

## The St. Thomas Easter Fair: 1820-1900

Dr. Jill A. Sullivan, Associate Research Fellow, University of Exeter  
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In the nineteenth century the annual St. Thomas Easter Fair drew crowds of revellers, eager to enjoy the traditions and novelties offered by the various showmen. However, despite its evident popularity for many, the fair was also the subject of disapproval and regret. Newspaper reviewers could applaud the colourful scene, yet also decry the gambling and suspected immorality that took place at the fairground. Diarists recollected the traditional games and rides and the showmen grumbled at the changing locations west of the river Exe. Using archive and newspaper sources, this essay offers a glimpse of the fair in the nineteenth century through the characters and commentators who recorded it each year.

### Origins and locations

The Easter Fair had its origins in the medieval history of Exeter, when five new fairs were introduced into the religious calendar.<sup>1</sup> A fair on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent had been established in 1374 for which, according to the historian Maryanne Kowaleski, 'there is no evidence that the citizens of Exeter ever bothered to obtain a charter. Nor did they obtain one for another fair they began about thirty years later in 1431. The fair took place on Good Friday'. In 1500 or 1501 the latter fair was extended to the Wednesday and Thursday before Easter.<sup>2</sup> Initially, as with other annual fairs, the Easter Fair would have been essentially a trading fair, but all such events would have been visited by itinerant entertainers and eventually an accompanying pleasure fair became established in the St. Thomas area. By the 1800s it was the pleasure fair rather than the market fair that had survived.

In 1877, the local diarist James Cossins recalled the Easter Fair of the 1820s, in an essay published in the *Exeter Flying Post*. In this piece, Cossins recollected that

[t]he various standings – consisting of toys, confectionery, fruits, oysters, cockles, &c – were taken up in the street, commencing at the pit to the church (no doubt many readers are not aware of the situation of the then pit, it was the site of the present railway station, and was about four feet below the roadway – consisting of an inn, blacksmiths shop, and a dwelling house, almost adjoining Beaufort House, which was originally the County Gaol). Opposite, in front of the debtors' ward, were booths for theatrical performances, shows, swings, boats, merrigrounds [*sic*], &c., &c. There being no police regulations, footballs were freely used in the streets, much to the annoyance of the stand keepers, the rickety ones sometimes having to succumb. If a fine day it was an animated sight in the three large fields leading to Cowick; dotted all over with the rising generation playing rounders, kicking footballs, &c., whilst drop the

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<sup>1</sup> Maryanne Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 59

<sup>2</sup> Kowaleski, pp. 66, 68.

handkerchief, kiss-in-the-ring, &c., were numerous patronised in the secluded corners.<sup>3</sup>

The streets and fields of St. Thomas remained the principal site for the fair; in 1830, a reporter for *Woolmer's Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* considered that the location was less than desirable 'standing as it does so near the "Debtor's Door," & terminating its western boundary with a contagious prospect of the Lunatic Asylum'.<sup>4</sup> By 1835 the increase in shows and booths, plus 'the depositories for the Sale of sweetmeats and toys' meant that a new site was needed.<sup>5</sup> A retrospective report in the *Exeter Flying Post* in 1891 recalled how, prior to the move,

[t]he booth and shows stood two and three deep in the road, leaving barely enough room for a single vehicle to pass. Complaints of the inconvenience of this arrangement became so numerous that the scene of operations was transferred to the field opposite the parish church.<sup>6</sup>

By 1837 'Mr. HARRIS' OLD FAIR FIELD, opposite the Church' was an established site for the fair although the stall owners and showmen did not always keep to their new location. In 1847 the *Western Times* reported that the

booth people, mummers, &c., were somewhat harassed by a local magistrate, and the shows were very properly sent into the field opposite the church, instead of being allowed to remain in the highway, obstructing the thoroughfare and destroying the peace of the resident villagers.<sup>7</sup>

But, in general, the main fair was still being held in Mr. Harris's old fair field nearly thirty years later in 1864 when the venue was changed once more.<sup>8</sup> According to a *Post* reporter, writing in 1891, the change of venue in the mid-1860s had occurred because 'the owner of the field' opposite the church 'found that the popular idea of amusement clashed with his religious convictions' and the 'showmen and stallkeepers therefore migrated to a field off the Alphington-road'.<sup>9</sup> In 1865, the *Devon Weekly Times* carried a report stating that 'Easter Fair this year was held in a field in Alphington-street, instead of in the usual place.'<sup>10</sup> And, when Wombwell's menagerie visited the fair in 1867, the *Gazette* noted that it would appear at the Fairground on Alphington Road in St. Thomas.<sup>11</sup> The site was more specifically given as the 'Field/adjourning the railway Arch, Alphington Road' in advertisement of 1869.<sup>12</sup> The Alphington Road site remained

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<sup>3</sup> 'St. Thomas or Easter Fair Fifty Years Since', in *Exeter Flying Post* (hereafter referred to as the *Post*) 14 March 1877, p. 7. See also the *Western Times*, 16 March 1877, p. 2, and Cossins *Reminiscences*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> *Woolmer's Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* (hereafter referred to as the *Gazette*), 17 April 1830, p. [3].

<sup>5</sup> *Gazette*, 25 April 1835, p. [2].

<sup>6</sup> *Post*, 28 March 1891, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Western Times*, 10 April 1847, p. 6

<sup>8</sup> *Post*, 17 February 1864, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Post*, 28 March 1891, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 21 April 1865, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Gazette*, 18 April 1867, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Gazette*, 10 March 1869, p. 8.

the home of the Easter Fair for a number of years, but in 1874 the *Western Times* commented that there had been a change of venue the previous year, to 'a field on the Okehampton-road' and in 1875, the same paper acknowledged 'the customary field near the Okehampton-street railway arch' as the now regular site for the Fair.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, in the 1876 report, the paper detailed the site as being the 'old rack Field', at the entrance to the old Okehampton Road.<sup>14</sup> In marked contrast to James Cossins's reminiscences of the old fair spilling into the streets and fields of St. Thomas, in 1878 the *Post* unromantically pointed out that the fair was 'held this year in a field at the back of the gas works.'<sup>15</sup> And in 1879, the site changed again, this time to 'a field near the St. Thomas Union'.<sup>16</sup> In 1881 the fair appeared to be back in its more usual site of a field in the Okehampton Road, where it remained until 1884. In the following year the fair was based again on Okehampton Street, in the 'large field near the St. Thomas Union Workhouse' although a visit by Bostock & Wombwell's Menagerie in 1885 meant that the St. Thomas Football Ground on the Okehampton Road had to be requisitioned as an additional site.<sup>17</sup> A *Gazette* reporter acknowledged the annoyance that the changes in sites had occasioned, suggesting that, as the

showmen have had to make many shifts first and last within the St. Thomas parish [...] from present appearances it seems pretty certain that they are drawing to the end of their tether, and will have to pitch their caravans elsewhere, for certainly by comparing the present with the past, the Fair as an annual "Institution" seems destined to become extinct.<sup>18</sup>

Whether the showmen would eventually stop attending the fair as a result of personal grievance or the perceived decline of the event – itself the result of regularly changed venues – is here unclear, but as the local newspapers carried nostalgic reports lamenting the modern fair and forecasting its decline throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, more weight should perhaps be given to the immediate complaints of the showmen over changing sites, than to any temporary drop in visitor numbers. A single site for the Fair on the Okehampton Road was maintained for the rest of the 1880s, and in 1889 buses transported visitors through Exeter, from the London Inn Square, down Fore Street to the destination of the 'Fairfield'.<sup>19</sup> The site remained unchanged into the 1890s, although a report in the *Post* in 1894 suggested that planned building work on the fair field might mark its closure.<sup>20</sup> The concern proved unfounded, but by 1895 the fair field had certainly been 'deprived of about two-thirds of its former dimensions' even though 'thousands' continued to visit the site.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Western Times*, 7 April 1874, p. 5, and 30 March 1875, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Western Times*, 18 April, 1876, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1878, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Western Times*, 15 April 1879, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Western Times*, 7 April 1885, p. 5, and *Post*, 1 April 1885, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Western Times*, 7 April 1885, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Western Times*, 23 April 1889, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Post*, 31 March 1894, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Gazette*, 16 April 1895, p. 8.

In 1900, the site was changed once more, this time to the Old Wrestling Ground, on Buller Road, where it remained into the early years of the twentieth century. Frank Retter, recalling his childhood in Exeter, around 1910, remembered that the fair field was 'close to Oakfield Road with an opening leading to Buller Road and another leading to Okehampton Street.'<sup>22</sup> And the former Mayor, Walter George Daw, born in 1905 noted that 'for many years it was held at St. Thomas on the site where the Montgomery School now stands.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 'St. Thomas Easter Fair', in Frank Retter, *An Exeter Boyhood*, p. 20. Unfortunately Retter doesn't give a year, but his recollections start at around 1906 and most from his boyhood seem to be between 1910 and 1913.

<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Williams (ed) *Walter George Daw: Exeter Citizen* (Exeter: 1994), p. 6.

