of Sileby.

Since those days, the Wakes Fair has appeared on several sites. Some of the present day proprietors of roundabouts who visit Sileby are the descendants of show owners who came to this village generations ago.

A story is still told by the show-folks of a year long ago, when they could not agree on a common site. The bigger showmen made their own arrangements in the village, and were followed by the smaller show and roundabout owners. That year, there were five separate little Wakes Fairs in different parts of the village during Wakes Week. Although the villagers enjoyed walking from one fair to the other, the showmen had a financial loss.

About 1890, before the Unity Hall was built in Swan Street, there was an unusually large Wakes Fair at the Wash-pit. Half way down Swan Street, close to the footpath was the "Flying Trapeze." A long wire rope was fastened to two sturdy poles, which were supported by stays. The wire rope was higher at one end than the other. Those who paid one penny to ride on the Trapeze, climbed up a high step-ladder to a small platform. On the rope was a wheel with handles. By taking hold of the handles, and stepping off the platform, the rider launched himself into a "Flying Trapeze" motion, and dangled in mid-air as the wheel took him from one end of the rope to the other. At the far end, where the rider was only a few feet above the ground, he dropped down to a heap of straw.

These bold young men who thrilled the village maidens with their rides along the high wire, would be a hundred years old, if they were alive today.

These bygone Sileby Wakes Fairs had many exciting sights and sounds. The red painted traction engines with polished brass fittings, the yellow flare-lamps and gaudy side-shows were a feast to the eyes of both young and old. The roar of steam engines, the high pitched warbling note of their whistles and the powerful music of the great show-organ, almost deafened the villagers who thronged the fair ground. The ringing bells on the roundabouts, the clang of wooden balls against the iron sheets at the "cokernut" shies, the loud voices of men attracting people to their side-shows, were an essential part of the atmosphere of the old fashioned Wakes Fair during the Sileby Feast Week.

In the days before cinemas, radio, television and record - players, the Wakes show ground seemed like a wonderland, and a great annual event in the lives of village people. There was a thrilling atmosphere about those old Wakes Fairs which is missing today.

WAKES WEATHER

Full enjoyment of the Wakes Fair, depended on there being good weather. As the time drew near, Sileby people began to look for signs to see how the elements would behave during their important Feast Week. There was a saying in the village at that time -

" Wet Quorn,
Fine Sileby."

It was generally believed that if it rained during Quorn Wakes, which took place about 24th August, the feast of St. Bartholemew, the Patron Saint of Quorn Parish Church, then Sileby would have a fine Wakes Week.

One old lady, who remembered Sileby Wakes during the reign of Queen Victoria, said, " the Wakes Fair was especially nice when there was a full harvest moon shining."

THE SHOWGROUND AT SILEBY WAKES IN THE PAST

The descriptions of bygone Wakes Fairs and what took place on the showground which follow, were given by Sileby- born eye witnesses. Most of them passed from this life years ago.

The Magic Lantern Show

During the late Victorian period, one of the most popular shows at the Wakes was the Magic Lantern . People loved to see pictures being projected on a screen. The tent filled quickly at each performance, and the villagers sat on wooden benches to stare in fascination at the hand-painted slides. The cumbersome iron and brass lantern was lit by carbide gas, which provided a bright white light.

As most of those attending the show had never been outside of Leicestershire, the scenes of places in England and abroad were a novelty.

Many went to the show to see the "comic pictures," which were similar to the cartoons we see in newspapers and magazines today. As each slide appeared on the screen, the audience slowly read aloud the sub-title, then roared with laughter. Reading aloud helped the older people, who had never attended school, and could not read.

When moving pictures came to the Fair, the Magic Lantern Show lost favour, and eventually disappeared.

Moving Pictures

One of the sensations of Sileby Wakes about the turn of the century was "Growther's Show of Living Pictures." Villagers gathered in front of Growther's booth to stare up at the platform, where, as someone said, "wimin dressed wi not much on, - and feathers" danced to the lively tunes of a small steam organ.

