



## 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year - 2021

Cockermouth has medieval origins, forming below the newly constructed Norman Castle. It is believed to have become a borough in around 1210, when 'the free men of Cockermouth were granted certain liberties'. On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1221, King Henry III granted the Manor of Cockermouth a Charter to hold a Saturday market. Later in the same year on 20<sup>th</sup> November, a revised Charter was issued, now for a Monday market. It is not clear why there was this change, apart from the suggestion that they found it difficult to tidy up in time for the Sabbath after a Saturday market. There has been a Monday market ever since, at least until very recent years.

Despite our town not currently having a regular market, the 800<sup>th</sup> is an anniversary that we should all be proud of and celebrate. Cockermouth has suffered significant challenges in the last few years, from major flooding to the current Covid 19 pandemic. All the more reason why we all need to support our town and ensure that it continues to thrive as a town that we are proud to live in during the coming years. With this in mind, a programme of celebratory activities is being planned. This is outlined later, but because of the current pandemic, it is not possible to plan ahead in detail. Further information will be provided on the Town Council and Civic Trust web sites as well as in the media.

The primary purpose of a market town is the provision of goods and services to the surrounding locality. Although market towns were known in antiquity, their number increased rapidly from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Domesday Book of 1086 lists 50 market towns in England, but by 1350 over 2000 new markets had been established, one of these in Cockermouth. Market towns most often grew up close to fortified places such as castles, not only to enjoy their protection, but also because large manorial households generated demand for goods and services. Moreover, a successful market town attracted people and generated income which helped pay for the town's defences. After 1199, it became the practice for the King to grant charters to villages and towns allowing them to hold markets on specific days.

## **History of Cockermouth Market**

Once the Charter was granted in 1221, the Lord of the Manor was able to take tolls and some protection was provided against rival markets. In particular, rival markets could not operate on the same day and no new market could be established within walking distance of Cockermouth, taken to be around 6 miles. The Charter still formally stands and can theoretically be invoked today. It is held by Allerdale Borough Council as 'the holder of the Royal Charter'.

Market Place was established below the new Norman Castle outside the gates which would originally have been at the bottom of what is now 'Castlegate'. This would have been the entrance to the castle and road access to Market Place from the east would have been by St Helen's Street. In 1342, this was referred to as 'Capella Sanct Elene', in 1540 as 'Sanct Elyns Gait', but by 1578 it had gained its modern name of St Helen's Street. Kirkgate, which comes into Market Place from the south, would have originally been 'Kirkgatestreete'. It provided access to the church, but until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had a ford at the bottom to cross what is now Bitter Beck, previously 'Skitter Beck', from the Norse 'skit' for filth. 'Ye Merket Place' of 1578 was sometimes referred to as 'High Street', and this area of town was referred to as 'Above Bridge'; 'Below Bridge' became the Main Street area. It is believed that the original settlement was the 'Above Bridge' area and Main Street was added on at a later date.

As early as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, there is record of there being a Moot Hall. The design of the most recent hall would have been similar to the still standing Moot Hall in Keswick; i.e. an open sided covered market, slightly above street level, with a room above supported by stone pillars and accessed by steps at one end. This would have been the 'moot', or assembly place, where meetings and courts were held. There is also reference to a tollbooth where market tolls were paid. The last Moot Hall was demolished in 1829. This was a serious loss to the market and activities that had been concentrated there became scattered over a wider area, becoming a nuisance, particularly in respect of butcher's stalls. As a consequence, a new market hall was opened on a site below All Saints Church. It was one of the biggest market halls in Cumberland and was designed on the lines of St John's Market in Liverpool. It included slaughter houses below and a separate fish market. The market hall was filled with stallholders until rationing in the 1939-45 war ended marketing in the building and it was used by the Ministry of Food for the storage of extra rations. Becoming disused, it was taken over by the local council for a while for storage purposes, eventually being demolished for housing.

A regulation of 1679 was designed to make conditions of buying and selling fair for all, enabling those who lived in the surrounding villages to reach market in time to have an equal chance with the townspeople and not when the best goods had already been sold. The scavenger was charged with ringing a market bell, before which no produce could be sold or bought, under financial penalty for failing to comply. The bell remains and can be seen in a niche high on the wall of number 9 on the south side of Market Place.

Despite the 800 years of history, the frontages of most of the buildings now facing onto Market Place date from Georgian times, giving the area a Georgian feel, similar to most of the Cockermouth Town Centre. Over recent years, the centre of trading has moved more towards Main Street and Station Street and the market itself has gradually diminished and now disappeared altogether. Allerdale Borough Council have a vision of seeking to restore a regular market in Cockermouth but this appears unlikely to be in Market Place itself due to modern day traffic volumes.