## The Easter Fair in the 1820s: traditions in St. Thomas

As in the sixteenth century, the Fair in the early nineteenth century ran for three days, with the difference that in the later period it started on Easter Monday and continued in that week, until the Wednesday evening. An established annual event, the Fair was evidently very popular: the Exeter diarist James Cossins recalled that 'after dinner crowds of people with their children from all parts of the city were seen wending their way to it'.<sup>24</sup>

Itinerant showmen, as well as troops of performers, travelling (or 'portable') theatres and circuses appeared at fairs throughout the country and, according to Cossins, Horde's Theatre visited Exeter in the 1820s, where the admission prices were 3*d.* to the dress boxes, 2*d.* to the pit, and 1*d.* to the galley.<sup>25</sup> The repertoire of travelling theatres could be surprisingly varied, from short harlequinades, farces, spectacles and sensational melodramas, to contemporary dramas, and abridged versions of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>26</sup> Some theatres and shows would re-visit the Exeter Fair each year, usually as part of a touring circuit that would visit all the major fairs in the region and, in doing so, became part of the local tradition. In 1826 a reporter for the *Gazette* expressed surprised that a particular Punch and Judy show had not visited that year and that the absence of Mr. Samuel's collection of shows had meant that the fair

exhibited but few of the motley amusements which have been witnessed in former years [...] but they were compensated for this omission by the theatrical corps of Mr. Scowton, whose dramatic amusements superseded the tricks of Samuel's troop, so long the caterers of fun to the gaping throng.<sup>27</sup>

Three years later, in 1829, the variety of shows on offer appears to have increased again, and in these early reports, a pattern begins to emerge, of the type of shows and stalls that would appear time and again at the Fair in the nineteenth century: the theatre, tightrope walkers, slack-wire performers, clowns, and conjurers, the sweetmeat stalls and the gingerbread stands, as well as curiosities such as the 'learned horse' and 'sapient pig'.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the main fair field, other activities also attracted participants and audiences. Wrestling matches frequently took place at the fairs of the early nineteenth century, and, on occasions, bull-baiting, a practice deplored in the local press. In 1826 an additional attraction was supplied by a woman who set out to walk fifty miles in ten hours on the same patch of land:

a quarter of a mile piece of ground was selected from the Lamb and Lion public-house towards the Dinsford Turnpike-Gate, she accomplished the

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<sup>24</sup> *Post*, 14 March 1877, p. 7, and *Western Times*, 16 March 1877, p. 2. See also, Cossins *Reminiscences*, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Cossins, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Josephine Harrop, *Victorian Portable Theatres* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1989) pp. 60-61

<sup>27</sup> *Gazette*, 1 April 1826, p. [3].

<sup>28</sup> *Gazette*, 1 April 1826, p. [3].

task with ease in 8 hours and a half, having 2 hours to spare – her reward was the voluntary contributions of the by-standers.<sup>29</sup>

Rarely was enjoyment of the fair confined to the fair fields. Cossins recollected how

On the approach of evening the streets were the promenade, and the "publics" were not forgotten, one or two fiddlers being engaged in each house for a dance [...]. It was also an occasion for housekeepers to invite their friends to tea and have a look at the passing crowd.<sup>30</sup>

Cossins emphasised the sociability of the fair days and evenings for local people, but the attractions of the 'publics' were a source of concern for many middle-class observers. Indeed, not all reporters were united in their response to the fair; local press reports throughout the nineteenth century varied considerably: from fascination to outright disapproval and from participatory observation to nostalgic hearsay.

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<sup>29</sup> *EFP*, 30 March 1826, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Cossins *Reminiscences*, p. 72.

### 1830s: All the fun of the fair

The 1830s saw longer and more regular reports appearing in the local papers. Their authors approved of the additional games played in the fields around the fair, such as football, dancing and kiss-in-the-ring all of which – for the reporters – seemed to ensure the continuance of more innocent 'rural' pursuits as opposed to drinking, gambling and watching what were often perceived as unedifying exhibitions.

The *Gazette* reporter of 1830, who had commented disapprovingly on the site of the fair, between the 'Debtor's Door' and the 'Lunatic Asylum', was keen to appear socially distanced from the event, an observer rather than a participant. Nevertheless, he gave an extremely detailed report of everything he saw there. Having arrived at the entrance to the main fair, he passed 'the *penny hops* on our right, and the ginger-bread stalls on our left' and instantly noticed 'an eager mob' who were 'watching the manœuvres [*sic*] of the gentleman who enacted the part of clown, and from the frequent shouts of laughter which burst from his auditors, we judged him to be performing some practical joke'. The clown

had, following him, some eight or ten ragged boys, one of whom carried a *large broom*, the leader himself bearing a huge sword – there was something strikingly stupid or darkly profound in these proceedings [...] Presently we saw the drift of the whole proceeding. It was a political pantomime and the clown was personating to a T the peculiarities of the noble Duke at the head of his Majesty's Government [...] The other characters, though sufficiently ragged and grotesque, might be identified as the representatives of noble lords and right honourable gentlemen.

Whilst the onlookers appreciated the comedy and political burlesque in the performance, the reporter styled the crowd a 'mob', a term that had taken on dangerous connotations in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and again in the politically-charged atmosphere of 1830s England. The reporter's assumption that a group of working-class revellers potentially constituted a mob, showed an inherent distrust of the popular attractions of the fair. The opening of his report had even displayed an unfounded fear of entering St. Thomas, but 'anxious duly to labour in our vocation' and presumably under instruction from his editor, he stayed, reluctantly, to observe the other shows. Those shows included pole-balancing and conjuring, as well as 'some natural curiosities' housed in caravans and advertised by large coloured posters of promised sights such as 'a live man with a *live pig's head*', 'a fat boy, a tall woman' and 'two or three crocodiles eating a man'. He next visited the 'ball-rooms or rather *bawl*-rooms':

The one, which struck our observation most forcibly, was on the first floor of a public house, where a full orchestra of fiddle and tambourine was animating some half dozen couples of girls to the jocund *hop*, but the crowded state of the room prevented the dance which was of the good old orthodox style – the country dance – from proceeding in the regularity that it should have done. The admiring beaux were sitting on benches, quaffing libations of barleycorn, and blowing their clouds, whilst the ladies

appeared to flit about through the dense wreaths of smoke which filled the room, like sprites in a church yard fog.

The 'hop', according to this report, was not the only tradition maintained at the fair:

the usual facilities were afforded for robbery and depredation by the attentions of a gang of *pea* and *thimble* sharpers, who did not confine their practice to the above game alone, but disposed of the watches of many of the lookers-on.<sup>31</sup>

A police report from the Exeter Guildhall noted that one of the above *pea* and *thimble* sharpers had been arrested by Officers Taylor and Howard; he had indeed been suspected of stealing watches although none were found on him and he was discharged.<sup>32</sup>

Two years later, in 1832, the *Gazette* contained another lengthy report, this time less fearful and critical of events west of the Exe. On this occasion there was no suggestion of a 'mob', instead, the street was filled 'with an assembly of all ages and both sexes, whose smiling countenances, and gay attire indicated that they were in the right humour for an evening's enjoyment', although the writer was archly amused by the potential for the 'good supply of rare, curious, and wonderful exhibitions, calculated to "astonish the natives, and make the vulgar [*sic*] stare"'. The report noted the usual sweetmeat stalls and Punch and Judy booth, as well as a 'number of *swing* vehicles were also in full work, for the purpose of exercising the juveniles.'<sup>33</sup>

On many occasions throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers carried reports of the fair, which merely commented on the weather and the crowds, sometimes with scant attention paid to the fair itself and the shows and spectacles it contained. As the extracts in this chapter demonstrate, when reporters did pay attention to the event, their reviews could range from the hostile and disapproving, to the aloof recognition of 'popular' or working-class entertainments, the curious and, very occasionally, the utterly fascinated. In 1833, an enthralled reporter for the *Gazette* saw the fair as an occasion where people 'assembled to enjoy a few hours' harmless fun and relaxation'. In particular his attention was drawn to a 'Balancer' at that year's fair ground. Rather than the aloof 'we' of the singular reporter in 1830, this reporter uses 'we' in the inclusive sense as he joined the crowd of on-lookers:

we saw a most singular and extraordinary feat performed by a dexterous and clever Balancer, which, had it been told us, we should have thought it was the invention of some wag, in order to furnish our readers with a bit of the *wonderful!* But of a verity, however improbable it may appear to those who did not witness it, *we* saw the miracle performed, and therefore it must be true. After displaying several pleasing and curious tricks in his art, the Balancer, having an eye to the pence, intimated to the by-standers that if they would collect the trifling sum of sixpence, he would perform such a trick as no other man in the world could – he would

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<sup>31</sup> *Gazette*, 17 April 1830, p. [3].

<sup>32</sup> *Gazette*, 17 April 1830, p. [3].

<sup>33</sup> *Gazette*, 28 April 1832, p. [3].

actually balance a *Donkey* on his chin! Curiosity was, of course, excited, and the required sum was quickly gathered, most of the spectators, however, believing the thing to be impossible, and that the performer would make fools of them by practicing some deception. A fine full-grown animal was presented – and all eyes were fixed upon the exhibitor, who commenced his operation by laying on the ground a ladder; he then placed the ass in a position with its fore legs over the top bar, and its hind legs resting on a bar about four feet lower; having secured the animal's legs, by a rope, he lifted the ladder, with the donkey on it, and placed it on his chin, the animal being elevated above; in this situation he *balanced the donkey*, on the ladder, without any assistance whatever, the ass pricking up his ears as if in triumph amidst the cheers, laughter, and astonishment of the assembled multitude, many of whom appeared to be of opinion that the balancer had dealings with Old Nick.<sup>34</sup>

This reporter evidently enjoyed being part of the crowd, and, although the sense of immediacy is missing, two reports from 1835 also celebrated the variety of shows and stalls on offer at the fair. These included sweetmeat and toy stalls,<sup>35</sup> swings (or "*ups and downs*"), roundabouts, singers and fiddlers, conjurors and 'garland dancers', plus: "*Merryman*" stuffing flax down his throat with a drum-stick, and with the assistance of wondering urchins, spinning it forth again in a thread that seemed endless' and 'an old Boatswain in an open Jarvy, spinning a yarn of a very different description'. Central to this fair were 'the unrivalled exhibition of the celebrated *Mister Jones*, and there, that of the renowned Donald M'Kinzey [*sic*]', each of which would have included a variety of shows.<sup>36</sup> The existence of showmen who – either singly or jointly – had overall management of many of the individual shows at the Easter Fair, had already been evident in the 1820s with the mention of Mr. Samuel, but the *Gazette* report of April 1835 emphasised the commercial aspect of the fair by suggesting that '[f]rom the immense number of [visitors] collected in the field, we should think Mr Mackenzie and Mr Jones netted a tolerable harvest'<sup>37</sup>

Despite the reported good-humour of visitors to the fair, the travelling theatre that year evidently appealed to their morbid curiosity, with a re-enactment of a Somerset news story. According to the *Gazette*, 'lovers of the horrible were accommodated in considerable numbers, with a description of the "Langport Murders," and other dark deeds of woe'.<sup>38</sup> The regular performances were heralded by 'a fellow with a brazen trumpet and still more brazen face' who

informed the populace that within was a correct representation of the Langport murder, and where, for the low price of one penny, they might see the *exact* manner in which that horrid deed was accomplished.<sup>39</sup>

But as well as the 'horrid deed' on display in the theatre, the usual games of football, 'drop-the-handkerchief', various stalls, drinking and dancing, maintained the traditions begun decades

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<sup>34</sup> *Gazette*, 13 April 1833, p. [3].

