

# Summer Celebrations

Barbecues may be a recent phenomenon in Britain, but summer parties are not. Peter Chivers from the Bicester Local History Society discovers some happy days.



Sheep fair in Kings End, 1909



Fancy Dress Parade Empire Shopping Week, 1931



Pram race in the 1960s

The Town Council has a welcome programme of local events to entertain us this summer, the origins of which can occasionally be traced back in the town's long history. Celebrations in the past were often a way to boost the town's economy rather than the focus of a worthy social or charity event. The community joined together at a time when the range of social opportunities we take for granted today were rare. The strong rural influence shaped the town's celebrations. Fairs were established during the middle ages for the sale of cattle, sheep and horses. The annual King's End Fair, which continued until 1910 was nationally renowned for the sale of sheep and leather goods. Hiring Fairs would be

held in Market Square in June to enable local people to find employment. The annual 'Pleasure Fair' held in early August was a forerunner of today's Fun Fairs and took place in the area around Manor Farm in King's End and in Church Street. The day before the Fair a procession, including a bellman, a collector of tolls and a fiddler, would announce the event. Attractions included roundabouts, shooting booths and dance halls. A sheaf of corn was carried through the fair, followed by the fiddler, to proclaim the start of the harvest. Morris dancers, including a local Bicester team, performed at the celebrations. Evidence suggests bull and bear baiting took place at these fairs.

Celebrations, such as 'The Empire Shopping Week', organised by the Bicester and District Chamber of Commerce in July 1931 were to encourage more use of British and Empire goods.

The Fancy Dress Parade on that occasion bears a striking resemblance to the present town's Carnival Parade. Shopkeepers entered window display competitions. A baby show, 'freak sports meeting', ladies glamorous ankle competition and a comic dog show were among the attractions on offer.

## Summer Celebrations in Bicester – a welcome distraction or an economic opportunity?

A fondly remembered event that took place in the 1960s was the annual fancy dress pram race. It managed to visit most of the pubs around the town. In true Olympic spirit, it was taking part that counted. A version of the race has been revived recently with the Carnival 'Wheeie Bin Challenge'. Community summer celebrations perform a valuable social function in Bicester today. Maybe the past teaches us that there are welcome economic benefits as well.

## Bicester Local History Society

"Nothing ever happens in Bicester!" is a myth that Bicester Local History Society hopes to dispel with guided local history walks. Bob Hession, Chairman of Bicester Local History Society, will lead the walks that start at the Dovecote by the Library in Old Place Yard. The two remaining walks in the programme take place on:

- Tuesday 10th August: Bicester Pubs, Inns and Alehouses (7.30 p.m. start)
- Sunday 12th September: Sheep Street, The Garth, London Road and Priory Road (2.30 p.m. start)

The walks take approximately two hours to complete and cost £3.00 per person. No need to book, just turn up at the appropriate time. For further details contact Bob Hession on 01869 350662 or by means of the contact page of the Bicester Local History Society website at [www.blhs.org.uk](http://www.blhs.org.uk). The next meeting of Bicester Local History Society will feature a talk given by local historian Pete Chivers concerning "Emigration from Bicester 1630 to 1930". The talk explores how and why former residents of Bicester set off in search of a new life in distant parts of the



world. The meeting takes place at St Edburg's Church Hall on Monday 19 July at 7.30 p.m.