Inside the booth, people sat on wooden forms. When the flickering film was projected on the square white screen, they gazed open-mouthed in astonishment to see "living pictures" for the first time, even if the poor quality of the film gave the impression that it was pouring with rain.

One of the earliest films still remembered, showed a railway station with a train just arriving. The engine with a tall chimney pouring out black smoke, and blowing steam about its wheels, drew up at the platform. Carriage doors opened, and passengers in Victorian dress were seen walking with quick steps away from the train, and out of the station.

It seemed to be magic. Some people became so excited, they could watch no more, and ran out of the booth. One old lady, who "wondered what the world was coming to," was not able to sleep that night.

Some year before the First World War, news films were being shown at the Wakes - before the cinemas took up the idea. The showmen had their own cameras and developing equipment. Any interesting local event was filmed, processed and shown the same evening on the showground. If nothing unusual was taking place, the camera was taken to the factories to film the villagers as they left work at dinner time. The sight of a camera being turned by hand attracted attention, and when the workers were told that they would be able to see themselves in "living pictures", they flocked to the fair that night. If someone was well seen in the film, he would spend the rest of the night borrowing enough coppers to sit through every performance. Inside the booth, the noise was deafening, as people laughed to see themselves and their work mates, and shouted out the name of every face that appeared on the screen. The "Show of Living Pictures" was a talking point in the village long after the Wakes had gone.

The Boxing Booth

The popular favourite of the men in the village was the Boxing Booth. After dark, a row of naphtha flares cast a yellow light across the front of the booth, with its colourful wooden panels with portraits of famous bare-knuckle fighters and later pugilists, shown in classical poses, or depicting scenes from their contests. The portraits included Tom Sayers, Jem Mace, Pearce "The Game Chicken" and others.

Crowds were attracted by a dancing girl, and various "stunts" performed by the proprietor. Someone recalls the showman brandishing a sword, which he claimed was a souvenir of the Zulu War, and had slain "many a man." He then threw potatoes in the air, sometimes catching them on the point of the sword, and cutting others in half as they fell. It always drew a crowd.

The showman then brought forward and introduced his boxers. Most of them were old hands at the game, and bore the marks of battle, cauliflower ears, flattened noses and scars about their eyes. They were all said to be "champions" of some distant part of the kingdom, and it was claimed that each had quite recently defeated some well known pugilist. Nobody in the crowd ever questioned these extravagant claims.

Several pairs of battered leather boxing gloves were held aloft by the showman, as he challenged local lads to enter the ring to box three rounds with his men. He offered a "dollar" to any village lad who could beat the booth boxer on points, and a golden half sovereign if he knocked him out.

At Sileby Wakes, there was never any shortage of challengers, as there was nothing the young men of this village enjoyed more than a good "fate." As each of the booth boxers stepped forward, hands were raised in the crowd, with the cry, "Al ev a goo at 'im." The boxing gloves were then thrown over the heads of the crowd to the challengers. As the boxers disappeared behind the platform curtains, there was a rush to the pay box to get a ring-side place to see the Sileby lads in action.

The booth boxers wore the authentic equipment, but the challengers usually stripped to the waist, and fought in their socks, so that their boots would not damage the canvas.

As the showman was the promoter, manager and referee, the challengers had to work hard to win a "dollar." When a booth fighter was knocked down, the referee spent much time in escorting the challenger to a neutral corner before he began a slow count over his fallen employee. To win the golden half sovereign, the booth fighter had to be "out cold."


Although booth fighters were experienced enough to avoid serious trouble, they needed all their skill when they came to Sileby. Showmen probably lost more money here than at any other Wakes. A local man who won the gold coin would make his way from the ground in triumph, surrounded by admirers, to celebrate at the nearest pub.

If a challenger seemed to lack aggression in the ring, he was abused by the other village lads. Arguments would develop later, and another fight begin. There were often better fights outside than those inside the booth.

One Sileby man who was "belted" round the ring in the first round, called for a drink of water as he rested in his corner. When the second round began, the booth boxer received a mouthful of water in the face, a thump on the jaw, and took no further interest in the encounter.