<sup>35</sup> *Gazette*, 25 April 1835, p. [2].

<sup>36</sup> *Post*, 23 April 1835, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Gazette*, 25 April 1835, p. [2].

<sup>38</sup> *Gazette*, 25 April 1835, p. [2].

<sup>39</sup> *Post*, 23 April 1835, p. 3.

before. And at the fair of 1836, the day's events were brought to a spectacular close by 'a grand display of fireworks by the ingenious Gyngall.'<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Post*, 7 April 1836, p. 2.

## 1840s: Wild beasts and well-behaved crowds

The 'annual pleasure Fair, so famous in the annals of this suburban parish'<sup>41</sup> appeared little changed in the 1840s; the opening day of the fair on Easter Monday attracted the largest crowds, with children frequenting the roundabouts, whirligigs and the numerous sweet and gingerbread stalls that lined the field. Football and 'drop-the-handkerchief' were still played in nearby fields and additional attractions included Bromsgrove's Menagerie in 1840 and again (with 'a genuine lion') in 1843, whilst the 'merry fiddle and the dance' at the local public houses continued the festivities into the night.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to the *Post* reports of the previous decade, the paper in the 1840s frequently addressed the weather and the crowds, with little detail about the shows. The *Western Times* was similarly reticent, but in the middle years of the decade the *Gazette* resumed its fascination with the three-day festival and its attractions for the local 'élite'. In 1843, its reporter highlighted a 'temporary pavilion' where a travelling theatre company

presented the play of "The Statue Bride," and another the "Fat Pig," this last having the superior recommendation of being patronised by Her Majesty and Prince Albert, which of course to a public of nicer discrimination than those present, might have floored at once the unhappy pretensions of the legitimate drama.'

The reporter's reference to the 'élite' was not overly disparaging, he was quick to comment on the good behaviour of the crowds, but expressed concern about the potential for pickpockets at the fair.<sup>43</sup> An arrest had been made the previous year, when PC Joseph Pike had arrested one George Drew for picking Mary Taylor's pocket at the fair. Drew had been taken before the Devon magistrates at the Exeter Castle and committed to the County Gaol for trial.<sup>44</sup>

The *Gazette* in March 1845 noted that in addition to the 'numerous' stalls, in the main fair field,

there were two theatrical exhibitions, several "wonders of the world" and numerous swings and roundabouts, and no deficiency of booths for refreshment, while outside the humours of an itinerant vendor of hardwares kept many a merry group in constant laughter [...] At night there was a splendid exhibition of fireworks and coloured fires by that renowned pyrotechnic J. Pulman.<sup>45</sup>

In 1846 the fair included 'rather more than the average number of shows', with 'in the arena opposite the church, a theatre, swings, roundabouts, and shooting galleries.' Once again the fair was joined by travelling theatres and a menagerie of wild beasts, which by 'the flauntiness of its

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<sup>41</sup> *Gazette*, 22 April 1843, p. [3].

<sup>42</sup> *Gazette*, 25 April 1840, p. [3], and 22 April 1843, p. [3].

<sup>43</sup> *Gazette*, 22 April 1843, p. [3].

<sup>44</sup> *Post*, 7 April 1842, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Gazette*, 29 March 1845, p. [3].

pictures and loudness of its braying trumpets allured many to the front.' And inside, where a 'woman put her head in a lion's mouth'.<sup>46</sup> The fair appears to have grown in size in these years: in 1847 the *Gazette* once again noticed that the

collection of shows to tempt the holiday folks, theatres, jugglers, peeps, &c., were more numerous than ordinary. There were swings, round-a-bouts, shooting-galleries, and minor gambling for sweets; while the long rows of stalls, with their attractive wares of toys, nuts, and lollipops, tempted the outlay of many a penny.<sup>47</sup>

The *Gazette* reporters maintained an almost idyllic portrayal of the holiday crowds at the fair, with comments on good behaviour and 'smiling faces'. The report from 1847 even entered into the spirit of the occasion with a short parody on market fairs: 'Trade generally was brisk, and notwithstanding the late fall in the wheat-market, gingerbread maintained its value, while there was a slight rise in ginger-beer!'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Gazette*, 18 April 1846, p. [3].

<sup>47</sup> *Gazette*, 10 April 1847, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Gazette*, 10 April 1847, p. 5.

### 1850s: Victorian respectability and the fair

Whilst the fair continued to thrive in the middle years of the nineteenth century, press reports underwent a change in the attitudes they expressed. Whilst some reporters continued to dwell on the human activity and amusements of the fair, others began to voice concern regarding the respectability and suitability of the occasion for what was perceived as its largely working-class audience. This was not the distrust of some of the reports in the 1830s, but neither was it the unalloyed contentment with happy faces that featured in many of the reviews from the 1840s.

In the *Post* the official response to the 1851 fair was a brief comment that 'a number of persons attended and were much amused with the various exhibitions.'<sup>49</sup> However, the Exeter magistrates were more vociferous when Charles Chenneur, Charles Salter and John Thomas appeared in front of them, convicted of stealing lead from a rooftop in Bartholomew Terrace. Their plan had been concocted after a visit to one of the theatres at the Easter Fair, a site described by the Deputy Recorder as an 'abominable scene of wickedness [...] which the inhabitants [of St. Thomas] had not the spirit to take the initiative and put a stop to.'<sup>50</sup> In general however, such declamations against the fair were unusual and judging from the level of response in the local press, the Easter Fair thrived. In 1852, the *Post* was able to report that 'the number of exhibitions [were] extraordinarily large' and the fair had been 'literally thronged by holiday folk from the city and neighbourhood.'<sup>51</sup> A much longer report in 1851 in the *Western Times* vividly described the fair by day and evening:

Easter fair has as usual, been a gay and festive scene, and booths of dazzling light have been crammed with holiday folk. From the railway bridge to the field in which the shows are situate, St. Thomas's was lined with those peculiar stalls – a kind of cross between a butcher's stall and a bed-stead, loaded with their various heaps of eatables, the mysteries of which are fully appreciated and felt by the juvenile part of the population. At about 8 o'clock candles and oil lamps illuminated the bed curtains of the mysterious stalls – giving a glare to the scene and an additional flavour to the gingerbread nuts. The numerous vendors of Tea and Coffee proved the increase of the Temperance Order, although we grieved to see that those beverages seemed to have given the parties selling the same a peculiarly husky voice, commonly known as a beery, or gin and fog voice – and the noses of the aforesaid parties were decidedly of the "ruby order."

In the neighbourhood of the shows, the crowd was excessive, all seemed fully alive to the fun [...] There were lots of swings, capable of holding any number at a pinch, and those circles of untiring steeds – on which the juvenile jockeys previous to starting, were venting their impatience by digging their heels into their horses' wooden ribs, and their toes into the heads of the passers by.

Then there were the usual variety of amusements for those of a speculative turn – shooting at targets for nuts, the chances of which are, if

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<sup>49</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1851, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> *Post*, 3 July 1851, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> *Post*, 15 April 1852, p. 5.

you are up to the mark you get your money's worth, and, if you are not a good shot – why you don't [...]

The shows were as a matter of course the great attraction, and all that could be done outside for nothing, was done; one van, was decorated with magnificent painting, a single stare at which was worth all the money charged for the whole entertainment. The painting itself was not faultless, but the moral sought to be conveyed, "vas varth tuppence and a glass of beer." Look to the right and you saw a Lion, the monarch of the forest, having a corn extracted, which painful operation he was bearing with a magnanimous grin, highly characteristic of his well known dignity. Look to the left and you had the death of Sir Robert Peel and a funeral group as an attraction for the distressed agriculturalists. The group might excite a sorrowful influence, but well knowing it has served for Queen Caroline lying in state, and has gone through all the various changes since that event, and will shortly be advertised as Mrs. Chesham, or one of the Frimley murderers immediately after execution, with group of mourning relatives – destroys half its stern reality, and sorrow waxes less.