## **Life in Cockermouth Medieval Market**

The market would have been a very important part of life in medieval Cockermouth both as part of the economy, employing many people, and providing an outlet for goods made locally or brought in. It would have been a very busy and noisy place on market day with merchants shouting their wares, the clatter of the iron clad cart wheels and the noise of the animals waiting to be sold. It was probably also the social highlight of the week, the opportunity for people in the local area to meet up and exchange news. A large variety of goods would be up for sale and the buyer would be able to find most things that they might need, including foodstuffs such as grain, butter, meat, fish, poultry, fruit, herbs and vegetables and materials including leather, linen, woollen cloth, jewellery and other fine goods. An important part of the regulation of the market was that prices and quality were checked by the authorities on behalf of the Lord of the Manor, for all goods, not just foodstuffs. The accuracy of the weights by which goods were sold could be checked too, by means of official weights and measures. Transgressors could be fined heavily.

## **Celebratory Activities**

The celebratory year began with a re-enactment of the granting of the Royal Charter. The Lord Lieutenant of Cumbria, representing the Monarch, handed the 'Charter' to the Town Mayor in Market Place. The occasion was marked by the ringing of the market bell. A plaque with the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary emblem can be seen at the centre of the flower bed at the Oakhurst entrance to the town.

Allerdale Borough Council are actively considering the feasibility of reintroducing a regular market in Cockermouth. This will depend on the willingness of enough market traders to participate. If it does proceed this year, there will be an opportunity to celebrate the market charter anniversary at the opening of the new market.

Because of the Covid 19 pandemic lock-down, it has been difficult for organisations to commit yet to detailed activities. However, the following are activities that are being planned. Details will be updated on the web sites of the Town Council, ([www.ckermouth.org](http://www.ckermouth.org)), and Civic Trust, ([www.ckermouthcivictrust.co.uk](http://www.ckermouthcivictrust.co.uk)).

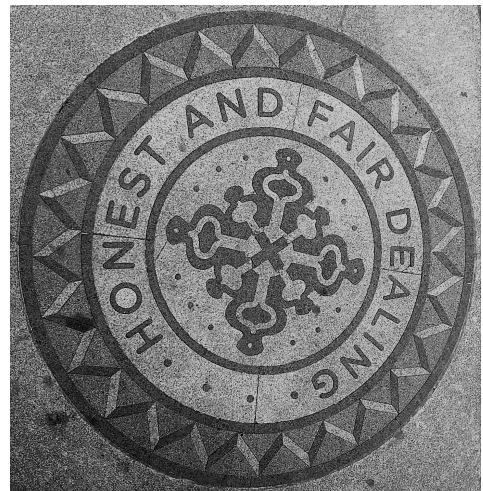
- Cockermouth Heritage Group are planning an exhibition relating to the history of the Market and its Charter in association with Lorton and Derwent Fells Local History Society. This is likely to be in association with an exhibition about the life of Dorothy Wordsworth on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth this year, to be located at the Kirkgate Centre in August.
- Lorton and Derwent Fells Local History Society are planning a lecture on a subject connected to the Charter, potentially to be held on the anniversary of the issue of the Charter for a Monday Market on Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> November.
- Cockermouth Live is planned to go ahead this year and the organisers are considering at least one event relating to the medieval period.
- Discussions are in hand with Lord and Lady Egremont as to how our medieval castle can be involved in the celebrations. This may include a special relocation of the November fireworks display to be centred on the castle.
- *Chamber of Trade?*
- *Cockermouth Schools?*

## The Market Charter

Allerdale Borough Council is currently the legal custodian of the Market Charter for Cockermouth. An image of part of the Charter is shown below.

*Image to be provided by Allerdale BC*

Artwork, mosaics and floor plaques have been installed within the current market place depicting some of the history of the town. Amongst them is an artwork celebrating the market cross as shown here. A market cross is a structure used to mark a market square where the right to hold a market was granted by a monarch. The origin would have been religious, perhaps to promote 'honest and fair dealing'. There is also a 'Market Bell Legend, 1685' beneath the bell, '*It is put in pain that the scavenger shall this day forward every market day ring the market bell at exactly 12 o'clock*'. Not obeying the bell could invoke a fine of 6s-8d.



The 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration programme of the granting of the Royal Market Charter to Cockermouth was initiated by **Cockermouth and District Civic Trust**. This leaflet has also been prepared and part funded by the Trust for issue to householders in the Cockermouth area. If you would like to find out more about the Trust or indeed to join, please contact our membership Secretary at 57 Castlegate Drive, Cockermouth, CA13 9HD. The annual subscription is just £7.50, plus £5 for each additional member living at the same household.



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