There is a true Boxing Booth story of a Sileby Wakes 80 years ago, which at the time, gave much amusement to the village.

One of the best Sileby boxers challenged a booth fighter with the sole object of winning that half sovereign. The fight lasted less than one round. The Sileby man "pasted" his fairground opponent all over the ring, and finally hit him with such a heavy



blow, he went over the ropes, and his weight carried him through the canvas wall of the booth, and out into the night... As the Sibley man stood in the centre of the ring holding up his hands in a victory salute, receiving the wild acclamation of the crowd, the wife of the unfortunate booth boxer climbed into the ring and "set about" the local hero, with her fists and buttoned boots.

The Tatooed Lady




In a small booth there was a lady who was said to be covered from head to foot with tatoos, but the moral requirements of that age enabled her to exhibit only a part of her anatomy to the public.

The showman outside the booth informed the Wakes crowd that this remarkable lady had crossed the China Sea, and had paid vast sums of money to have her body adorned by the finest tatoo artists of the orient. At the price of but one copper coin, the people of this village could see with their own eyes, a living gallery of art.

Inside the booth, the Tatooed Lady sat on a stage, displaying her ample arms, neck, face and feet, covered with blue dragons, birds, flowers and butterflies.

Those who happened to wander about the showground in the day time, might see this lady in the midst of the family washing, and without the trace of a design on her skin. The tatoos were transfers, which were applied each evening before the show opened.

An Aquatic Show



A showman named Charlie Birch brought an unusual side-show to the Sibley Wakes Fair. Inside the booth was a huge glass and steel tank, filled with water. Miss Birch, his daughter was the star attraction. Dressed in a bathing costume of that period, she ascended a flight of steps, and lowered herself into the tank. Having a fine pair of lungs, she could remain under the water in sight of the villagers for an extra ordinary length of time. Someone remembers her eating a banana under the water, and making the skin float to the surface.

To conclude her act, a number of articles were thrown into the tank - old watches, door keys and pieces of jewellery. The young lady moved about the bottom of the tank and was applauded by the onlookers as she recovered the objects.

The Animal Show

The large menageries or "wild beast shows" and circuses were not Wakes visitors. They needed full houses at their performances to maintain the expenses of the show, and were unable to compete with side-shows and roundabouts.

Small animal shows appeared regularly at the Sileby Wakes, and exhibited an assortment of animals, birds and reptiles.

Outside the booth were coloured pictures of rare and exotic creatures which had no connection with the show. The showman announced through a megaphone, that he had obtained, "at enormous expense from the four quarters of the globe," wonderful animals which were not to be seen anywhere else in the kingdom. The villagers were told that for the paltry sum of one penny, they could see the biggest rat in captivity, which had been taken at terrible risk in the sewers of Liverpool. The enormous rat was in fact, a coypu, a species of South American aquatic rodent - but to country folks, it looked just like an overgrown sewer rat.

Another star of the show was the Tasmanian Devil. Those who paid their penny expecting to see a ferocious beast akin to a sabre-toothed tiger, found only a little brown animal with a white band across its chest, about the size of a fox terrier and sound asleep.

Freaks of nature were a feature of the side show. A large board outside the booth listed the items on display - "a duck with four legs, a calf with two heads, a snow white albino blackbird" and other amazing creatures. These freaks were certainly on display, but they were stuffed, and rather moth-eaten.

A young lady standing in front of the booth drew gasps of awe from the Wakes crowd as she placed a six foot python round her neck. At the pay-box, a monkey wearing a pill-box hat and a red jacket, took the pennies from those who entered.

The showman always concluded his introduction with the words, "Hurry up, folks, pass right in, there is no waiting."

The old fashioned Animal Show had an exciting and distinctive smell; it was a pungent combination of warm animal bodies, sawdust and oil smoke from flare lamps.

Fortune Tellers

No Sileby Wakes was complete without a Fortune Teller. Someone observed that although the mystic who came to the village was not always the same person, she was "Gypsy Lee." A board outside her tiny two-person booth showed a large hand with the lines used in palmistry, and the mysterious word, "clarvoyant."