At *the* show of the fair were assembled an audience of above 300, who were very orderly passing round the pipe of peace, and they paid great attention to a compound of the marvellous and horrible, in a piece called the "Hocean Child," [Ocean Child] by which all preconceived notions of the English language, and our naval affairs, were completely overset. The Hocean Child's father, by order of a sanguinary captain walks the plank. As he clings to the vessel, his hand is chopped off by the carpenter, and pocketed by the ship's surgeon, a gentleman in Turkish trowsers [*sic*], russet boots, and a white hat – which last mentioned article caused one of the audience to make an allusion to a "donkey." The Hocean Child's mother, a widow, filled with des-ho-lation on the departure of her husband, prays to the Helements, and a storm ensues. We then had a lapse of 18 years, the Hocean Child had grown a true British sailor hevery hinch, as his captain informed us. The Surgeon gives the Hocean Child the hand of his father, which he, the surgeon, has preserved in a strong pickle, which the Hocean Child carries to the sanguinary captain, who thereupon stabs himself, thus satisfying the ends of justice, the Hocean Child, and the audience. At the conclusion of which, with other sober citizens, we retired to our homes.<sup>52</sup>

The *Western Times* carried a similar report in the following year, 1852, commenting on the numbers of people, the lack of sleep suffered by local residents for the three nights and the 'discordant noises' of the fair, made up of a compound of the 'husky shouts of the showmen – the noisy emulation of the musicians – the firing at the nut-stands – the "cries" of the various vendors of sweetmeats, &c.<sup>53</sup> The report was uncritical of the fair and its ancillary activities, but it did highlight the fact that 'street fights' and drunken rows were a usual feature, of 'drunken men, and even drunken women at midnight and at early morn, reeling into the city, and disturbing the slumbering citizens.'<sup>54</sup>

The 1853 fair was also attended by large numbers of visitors, drawn to the cries of the 'toy and toffy [*sic*] vendors and the noisy invitations of the showmen' although, according to the *Western Times*, there were fewer shows; 'only three of modest pretensions, in the "realm of art

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<sup>52</sup> *Western Times*, 26 April 1851, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Western Times*, 17 April 1852, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Western Times*, 17 April 1852, p. 6.

and magic" being in the fair'. Itinerant entertainers included broadside vendors: a noisy couple [who] were vending wretched trash about the Clayhidon murder, and singing doggerel verses thereon' as well as a young man 'of "artistic" appearance [who] was doing a good trade by cutting penny portraits in paper'. But the reporter decried the presence of '[s]windling tables' and the poor women with their children who seemed to be the more usual victims.<sup>55</sup> This comment heralded deeper concerns: the paper's report on the 1854 fair focused on the gambling, drinking and dancing in the public houses, making the closing comment that '[a]s the general taste is indicated in the popular amusements, we need not say that this fair does not indicate a very highly cultivated mental state in the working classes.'<sup>56</sup> It is unlikely that the Easter Fair was solely attended by the working-classes, but that inference dominated the newspaper reports. The *Post* went further: according to a reviewer writing in 1855, the holiday crowds that year included not only 'sightseers, citizens and rustics' but also 'of course, no small proportion of the "rag-tag and bobtail" of the district.' The reporter had to admit that in spite of the 'numbers daily assembled' no 'serious interference of the law' was required, but doubts about the respectability of the shows and amusements on offer began to permeate the newspaper reports of mid-century.<sup>57</sup> In 1856 the *Post* further noted that the fair had been 'more than usually attractive to those persons who have a taste for rough and in some respects questionable amusements' and voiced concerns over the number of illegal gambling tables. Specific disapproval of the shows once again centred on the 'cymbals, drums, cracked and discordant instruments' with which the various showmen attracted people to their booths, a complaint that was to recur until the end of the century.<sup>58</sup> In 1857, the *Post* reviewer once again dismissively referred to the Fair 'with its usual juvenile attractions and its rough amusements'.<sup>59</sup> And in 1859 the paper's reporter moved from tolerating the 'juvenile' appeal of the fairground to making a clear demarcation between the religious meaning of Easter and the now, clearly (to the reporter) immoral Fair, stating that:

Notwithstanding modern attempts to rationalize the recreations of the people, we find that the rougher kinds of amusement are much preferred by a large number of the lower classes. Every year the parish of St. Thomas the Apostle, at the festival of Easter, is the scene of riotous amusement and sensual indulgences, which are not at all in keeping with this age of civilization and boasted intellectual progress. Crowded public houses, drunkenness, and obscenity are the rule, whilst the innocent amusements of the old fair-times are the exception. It is undoubtedly right that the poorer classes should have their amusements, but it is a pity that some efforts are not made to check the really increasing demoralization which seems to prevail at these Easter revels.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Western Times*, 2 April 1853, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Western Times*, 22 April 1854, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Post*, 12 April 1855, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Post*, 27 March 1856, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Post*, 16 April 1857, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Post*, 28 April 1859, p. 5.

Here, nostalgia for a perceived golden age of the Easter fair was linked to Victorian respectability to attack the fair in the columns of the *Exeter Flying Post*. Recollections of the 'amusements of the old fair-times' conveniently forgot the traditions of the public house dances in a zealous attempt to 'improve' the working classes.

## 1860s: Fluctuating fortunes

Although a separate fair field had been long established, the Easter Fair evidently still overran into the streets of St. Thomas, as it had done in earlier decades. In 1863, despite a request in the pages of the *Western Times* that the event would not give any trouble to the shop keepers and householders in Cowick Street, a later report noted that '[s]ome of the streets were lined with stalls' and that 'the grumbling shopkeepers would have found some difficulty in causing their removal according to their threats.'<sup>61</sup> Stallholders who set up their wares in the streets rather than the fair field may have done so for financial reasons. In the main fair field, showmen had to rent the spaces for their shows, exhibitions and booths. This was a formal process for which applications were invited through advertisements printed a few weeks ahead of the fair dates. In 1869 for example those applications were to be made to Mr. Brice of the Plymouth Inn, in St. Thomas.<sup>62</sup>

The applicants could include local as well as national stall holders and showmen, but the owners of the smaller concerns that pitched outside the main field were rarely mentioned in reviews. One exception was Catherine Bowey of Preston Street in Exeter who in 1862 ran a stall at the fair with a Mrs. Trip. Bowey's details were recorded in an appearance as complainant at the Exeter magistrates' court after she was attacked by another woman in the Turk's Head Inn during the fair. The assailant was found guilty and sent to prison for two weeks in default of paying a 15s. fine.<sup>63</sup> This incident was the only reported example of criminal activity associated with the fair, but the concerns that had been expressed in the late 1850s regarding behaviour continued to appear in occasional newspaper reports of the 1860s. According to the *Post* in April 1860, that year's fair was 'of the usual motley character and attended by the accustomed scenes of riot and dissipation'.<sup>64</sup> A year later, the *Western Times* stated that 'the annual "carnival of St. Thomas" popularly known as Easter Fair [...] sustained its ancient reputation for revelry and coarse amusement'.<sup>65</sup> Some reports even registered evidence that the fair might be in decline, citing the sad remnants of the fair as examples of the worst kind of entertainment for the working classes. In 1864, a report in the *Devon Weekly Times* commented on the lack of a theatre and menageries at that year's fair, noting only a range of small sideshows that included a "'Pavilion of merit," the merit of which was confined to the gyrations of a rheumatic clown; and the exhibition of a live rat-eater'. The reporter concluded:

These are the kinds of exhibitions for the enlightenment and amusement of the masses in the present gracious year of 1864. Save us from a repetition say we. A solitary swinging boat, a roundabout, the average

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<sup>61</sup> *Western Times*, 3 April 1863, p. 5 and 10 April 1863, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Gazette*, 10 March 1869, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Post*, 30 April 1862, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Post*, 11 April 1860, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> *Western Times*, 6 April 1861, p. 6.

number of nutstalls, and the usual amount of foul language, were the remaining characteristics of the fair.<sup>66</sup>

A sparse selection of stalls and exhibitions in 1864 may well have contributed to the *Gazette* report of 1865 suggesting that the fair was less popular and would 'soon become a thing of the past'.<sup>67</sup> And the *Western Times* that year also commented on the reduced state of the fair: 'This annual holiday is growing small by degrees and beautifully less, as far as kickshows and fools are concerned in the field.'<sup>68</sup> Such comments evidently drew on wider social concerns regarding the way in which the working-classes spent their leisure time, and by the late 1860s attempts were being made by some to address those concerns with the distribution of religious tracts at the fair. This action was noted by one reporter in the *Devon Weekly Times* in a not particularly respectful observation that 'Maw-worm was there to distribute tracts, "in the hope that we should hesitate from stepping into the tremendous abyss yawning at our feet."<sup>69</sup>

Whilst some reports in the first half of the decade attempted to signal the decline of the ancient festival, others heralded a revival, noting the maintenance of traditions and highlighting the number of shows and exhibitions on offer. In 1860, a *Western Times* report had celebrated the array of stalls and the banter of the 'Cheap Jack' pedlars:

THE EASTER FAIR has been quite a "Revival" this year. Shows from the "penny peep" up to the "legitimate drama" [...] and the number of portable establishments for the saccharine we shouldn't like to say. Cheap Jack vended wares of the most *useful* and charming variety, from the "silver spoons for 6d, that sweetened your tea without sugar, provided you puts a lump of treacle in it, and the knife that would cut anybody else's bread and cheese provided you hasn't any of your own" up to – we daren't say what. A new member of this respectable family in the shape of lovely woman did the "cheap Jenny," and eloquence being the great qualification for the profession, we need hardly say the lady was not in that respect behind her tonguey relatives.<sup>70</sup>

Other attractions included the usual toy and sweet stalls, whirligigs and swingboats. In 1863 the *Western Times* commented that although the 'annual merry-making was, as usual, well attended by the youngsters of the neighbourhood' heavy rain on the opening day meant that 'many got drenched during their aerial flights'.<sup>71</sup>

By 1866, the *Post* admitted that '[t]he showman is yet an institution, as a run into St. Thomas will fully demonstrate'.<sup>72</sup> The *Devon Weekly Times* continued to promote the 'revival' of the fair, adding that the 'shows were good and the sports exciting'.<sup>73</sup> The last refuge for critics of the fair

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<sup>66</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 1 April 1864, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Gazette*, 21 April 1865, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Western Times*, 18 April 1865, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 17 April 1868, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Western Times*, 14 April 1860, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Western Times*, 10 April 1863, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> *Post*, 4 April 1866, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 6 April 1866, p. 5.

