

Axminster's Livestock Auction Market

Axminster has had a formal charter allowing markets to be held since the 13th century, and animals were sold as part of that. However it was not until the 19th century that clear evidence for the existence of organised livestock auctions can be found. By that time the Knight family held first a share in, and then, after 1871, all of, the manorial rights, including those pertaining to the market. Prior to the emergence of auctions the assumption is that animals were brought into the town on market day when they were considered to be ready to slaughter, and then sold by private agreement to one of the various butchers of the town.

For centuries the market was held in Market Square, and there were also temporary butchers shops (or 'shambles') there where the animals were killed and butchered, and their meat sold to householders.

At some point after Trinity Square was created, following the town-centre fire of 1834, the sale of livestock by public auction either moved there or was established there as a new way of selling animals. One of the prime movers in this process was Benjamin Gage, a local auctioneer, who advertised monthly sales in Trinity Square from 1857, according to 'The Book of Axminster with Kilmington' (which is the source for several of the facts quoted here).

Benjamin Gage was subsequently joined in partnership by his son John under the name B&J Gage. He was not the first auctioneer in Axminster, but he is the first who appears to have specialised in livestock. At very much the same time specialist cattle dealers were becoming established in the town, no doubt attracted by the regular auctions.

By the early years of the 20th century there was pressure on grounds of both public safety and public health for livestock markets to be held in dedicated premises, and for butchers to establish shops rather than using temporary stalls. In 1910 B&J Gage obtained a licence from the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, and on 11 May 1911 signed a conveyance with both the Knight family (as owners of the market rights) and Messrs R&C Snell (as fellow auctioneers and incoming purchasers from the Knights of the remaining Manorial rights, which were connected to the market). This conveyance coincided with the removal of the weekly livestock auctions from Trinity Square and into a new location on Combe Fields, off South Street.

The site itself, which had until then been the garden of a large house, was bought by the Gages and the Snells, and work soon started on the construction of permanent buildings and livestock pens on a half-acre concrete base (to facilitate cleaning). It was opened on 6 October 1912, with space for 400 mature cattle, 300 calves, 2,000 sheep and 500 pigs and facilities for poultry and rabbits. The main auction ring was used for selling mature cattle, with most other animals being sold in their pens. The two firms of auctioneers, still competing head-to-head at that time, conducted their sales at opposite ends of the market.

By 1915, however, both Benjamin and John Gage had died, with the son pre-deceasing his father. Ellen Selina Gage, John's widow, signed a further agreement regarding the market house, market toll rights and dues on 23 July 1914, the other parties to that agreement being Robert Snell (of R&C Snell), Henry Knight (senior and junior) and Axminster Rural District Council.

Copies of all of these agreements are held in the National Archives, and reference details can be found via their on-line 'Discoveries' catalogue.

Major Henry Knight (1849 to 1917), the older of the two Knight family signatories, had by 1911 moved away from Axminster to join the Army, and his only child, also called Henry (1878 to 1947), was by then a barrister in London. By 1915 they had sold off most if not all of their remaining land and property in Axminster, and in 1916 the formal title of Lord of the Manor was sold to Charles Snell (of R&C Snell). In later years one of the main auctioneers in Axminster was Arthur Benjamin Gage, the son of John Gage, who had joined Messrs R&C Snell following the effective merger of their two family firms.

All of the persons mentioned above are covered in the 'pen portraits' section of this website.

In the 1950s the manorial and market rights were bought by Frank Rowe of Messrs R&C Snell, and have subsequently passed to Jim Rowe, the present Lord of the Manor of Axminster. Messrs R&C Snell have more recently been absorbed into Symonds & Sampson. In the 1980s and 1990s Graham Barton of R&C Snell won several titles in the UK National Auction Competitions.

The market was at its most active in the years between the 1920s and the 1980s, but with the rise in large slaughterhouses and national butchery chains the auction as a sales mechanism declined in importance, and at very much the same time the country suffered a series of animal disease catastrophes. In the late 1980s BSE (more widely known as 'mad cow disease') primarily revealed itself in dairy cattle, though the disruption to markets caused by animal movement controls also affected beef and sheep farmers. Then there was the widespread foot-and-mouth outbreak of 2001, which directly affected all types of livestock, including farms in East Devon. The rigours of movement controls and traceability were probably the final nail in the coffin for Axminster's livestock market, and the site was sold for re-development as housing in 2006.