After crossing her swarthy palm with silver, all manner of secret personal hopes and fears were disclosed. The gypsy fortune tellers were so skilled in the art of observation, even Sherlock Holmes would have been hard pressed to equal them. Their style and quality of clothing and footwear, the condition of the hands,

rings, jewellery, etc., were enough to disclose the patron's age, financial status, whether married, single or widow, domestic or factory worker. These and many other details were determined before the villager had even opened her mouth.

Some of these sessions with the Fortune Teller were taken seriously, and women remembered every word the gypsy had said, even years later. When some event occurred, it would be remembered that something like that had been foretold at one Wakes by the Fortune Teller.

As people generally dislike to hear bad news, much of the information given in the booth was hopeful, but few persons left without the "gypsy's warning". They were told to be careful about their health, ot to guard against trusting a dark stranger they would meet.

Although most of those who visited the Fortune Teller did so "for fun," there was always an inward desire that the nice things they heard would come true.

SILEBY WAKES AMUSEMENTS AND ROUNDABOUTS

Before the First World War, the Wakes showground was full of roundabouts, booths, stalls, traction engines and horse-drawn caravans. Many features of those Wakes are now almost forgotten. Some of the older villagers remember a variety of attractions offered in those days, and the names of the prominent showmen - Bishop, Bishton, Cox, Holland, Martin, Twigden and others.

The Spinner- Majig

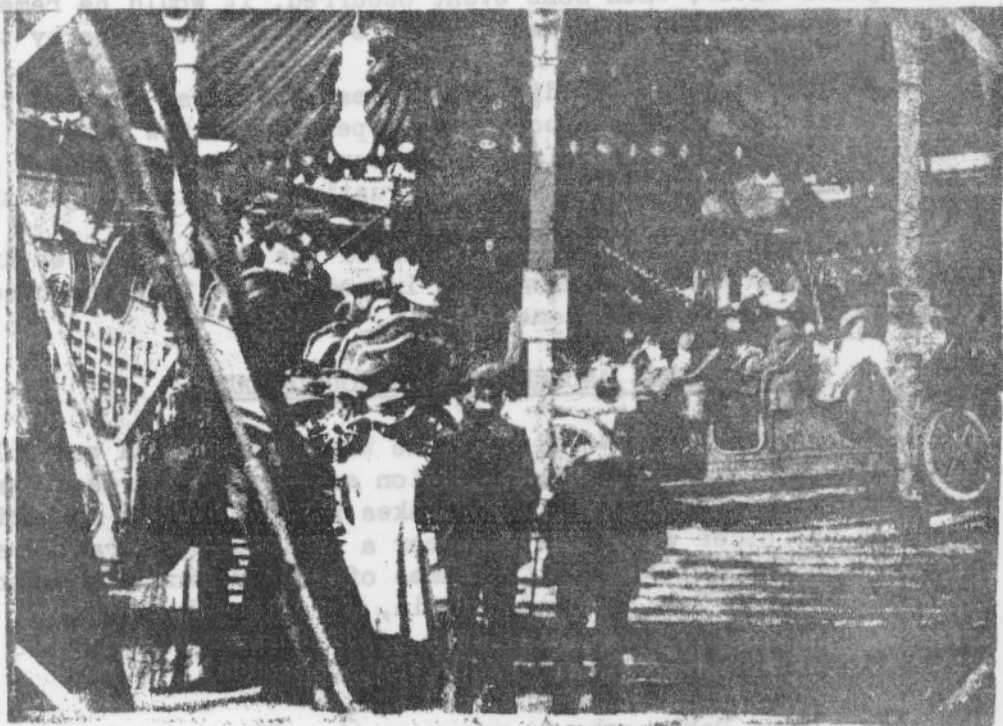
Mr. James Dakin, who is now more than 90 years of age, remembers Sileby Wakes 80 years ago. In those days, children crowded round a stall called "The Spinner-Majig," which had a pointer moving round a numbered circle. Against some of the lucky numbers were bags of home-made boiled sweets. Contestants paid $\frac{1}{2}$ d to spin the pointer, and if it came to rest against a lucky number, they picked up the bag of sweets.