seemed to be relief at the fact that the parish of St. Thomas was beyond the city boundaries, but as the *Post* noted in April 1867, '[t]he shows, the stalls, the clatter, the booms, the deafening noise and grotesque commotion is nearly within hearing.'<sup>74</sup> The 'grotesque commotion' in part emanated from the many showmen shouting appeals to the passing crowd to visit their exhibitions, including a 'Living Wonders' show consisting of a 'living skeleton and the Lilliputs' and "'The Temple of Amusements" which comprised two acrobats', 'sparring booths, learned ponies, galvanic batteries, several picture galleries [...] swinging boats, shooting booths, and confectionary booths in abundance.'<sup>75</sup> Amid the spectacle however, and to the concern of a reporter from the *Devon Weekly Times*, the fun of the 1868 fair was offset by extreme poverty: 'At the entrance several dilapidated human beings, with large families appealed to the "kindness and generosity of the public."<sup>76</sup>

As in earlier decades the travelling theatres continued to exert a fascination for the local reporters. The *Western Times* report of 1860 noted that there was an 'abundance' of theatres that year, 'where ladies might do the hysterical over that surpassing tragedy "The battle of the Alten Heights, or Leonora's Grave," &c., &c.'<sup>77</sup> In 1865, the *Devon Weekly Times*, reported that amongst the 'amusements of a rough and ready character',

There was a Theatre in which such pieces as "The Mistletoe Bough" and "Maria Martin, or the Murder at the Red Barn" were performed. The company comprised every shade of sensational talent, and if they sometimes treated the audience to such choice phrases as "stattik vissheons," and "chappilets," we will do them the justice to say that they were perfect masters and mistresses in the art of "piling up the agony."<sup>78</sup>

In 1868 the principal show was 'Weights Standard Theatre', where the repertoire comprised the *Warlock of the Glen* followed by a 'Gorgeous Christmas Pantomime', despite the fact that it was Easter. The reviewer of the *Devon Weekly Times* was unimpressed with the pantomime; it appeared to lack a title or a plot, consisting simply of a series of dances, none of which he thought very promising.<sup>79</sup>

Of the larger travelling shows to visit the St. Thomas fair, one of the most important was the menagerie. In 1863, Edmond's 'Royal Windsor Castle Menagerie' visited Exeter, exhibiting in Longbrook Street at the end of March, before heading to the Alphington Road to feature alongside the Easter Fair.<sup>80</sup> Evidently large crowds were expected at the fair for the menagerie to be sited nearby. Wombwell's Menagerie visited in 1867, and the extended Edmond's 'Royal Windsor Castle & Crystal Palace' menagerie revisited the fair in 1869, where entry to the spectacle was

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<sup>74</sup> *Post*, 17 April 1867, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 18 April 1867, p. 5 and 17 April 1868, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 17 April 1868, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup> *Western Times*, 14 April 1860, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 21 April 1865, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 17 April 1868, p. 5.

<sup>80</sup> *Western Times*, 10 April 1863, p. 6.

advertised at 1s. or 6d. for the 'Working Classes'.<sup>81</sup> Major national shows such as Wombwell's and Edmond's would have brought their own retinue of sideshows and exhibitions, and for such large concerns to have included the Exeter fair in their tours of the south west suggests that the fair was well supported, and far from decline.

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<sup>81</sup> *Gazette*, 18 April 1867, p. 4 and *Post* 24 March 1869, p. 4.

## 1870s: Inventions and new attractions

Despite the hopeful hints in some newspaper reports of the 1860s, the mid-nineteenth century did not mark the passing of the 300 year old fair. Instead, thousands of people attended the fair of 1870: '[t]hroughout the afternoon and evening, Fore-street, Bridge-street, and Alphington-street were thronged by troops of parties bound on the sight-seeing expedition'. Among the sights awaiting them were whirligigs, or roundabouts which, for the first time, were 'driven by steam'.<sup>82</sup>

Of these there were three specimens, two of them being provided with "hobbies," three-abreast, and with gaily painted affairs for all the world like hotel omnibuses in miniature and minus the wheels. The Babel of noises arising from the fair field – to the annoyance of all residents within a radius of half-a-mile – was not, it may be imagined, at all mollified by the screams of the whistles attached to these machines, the proprietors of which seemed to act on the principle of frightening the public into patronising their entertainments. Steam was also pressed into service for the working of an "industrial exhibition," where might be seen a model of a silk ribbon factory and a "temple of Minerva" in full play. Here also were a case of automaton humming birds and the "piping bullfinch" from the Paris Exhibition, the latter of which was certainly worth seeing.

In addition, the fair included the usual sweetmeat stalls, nut stands, conjurers and boxing booths, plus a 'Zoological Menagerie', including a 'lion maimed monkey'. This show was evidently a much smaller and less impressive concern than the menageries provided by Edmond or Wombwell. According to this review, the other animals on display inside the tent

if we may judge from one or two specimens occasionally exhibited on the outside as decoys – were sorry representatives of the "noble denizens of the forest," to whom they were believed by a charitable public to bear some resemblance.

Next to the menagerie was the theatre, that year it was 'Weight's Theatre', which had been recorded at the fair in 1868 and whose repertoire 'may be best described as a mixture of melodrama, tragedy, comedy, and pantomime, well shaken.' Booths containing curiosities were also trumpeted, including 'a "Swiss bearded lady and her son," an "Egyptian mummy" – on a pedestal! – and a porker with a double supply of legs and bodies.'<sup>83</sup>

In 1871, the *Post* detailed the forthcoming attractions of that year's Easter Fair, which were to include the 'London Gala Company', promising 'old English peaceful sports'. The sports were open to competition and included horse racing, steeple chasing, jumping in sacks, and dancing and, in addition, the manager of the London Gala Company also 'secured the services of the Great Allied Circus Company' with 60 artistes and 80 horses and ponies, to perform at the fair,

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<sup>82</sup> *Western Times*, 19 April 1870, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Devon Weekly Times*, 22 April 1870, p. 7.

each day at 2.30 pm until '(with a short interval)' 10 at night.<sup>84</sup> The *Western Times* review noted that the fair-going public were appealed to by very different aspects of the occasion on their way to the main field. Stalls, especially those selling sweetmeats were evident 'as soon as you get outside the city boundary', as were 'blind, lame and deaf and dumb beggars [*sic*], and all the usual attendants at fairs [...] and similar places'.<sup>85</sup> Once at the main site, the 'thousands of visitors' had an exceptional choice of entertainments that year 'for never, perhaps, has the Fair Field contained so varied a collection of "this world's wonders."' Shows included everything 'from the drama to performing monkeys and goats', the races managed by the Gala Company, freak shows, including "'a grey horse with six legs – the extra ones being in front – projecting from below the knee;" and "a colt with three legs.'" Plus rifle galleries, nut-stalls, boxing booths, athletics, and the 'sundry stalls, and booths, the cries, the shouts, the booms, the ringing, singing, noise, and commotion' of Easter Fair'.<sup>86</sup> The shows were advertised by a cacophony of 'hand organs, cymbals, drums, cracked trumpets, and gongs, unite[d] in "harmony" until each place is full.' At the theatre

A very energetic painted faced conductor invites the spectators to "walk hup, cause the place are nearly full, and you now sees all the whole performance for – price threepence gallery." To offer an additional inducement the "stars" consent to show themselves for a few minutes, and the beauties of the boards indulge in a public dance, on which some daring youths get too near the steps, and blocking the way, receive a few enlivening cuts with the whip for their trouble.<sup>87</sup>

Throughout the 1870s, the newspaper reports acknowledged the range of people enjoying the fair but there was little comment on behaviour or a perceived potential for crime during the three day festival. Reviews instead reflected contemporaneous developments in the reduction of working hours and the consequent increase in leisure time that was emerging in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, noting that the fair attracted

not only the denizens of the city, but several excursion trains brought in large detachments of pleasure seekers, who made the streets lively and animated with their presence and occasionally jocund with song.<sup>88</sup>

Newspaper reports invariably focused on the shows themselves, revelling in the sights and sounds provided by the showmen, and the theatre where the 'symmetrical forms of the comedians were enveloped in glittering costumes, enough to throw a gas company into despair'. In other booths were spotted the curiosities:

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<sup>84</sup> *Post*, 5 April 1871, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Western Times*, 11 April 1871, p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> *Post*, 12 April 1871, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> *Western Times*, 11 April 1871, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Western Times*, 7 April 1874, p. 5.

living skeletons; the largest man in the world; the great English giant horse, which "challenges the world to produce his equal;" a sheep with six legs; the great Spanish bull with two bodies and six legs; and a wild Indian, who looked as tame as paving stones. The Indian performed one of his astonishing achievements on the outside. He held in his hands something that looked like fine tow, and presently he began to swallow portions, varying the operation by ejecting smoke and then fire from his mouth. The beholders were wonderstruck; and one of them exclaimed "There's no 'sception about he – no Englishman could do that, I know." But if the amazed one had turned his head to the left he might have seen an Englishman performing precisely the same thing.<sup>89</sup>

The fair of 1875 once again comprised a large number of 'athletic performances, exhibitions of fat and thin, tall and short persons, and extraordinary cattle, peep shows, shooting galleries, sweet and nut stands'. The *Western Times* review expanded on a few examples of the unusual animals on show, which included 'the polite pig which has a "man's 'and and harm," and courteously presents the same to be shaken by the assembled company.' Visitors could also see a 'Salamine individual who has a talent for "swallowing pokers, eating fire, and drinking fire," a "German Gymnasium," where 'prodigies of agility are performed,' and a circus 'at the back of the fair field', plus Professor Lightwood's 'sparring tent'.<sup>90</sup> In 1878, the attractions even included a 'Talking Fish' whose appearance was heralded by advertisements in the local press.<sup>91</sup>

Reporters appear to have prided themselves on their ability to present the fair and its characters as comic creations, picking up on the accents and dialects of performers, and their easy beguilement of the crowds. This style of reporting echoes throughout the period, sometimes revealing a certain detachment, but more often appearing as an attempt to copy the comic creations of such popular authors as Charles Dickens. However, the characters and types witnessed at the fair had their own, very specific hierarchy and titles as an incident in 1875 highlighted. The *Western Times* review of that year's fair described the Cheap Jacks selling their wares, amongst which 'elegant gold-plated watch guards worth 8s. 6d, and even half a guinea, sold for 1s. 6d.'<sup>92</sup> But the term 'Cheap Jack' could be offensive if misapplied. A few days later, magistrates at the Exeter Castle heard a case of assault between two of the fair men – the proprietor of one of the sparring booths and a 'licensed hawker and proprietor of a travelling cutlery establishment'. The former had insulted the hawker, calling him a 'Cheap Jack' and assaulting him. The defendant was fined costs of 11s. 6d. and bound over to keep the peace for six months.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Post*, 3 April 1872, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Western Times*, 30 March 1875, p. 5.

<sup>91</sup> *Western Times*, 18 April 1878, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Western Times*, 30 March 1875, p. 5.

<sup>93</sup> *Western Times*, 6 April 1875, p. 3.

## 1880s: The old world and the new

In the 1880s, the Easter Fair stalls and shows were a mixture of the traditional and the new. In 1881, the fair included toy and sweet stalls, a couple of sparring booths, 'no less than three steam whirligigs of large size – two in the form of bicycle machines and the other of the ordinary horse and carriage pattern', 'high-flyer' swinging boats, shooting galleries and nut standings, as well as 'the shows proper', which comprised an 'Italian skeleton girl', a 'giantess', 'the London Giant Boy', a marionette exhibition, a gymnastic show, and an 'Indian Temple of Wonders'.<sup>94</sup> The *Gazette* reporter was especially pleased to note that the travelling theatre ('a real House of Thespis on wheels'<sup>95</sup>) – not seen since the early years of the 1870s – had reappeared at the fair:

this year there is to be seen one of the genuine old-fashioned travelling theatres, where, in the short space of half-an-hour, and for the small charge of 3d., the spectator can witness a tragedy of the deepest dye, a burlesque, and a pantomime, while those unfortunates who have no money can feast their eyes on the gorgeously clad ladies and gentlemen who parade on the platform in front of the stage between the performances. It is now so many years since a similar theatre has been seen at the Fair that it might well have been thought that this particular form of entertainment had ceased to exist.<sup>96</sup>

In 1885, Edmonds' Menagerie, which had been tented in the St. James's Road, travelled down to St. Thomas's for the fair, to exhibit its '600 Beasts, Birds and Reptiles' and Captain T. B. Cardono, the Great American Lion Tamer.<sup>97</sup> The following year, Swallow's Circus visited Exeter during the fair week. It had performed at the indoor venue of the Victoria Hall on Queen Street during the winter, but tented at St. Thomas's for the Easter Fair.<sup>98</sup> According to a *Post* reporter, artistes at the circus included 'Funny Fred Hall and his donkeys, Miss Swallow and her sister, who both ride as gracefully as ever, Fernondez [*sic*] and D'Altroy, the acrobatic clowns.' The fair also featured waxwork shows along with the 'gilded and brilliantly lit roundabouts [in] the middle of the field', which attracted 'both small and "large" children'.<sup>99</sup> Plus, there were shooting galleries, including a new feature, the 'Mexican shooting-gallery' at which 'the marksman takes aim at a ball which is kept in the air by a small jet of water' although that same jet of water 'then disappears at the moment when its presence is most required'.<sup>100</sup>

The steam-powered roundabouts were especially popular with 'old and young', 'there being quite a rush for outside horses [...] whenever the concern stopped its giddyng whirl'.<sup>101</sup> One of the showmen in particular caught the reporter's eye and ear:

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<sup>94</sup> *Gazette Telegram*, 19 April 1881, p. 2 and *Western Times*, 19 April 1881, p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Western Times*, 19 April 1881, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> *Gazette Telegram*, 19 April 1881, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Post*, 1 April 1885, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> *Gazette*, 22 April 1886, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

The proprietor of one of the waxwork shows was most pathetically eloquent. He stood on the stage outside his brilliantly lighted exhibition, the front of which glittered with gilding and varnish, and dazzled the eyes of the onlooker by the high colouring of its decorative paintings, and with extended arms he implored his audience to witness the marvels of artistic and mechanical skills to be seen within. Then, seemingly overpowered by his emotional feelings, he became speechless, and raised aloft a large tin plate, on which was painted a colossal figure 2, from which we inferred that the sum of twopence would admit one to a waxy paradise.<sup>102</sup>

In 1889, Easter Fair included the novelty of roundabouts that were not only steam-powered but were also 'being worked on an improved system, the horses alternately going up and down', plus the new 'aerial flight or trapeze railway', and a firework display which concluded the festivities each evening.<sup>103</sup>

In 1868, the presence of people distributing religious tracts had been unkindly referred to as 'Maw-worm', but in the 1880s a more organised local body – the Exe Island Mission Society – began to be seen more regularly at the fair field. In 1881, the Mission had a 'small standing' near the entrance where volunteers sold 'Bibles at 6d, Testaments from 4d, and Gospel portions at 1d.' But whilst the novelty of the Society's appearance attracted on-lookers, little was sold.<sup>104</sup> The same society tried to hold an open air mission meeting in the field itself, but 'here again their efforts did not seem to be appreciated.'<sup>105</sup> According to the *Gazette*, their efforts were similarly unsuccessful on the opening day of the 1882 fair.<sup>106</sup> However, a report published two days later stated that

Many people purchased Bibles and Prayer-books to take home to their friends [...] Nearly 6,000 tracts were distributed, and Gospel addresses were delivered by numerous Christian friends for the space of three hours, during which time large numbers of people assembled to listen, notwithstanding the many counter attractions.<sup>107</sup>

The religious presence at the fair rapidly became one of its modern traditions. In 1886, the *Gazette* commented that 'as in former years' there would be 'a stall for the sale of Bibles and religious works, presided over by Mr. Eccles.'<sup>108</sup>

Another modern tradition established in the 1880s that was less easily tolerated, was the sale and use of what were termed 'teasers'. These were small pipes which squirted water over unsuspecting victims. They were also termed 'ladies' teasers', as women seemed to be the most regular recipients. Unpopular with many, the *Gazette* noted in 1886 that there were far fewer

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<sup>102</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Post*, 22 April 1889, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Western Times*, 19 April 1881, p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> *Gazette Telegram*, 19 April 1881, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Gazette Daily Telegram*, 11 April 1882, p. 2.

<sup>107</sup> *Gazette*, 13 April 1882, p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3.

'teaser' vendors at that year's fair and 'it is to be hoped that these obnoxious articles will ere long disappear altogether.'<sup>109</sup> There may have been fewer vendors, but the 'teasers' were still much in evidence that year according to the *Post*, whose reporter stated that they were 'much used, and used unfairly too, some of the unfortunate sufferers being drenched to the skin.'<sup>110</sup> It was another three years before an 1889 announcement was made, that teasers were to be banned 'and anyone found selling them in the field will be prosecuted.'<sup>111</sup>

The banning of 'teasers' was welcomed in the press, but reviews of the fair during the 1880s often reflected nostalgically on other changes witnessed in the fair field. In 1882 and again in 1883, reporters in the *Gazette* and *Post* each noted that the 'ancient glories' of the fair, such as the exhibitions and curiosities had largely disappeared.<sup>112</sup> According to the *Gazette* report of 1882, the decline was due to a numerous yet unappreciative audience, amongst whom 'the rising generation' were proving difficult to impress.<sup>113</sup> In 1886 the *Gazette* also suggested that some of the old-fashioned shows were no longer touring: 'it may be that the "sword-swallowers," "magicians," and such-like geniuses who used in former years to occupy so prominent a position have ceased to exist.'<sup>114</sup> And whilst demanding youngsters enjoyed the new steam-driven roundabouts, the machines of 1886 were a cause of nostalgic regret in the *Post*:

The fun that was obtained by the pushing by numbers of children of the ancient roundabout will no doubt be remembered by many who are now grown into man's estate. But these are now removed, and with the aid of one man and a small steam engine the roundabouts now fly round quicker and perhaps safer.<sup>115</sup>

The travelling theatre was also a cause for comment and recollection in the papers. In 1882, the *Gazette* attributed their irregular appearances at the Fair to growing competition.

The travelling theatre, however, has had to contend with wandering companies and has suffered in consequence. People are more fastidious than they used to be, and the result is that these exhibitions which used at one time to be the great feature of all fairs, are either being snuffed out, or, rising in the social scale, appear as tenting dramatic companies, who "pitch" in the smaller towns for a week or so at a time, discard the outside free-gratis-for-nothing parade and minuet and have shilling boxes, sixpenny pits, threepenny galleries, and only give one performance in an evening.<sup>116</sup>

And yet, despite the fluctuating fortunes of particular shows, the fair as a whole did not decline. The *Western Times* report of 1884 even stated that the 'Fair is on a somewhat larger scale than

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<sup>109</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3 and *Post* 10 April 1889, p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> *Gazette Daily Telegram*, 11 April 1882, p. 2 and *Post*, 28 March 1883, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> *Gazette Daily Telegram*, 11 April 1882, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> *Gazette Daily Telegram*, 11 April 1882, p. 2.

for some years past'.<sup>117</sup> And the *Gazette* reporter, commenting on the possibility of 'magicians and such like' no longer touring in 1886, also offered a more prosaic explanation for the recent reduction in scale, despite the continuing high numbers of local and excursionist visitors. He suggested that 'although the stalls and shows occupy only half the space they did some years ago' this may have been 'due to the extension of building operations in the neighbourhood of the Fair-field.'<sup>118</sup>