Sea- on - Land

This was a horse-drawn vehicle, with the upper part shaped like a boat. It carried a dozen children round the village when they had paid the fare of $\frac{1}{2}$ d each. They entered the boat by a step-ladder. Iron rods coupled between the road wheels and the sides of the boat caused the vessel to rock slowly from side to side, as it moved along the streets. Mr. Dakin remembers the owner of the "Sea-on-Land" making a little extra money taking Sileby girls to Black and Driver's hosiery factory at Barrow-on-Scar.

The Dragons

The largest roundabout on the Wakes showground had a number of cars with small wheels guided by rails, and rising and falling over two "hills" as they rotated. Each car had several wide seats, covered with scarlet velvet, and surrounded by highly polished brass hand-rails. As the cars usually had a dragon head at one end, and



a spiky curled tail at the other, the roundabout was known as "The Dragons." In Sileby, it was known as the Gondolas, pronounced, "gone-dowluz." In the photograph above, the cars have been made to resemble charabancs.

The Cake Walk

A favourite ride at the old Sileby Wakes, was the Cake Walk. There were two gangways placed side by side, which moved backwards and forwards with a slight rising and falling motion. The object was to walk along one gangway, holding the brass handles, then to return by the other. The power was provided by a traction engine, and the Cake Walk was in constant motion.

A Sileby woman looking back on those days, said, "at fust, way wor too frit to goo on it!" It was a matter of becoming accustomed to the rhythm of the movement. She said, "Way uster fight agen it, an that made it wus - way fell all over the place." Once the motion was mastered, it was easy. Couples could be seen dancing along the swaying gangways to waltzes played by the steam organ. (The name Cake Walk was taken from an American dance of the Victorian period).

Someone remembered a Wakes when a woman began to lose her large hat by the shaking on the gangway. She put her hand behind her head to catch it, but took hold of the hat of the woman following. Both lost their balance, and were seen staggering backwards and forwards in unison, to the amusement of the crowd.

It is said that there were some "rare sights" on the Cake Walk after the people came out of the public houses late at night, and tried to walk along the gangways.

The Flyin' 'osses

This was a merry-go-round for children, with eight small horses. Some roundabouts of this type were manually operated, the owner laboriously turning a wheel like that on a washing mangle. Bishop's Flyin' 'osses had a small steam engine to turn the roundabout, but one year, it performed so badly, a pony was used to pull it round.

The Gallopin' 'osses

This was a massive adult version of the above. On two sides were flights of steps leading to the circular platform, where the horses were mounted. Large horses carved from wood, with flowing manes and legs extended, were set in rows of three, and moved up and down as the roundabout turned to the rich tones of its large steam organ. The whole structure was beautifully painted in attractive colours, and overlaid in places with gold leaf. Some roundabouts of this kind had also peacocks, ostriches and cockerels.

The Joy Wheel

One of the pleasures of a Wakes Fair was to watch others enjoying themselves, and this applied particularly to the mat-slide or helter-skelter and the now almost forgotten Joy Wheel.

The Wheel was in shape like an inverted saucer, some ten feet in diameter, and two feet above the ground. The whole surface was highly polished, and curved gently downwards from the centre. The riders sat with their backs to the middle, and their legs stretched out before them. As the Joy Wheel began to rotate, the riders did their best to remain where they were, but as the Wheel turned faster, they lost their grip and slid over the polished wood, and rolled on to the grass. When the Wheel stopped, it was always empty. Although Sileby people called this the Joy Wheel, it was known to the showmen as "The Devil's Dish."

Over Boats

Bishtons had six Over Boats in a line, with a steam engine in the middle. They were a larger version of the Swing Boats, which were operated by the passengers pulling on a rope.