Whilst the attractions of the fair remained constant for the Exeter and district population, concerns regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol (and related behaviour) at the site were once again being expressed by the authorities and echoed in some of the local papers. In 1881 the Exeter magistrates refused several applications for extended licenses for local public houses. Landlords of The Swan in Okehampton, and The Buller's Arms, The Ship, The Railway, The King's Arms, and The Royal Oak in St. Thomas all appealed for their pubs to stay open until midnight on fair nights, but they were all refused; the licensee of the Grapes Inn on South Street, however, was permitted to sell alcohol at the fair field, but only from noon until 7 pm. Following the fair, the local police report to the magistrates stated that there had been no drunkenness at the fair and that 'thanks were due' to the magistrates for their preventative actions.<sup>119</sup> An article in the *Western Times*, though, undermined this apparently conclusive report, by simply noting that some people had compensated for the licensing restrictions by starting their drinking early in the day.<sup>120</sup> In 1884 a license was granted to the landlord of the Golden Ball Inn on Mary Arches Street, to sell liquor at the fair field between the hours of noon and 8 pm.<sup>121</sup> In 1885, however, local residents as well as the magistrates and the committee of St. Thomas vestry were all vociferous in preventing liquor licences being granted for the fair field. Both the *Post* and the *Western Times* carried reports from the magistrates' court at the Castle of Exeter, where, in mid-April, a Crediton publican applied for a licence to sell liquor at the fair field. The Clerk to the St. Thomas Local Board represented the St. Thomas ratepayers whom, he claimed 'passed a resolution ten months ago against the fair. He characterised the proceedings at the fair as disgraceful'. Furthermore, it was stated (as it had been in earlier decades) that only the 'lowest classes' attended the fair and as police were needed to keep order, extra police were drafted in from the county.<sup>122</sup> The Deputy Chief Constable added that

The fair was a scene of disorder [...] there had been disorder in former years, and there was more or less drunkenness every year. It was merely an excuse for drunkenness.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *Western Times*, 15 April 1884, p. 5.

<sup>118</sup> *Gazette*, 30 April 1886, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> *Post*, 13 April 1881, p. 3 and 20 April 1881, p. 7, and *Western Times*, 14 April 1881, p. 6..

<sup>120</sup> *Western Times*, 19 April 1881, p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> *Post*, 5 March 1884, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> *Western Times*, 20 March 1884, p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> *Post*, 18 March 1885, p. 5.

The magistrates therefore refused the licence. In 1886, a *Post* report retrospectively applauded that decision, adding that 'consequently a great deal of the rowdyism which had hitherto characterised the occasion disappeared'. The report noted that no applications had been made for the 1886 fair, and forecast that 'the same freedom from drunken brawls may be anticipated.'<sup>124</sup> However, the review of the 1886 fair in the *Post* applauded the public rather than the authorities for the good behaviour at the fair one evening, where he witnessed

the dense yet constantly moving mass of infinitely varied humanity in all degrees of sobriety, but, with scarcely an exception, all full to the bung of good humour and joviality. There were very few thoroughly drunken persons on the grounds, and this fact is credit to our city.<sup>125</sup>

But magistrates' concerns over the potential for drunken and bad behaviour continued to influence licensing and in 1887 the landlord of the Victoria Inn, in Parr Street, was refused a liquor licence for the fair.<sup>126</sup> A further concern for the local authorities surrounded the day on which the fair opened. Up until the mid-1880s, Easter Fair opened on Easter Monday and ran until the Wednesday evening of that week. However, in 1884 the fair opened on Good Friday and continued to do so for the next few years, although in 1886 the local magistrates agreed to approach the field owner over the matter.<sup>127</sup> The issue remained unresolved in 1887 when, although the police were on duty to stop the public from entering the field, preventing all the fair activities on Good Friday seemed to be well nigh impossible due to

the obstinacy of the proprietor of one erection, who instead of keeping quiet as he had been desired got up steam and played away his hurdy-gurdy "like all that," apparently for the benefit of his would-be patrons that lined the road outside.<sup>128</sup>

In 1888, police again prevented the public from entering the fair field on the Friday or the Saturday, in a continued attempt to control noise levels, although the showmen had already begun to encamp in the neighbourhood.<sup>129</sup> According to notices in the *Post* in 1889, the police activity of the previous two years had been ultimately successful, as the fair that year reverted to its earlier pattern of opening on Easter Monday and running until the Wednesday.

In addition to drinking, noise, and a lack of religious observance, the age-old problem of illegal gambling continued to occur at the fair field. In April 1886 a labourer who appeared before the magistrates charged with gambling on the fair field was fined 20s, or, if he could not pay the fine, 14 days hard labour. According to the *Western Times*, the labourer's friends paid the fine but

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<sup>124</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>125</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>126</sup> *Western Times*, 7 April 1887, p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> *Western Times*, 12 April 1887, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> *Western Times*, 23 March 1888, p. 5.

his gambling table was confiscated by the authorities.<sup>130</sup> In 1887 an individual was charged with organising gambling at the fair but the fine was considerably less than in the previous year: just 1s. plus 6d. costs.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, in 1889, a man was arrested for playing a game of chance at the fair; a stranger to Exeter he was offered the choice of a fine and costs of 15s. 2d., or fourteen days in prison.<sup>132</sup>

It is evident that although reviews of the fair tended to focus on the wonders of the shows and commented on the crowds enjoying the fair with their friends and families, that drunkenness, fights, bad behaviour and gambling at the field and in the vicinity recurred throughout the period. Some reporters noted such activities as part of the range of human life on display over the three days, but others used those activities as a founding reason to banish the whole event. Such comments emerged with a particular force in the late 1880s, aided by the latest development in local newspapers, the gossip column. In 1886, the *Post* column 'Over the Walnuts and Wine' contained an extended diatribe which reflected Victorian concerns to encourage rational and improving recreational activities, rather than frivolous and potentially sinful amusements.

There needs, however, very strong advocacy to defend with any success the existence of the so-called pleasure fairs. The sights at these degenerate spectacles are anything but fair, the sounds anything but charming, and the pleasure merely a ghastly mimicry of enjoyment. It would be a distinct gain to St. Thomas if the Easter fair could be quietly burked and buried before public neglect puts a stop to its disgusting reveals [*sic*]. [...] if rational pleasure could be bought rather more within reach of the very poor, and the poor pleasures of dirty merry-go-rounds and squalid shooting-galleries could be rendered by education less desirable, the last link that binds the enjoyment of the people to the lower manners and customs of their forefathers would thin out, snap, and be gone.<sup>133</sup>

A dislike of 'degenerate fairs', which had apparently become nothing more than 'gathering places subversive of morality and productive of all sorts of petty swindling and cheating', was sustained in the editorial columns of the *Post* that year.<sup>134</sup> And whilst a reporter who visited the fair the following week delightedly expended a full column in describing the shows and crowds, the editorial stance clearly prompted his final sentence which concluded that '[t]aken as a whole, the fair is hardly equal to its predecessors, and its utter extinction would be no matter for regret.'<sup>135</sup>

The *Western Times* that year provided a contrasting and non-judgmental overview of the fair, instead emphasising the humanity of the showmen. The paper ran a report on a visit to the fair by a party of fifty children, old people and what were termed 'imbeciles' from the St. Thomas Union, or Workhouse:

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<sup>130</sup> *Post*, 28 April 1886, p. 2 and *Western Times*, 30 April 1886, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> *Western Times*, 15 April 1887, p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Post*, 23 April 1889, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> *Post*, 28 April, 1886.

<sup>134</sup> *Post*, 24 April 1886, p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> *Post*, 27 April 1886, p. 2.

They experienced the greatest kindness from the "show" people, who not only admitted them gratuitously to their booths, but vied with each other in otherwise contributing to their comfort and general enjoyment. [It was] a red-letter day in the monotony of their existence.<sup>136</sup>

And in 1889, the *Western Times* report emphasised the 'innocent fun' to be had visiting the variety of stalls and rides at the fair which its author felt displayed 'a general improvement' in its character. According to this report, the fair was not a pernicious event and a haunt of impoverished delinquents. Instead, it attracted 'a number of country cousins', amongst a crowd that was largely comprised of Exeter citizens, and who, importantly, 'embraced all classes as well as ages'.<sup>137</sup> As with other events in and around the city, the divided responses of the local press reflected different attitudes among the local population: of dislike, tolerance, affection, and curiosity. Ultimately, as a *Western Times* reviewer stated, 'the fair shows no sign of declining in popular favour'.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Western Times*, 4 May 1886, p. 7.

<sup>137</sup> *Western Times*, 3 April 1888, p. 5.

<sup>138</sup> *Western Times*, 23 April 1889, p. 5.

### 1890s: The skill of the showman

In the 1890s, despite misgivings about the quantity and level of noise – especially from the new ‘steam hooters’ – irritating gimmicks and occasional precautions against Good Friday opening, there was a clear return in the newspaper reports to embracing the fair as part of life in Exeter. Many of the usual sights and sounds were maintained, such as the boxing booths, shooting galleries, swing-boats, roundabouts and nut-stands, but novelties were also a regular feature. For example, a wrestling bear at the 1893 fair, “snake-eaters” from South Africa’ and sea lions in 1895, although the curiosities and freak shows were less evident on several occasions during the decade.<sup>139</sup> The notorious ‘teaser’ could still be a problem, but by 1895 they had ‘become practically a thing of the past’. However,

another torment in the shape of "elephants' trunks," flexible rolls of paper, which can be suddenly blown out to the length of a yard, has been provided, and while provocative of much amusement, may inflict injury to the eyesight and temper.<sup>140</sup>

The newspaper reviews in the first half of the decade documented the latest innovations in technology at the fair. But the most dominant aspect of this decade was the fact that the fairs of the 1890s became the arena for large scale commercialism, as the showmen W. C. & S. Hancock became the sole lessees of the site for the three, and occasionally four day festival.

Some of the newspaper reviews commented on what they perceived as improved standards in the entertainments. The *Post* review of the 1891 fair stated that some of the shows that year ‘presented a really creditable appearance: [o]ne of them had the "walk up" gentleman attired in evening dress – a refinement hitherto unknown under similar circumstances in these parts.’<sup>141</sup> The musical choices played were also approved, including as they did ‘Hail the Conquering Hero’, Handel, and the National Anthem, which that year was ‘many, many times repeated by a very brass band, with an occasional "ad lib" interposition by a vigorous cymbal player.’<sup>142</sup> The different pieces of music produced by the ‘steam organs and brass instruments’ were played simultaneously and at volume, a fact that failed to elicit applause from either the newspaper critics or the sleeping local residents.<sup>143</sup> Reporters commented on the improved look of the shows, admiring the use of technology and art. In 1894, the *Post* ‘Local Gossip’ columnist made a feature of this aspect:

Going through the Easter fair, one could not fail to be struck with the improvements in the construction and the "get-up" of the various booths, &c., which have taken place of recent years. Some of the "shooting-galleries" were attractive examples of this. One I noticed was well fitted [up to re]present a natural piece of country with moving game, the

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<sup>139</sup> *Gazette*, 4 April 1893, p. 8 and 16 April 1895, p. 8.

<sup>140</sup> *Gazette*, 16 April 1895, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> *Post*, 4 April 1891, p. 8.

<sup>142</sup> *Post*, 4 April 1891, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> *Gazette*, 31 March 1891, p. 3 and *Western Times*, 4 April 1893, p. 5.

scenery being really artistic, and cleverly arranged [an] advance on the old sewer pipe arrangement [...] Another noticeable improvement was in respect of the roundabouts, which were really elaborate combinations of works of art and science. The moving platforms practically do away with all danger, and the ingenious mechanism for giving the horses the double motion gives a sense of reality which a rider assured me was more than ordinarily enjoyable. But the greatest innovation was the electric light, which I believe was first tried here, and which was most successful. The two traction engines which supplied the motive power for the dynamos were fine looking machines that must have cost "a pretty penny."<sup>144</sup>

Newspaper advertising for the fair – for attractions rather than rental space or warnings by the local authorities – had been slowly growing since the enticing mention of a ‘Talking Fish’ in 1878. Advertisements for circuses that included the fair as part of their regional tours had appeared in the 1880s, but 1892 marked a turning point. That year the *Gazette* carried an advertisement for John Manders’ Royal Waxwork Show, which would be appearing at the Easter Fair.<sup>145</sup> W. C. & S. Hancock also began their annual advertising campaign in 1892, and from then on the newspapers began to express a corresponding interest in the commercialism of the event. In 1891, the *Post* review had already contemplated the returns to be made on the ‘switchback roundabout’

The proprietor must have found his money bag rather heavy at the end of the day, for during the short time I stood watching, the coppers rolled in to the tune of about £10 per hour.<sup>146</sup>

And the ‘Local Gossip’ column of the *Post* in 1893 also attempted to calculate how much profit the showmen might be making:

Those mechanical imitations of the genuine things, the switchback and the roundabouts, did a roaring trade, and the proprietor must have carried away a small fortune in coppers. The switchback, for instance, was worth about 16s or 17s a turn, and as each ride averaged something like a minute, it may easily be calculated what a profitable business it must have been while patrons were plenty, and from what I could see of it the holiday spirit was constantly moving a stream of more or less giddy pleasure-seekers to the "horses" or the carriages.<sup>147</sup>

In 1896 a rumour was spread that smallpox had been discovered at the fair site. For Mr. William Hancock, a well-placed advertisement confounding the rumour would not have appeared until the next day, and would not have been read by everyone planning to go to the fair. Similarly, announcements at the fair field would have been too late. So, being the showman that he was, Hancock

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<sup>144</sup> *Post*, 31 March 1894, p. 8.

<sup>145</sup> *Gazette*, 12 April 1892, p. 1.

<sup>146</sup> *Post*, 4 April 1891, p. 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Post*, 8 April 1893, p. 8.

hitched an elephant and two camels to a van, added a band to the procession, and paraded them all round the city, stopping at intervals to announce that the small-pox rumour was baseless.<sup>148</sup>

His innovative approach to combating the rumour, and the disruption created in the city centre streets led to Hancock being fined for excessive noise. The strategy was successful though, and the fair attracted many visitors. The *Gazette* report noted that the incident had achieved far-reaching fame, having also been reported in the London *Pall Mall Gazette*. In 1897, Ginnett's Royal Circus appeared with the fair, in the nearby Old Wrestling Field on Buller Road. But by this time, the fair itself was dominated by Messrs. Hancock's show, the proprietors of which celebrated Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in a display of generosity towards the local poor children:

Messrs W. C. and S. Hancock, the amusement caterers, entertained the children of the St. Thomas and Exeter City Workhouses. Although at a busy time of the day Mr William Hancock had the machinery stopped and begging the indulgence of his patrons for a few minutes, he had the whole of the children carefully placed upon his largest roundabouts and rode them around amid the cheers of the bystanders. They were then taken to the gondolas, and there treated in like manner. The cars on the switchback, being more spacious, there were many vacant seats, and Mr. Hancock instructed his men to fill the cars with any children unable to pay for a ride in honour of her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee. Needless to say, the children enjoyed themselves right heartily.<sup>149</sup>

The presence of the Workhouse children at the fair had been organised following an official invitation from Hancock presented to the Union Guardians. Hancock sustained his interest in local charities and in 1900, the *Post* reported that

The amount taken by Messrs. Hancock at the steam switchback at the Easter Fair after four o'clock yesterday afternoon was £13. 5s. 7d, which has been handed over to the hon. Treasurer of the Devonshire branch of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families.<sup>150</sup>

In addition to Hancock's charitable gestures, it was evident that local religious groups continued to be concerned for the souls of those attending the fair. Whilst in the 1880s, the local Mission Society had attempted to affect the moral and religious outlook of fair-goers, the 1890s witnessed a change of tactic. In 1893, as reported in the *Western Times*, approximately one hundred of the 'showmen and showwomen, proprietors of "roundabouts," and people in charge of the other gay appurtenances, had a free invitation to attend [a high tea], which was provided in the Board School, Okehampton-road, at the cost of the Exeter branch of the Ladies Temperance League'. During the tea, music was played, and afterwards a temperance meeting and prayers were held.

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<sup>148</sup> *Gazette*, 14 April 1896, p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> *Post*, 20 April 1897, p. 4.

<sup>150</sup> *Post*, 21 April 1900, p. 5.

Apparently, according to the organisers, 'it was customary in many towns to give a tea of that description whenever a fair was held'. The visitors joined in, 'addresses were given by some of the showmen' and at the close of the meeting 'more than 40 pledges were taken'.<sup>151</sup> In 1897 the *Post* reported that the Exeter Women's Total Abstinence Union had invited the show people to a tea at the Okehampton Road Board School room.<sup>152</sup> And again in 1898, the same temperance group gave a tea 'to the children and show people', with separate addresses for the children and the adults.<sup>153</sup>

By 1898, Hancock's carnival was visiting Exeter several times during the year, with prominent advertisements in the *Post* for their appearance at the Easter Fair, which ran from the Saturday through to the following Wednesday and sometimes Thursday (though not of course on Easter Sunday). In 1898, their attractions included: 'The Latest and Improved Venetian Gondolas,/Gallopers, and Steeplechasers, Jungle Shooting,/Menageries, and other Amusements. The ground/brilliantly Illuminated by Electricity.' Plus a 'force of police in attendance to preserve order'. But the most prominent aspect of the advertisement was the appearance of

The Original and World-famed  
CINEMATOGRAPHE,  
OR LIVING PICTURES,  
Procured at great expense specially for the Fair.<sup>154</sup>

In 1899 the Fair ran from Saturday to Thursday and Messrs. Hancock again advertised in the *Post*; this time the main attraction was Madam and Mons. Spessaroy, 'Who will give the Startling Performances during/the Fair with their wonderful Performing/Tigers and Bears'. 'Living Pictures' were again a feature, and Mr. Hancock also aimed to direct the behaviour of visitors:

No Ladies' Teasers, Confetti, or Brushes will be  
Sold or Used in the Field during the holiday.

Police are specially engaged to turn any persons  
from the field who do not conform with the rules.<sup>155</sup>

The *Western Times* added that the fair was 'as usual a big attraction, thousands of people flocking there, the attendance being probably the largest for many years.' Despite there being fewer roundabouts and no switchback railway ('at which much disappointment was expressed'), an additional feature of the 1899 fair was 'Mr. Hancock's 'steam circus, with a "paper

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<sup>151</sup> *Western Times*, 4 April 1893, p. 7.

<sup>152</sup> *Post*, 19 April 1897, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> *Western Times*, 12 April 1898, p. 5.

<sup>154</sup> *Post*, 2 April 1898, p. 8.

<sup>155</sup> *Post*, 1 April 1899, p. 5.

orchestra".<sup>156</sup> In 1900, his 'Marvellous/New Riding Machine "The Flying Cockerel"' appeared 'for/the first time in Exeter' and was illuminated by 'electric light, manufactured on the spot'.<sup>157</sup>

The Easter Fair had it seemed come of age: the technology and commercialism provided by the accomplished showmen Messrs. Hancock won over the local papers, whose reporters once again engaged with the event as fascinated fair-goers rather than moral commentators. But the expansion of the city meant that by 1900 a new site was required for the ever-popular fair. The following year Hancock's fair – advertised as 'their GRAND CARNIVAL' – was situated at the Old Wrestling Ground on Buller Road, where Ginnett's Royal Circus had appeared in 1897<sup>158</sup> and which remained the site of Easter Fair as a new century began.

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<sup>156</sup> *Western Times*, 4 April 1899, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Post*, 21 April 1900, p. 5.

<sup>158</sup> *Western Times*, 6 April 1900, p. 4.