Skittles

The old Wakes had long alley skittles. There were four sets of nine-pin skittles, set at the end of twelve foot long boards, and each illuminated by flare lamps. The showman's cry was, " Three balls for tuppence. Nuts for seven, eight or nine down." About the turn of the century, men could win cokernuts for knocking down the required number of skittles, but later, the prize was monkey-nuts. The nuts were taken from a sack by a tin mug, and poured into the hands or the pocket of a winner. Women and children participated, standing half way along the alley.

WAKES TOYS AND SWEETS

Lead Sqibs

A toy found on the old Wakes showground was a small, cheap water pistol, known in the village as a "lead squib." The pistol was roughly moulded in lead, and to it was attached a hollow rubber handle. When the handle was squeezed, a fine jet of water was expelled from the nozzle. As there were fire buckets all round the showground, children were never short of ammunition. Many a lad had his ears boxed for spraying accidentally someone's best Sunday suit, or a new Wakes dress.

Confetti

Many readers will remember a time when it was the custom for children to buy confetti to play with on the showground. Money was scarce, and the youngsters soon spent their few coppers spending money. One man remembers a Wakes Fair 70 years ago, when he treated a pretty girl to a ride on the "Flyin' 'osses," and as the ride cost one penny each, he was broke for the rest of the Wakes!

Confetti at $\frac{1}{2}$ d a bag, provided much fun for the children, who threw it by the handful over their friends, and anyone who was passing. One lady remembers the lads throwing the confetti in her face, and pushing it in her mouth when she screamed. They had to shake their clothes a great deal before they entered their homes.

Sawdust Balls

A regular Wakes toy was the sawdust ball. A quantity of sawdust in a sheet of silver paper had been pressed into the shape of a ball. It had then been inserted into a small net bag, which had all the colours of the rainbow, and a piece of elastic attached. It was a thing of only passing beauty. Once the silver paper was ruptured, the sawdust poured out, and the ball collapsed.

Wakes Sweetmeats

There were at least two stalls at Wakes time selling brandysnap and Grantham ginger-bread. Older villagers may remember Mrs. Atkins and Mrs. Johnson, who had stalls in High Street.

A lady who died some years ago, could remember the Wakes of the 1870's, when there were stalls selling trinkets and sweetmeats along the wall of the churchyard, under the old elm tree. It was then the slow quiet world of the horse and cart. Today, those stalls would create chaos at "Hill's Corner."

Rock Apples

A Wakes time sweet enjoyed by children was known in Sileby as a Rock Apple. A stick about six inches long was thrust into the top of an apple, which was then dipped into hot treacle toffee, and placed upside down on a tray to cool and set. The flavour of apple and toffee was distinctive and pleasant.

There were two minor perils associated with Rock Apples. First, the crisp, sweet treacle toffee disguised the green, sour cooking apple beneath, and this could lead to sharp pains, known in Sileby as "belly ache." Secondly, there was the possibility of getting a few splinters in the fingers from the stick, which had been cut from an old orange box, or some other inferior wood.

Nuts

Children could buy a bag of mixed nuts for $\frac{1}{2}$ d. As most of the nuts were from unsold stock of the previous Christmas, the children searched the showground to find stones to crack the shells, to discover how many "bad uns" they had in their bags.

Supper at the Wakes

Most people seemed to enjoy a "walking picnic" as they wandered round the Wakes Fair in the evening. They were seen holding fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, pig's trotters and bread and cheese. A plate of peas, sprinkled with vinegar, could be bought for a penny. A stall with a portable coke burning stove sold the forerunner of the modern "hot-dog." A sausage on half a slice of bread dipped into the frying fat could be purchased for a penny. Few people needed any supper when they arrived home after an evening at the Sileby Wakes Fair.

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Bygone Sileby

The next booklet, Number 13, will be about the old Sileby
SUPERSTITIONS. It should revive some memories of the past.

In the near future, these booklets will include a history of
Sileby Parish Church.

After several years of investigation, it has been possible to
discover the identity of every Patron and Parson of this church,
from 1200 to 1970. They include some interesting and unusual people.