

The history of the Fairlop Fair

It is hard to comprehend when appreciating the peace and quiet of Fairlop Waters that 200 years ago thousands of people visited a fair there, with all the resulting noise and mayhem.

The story starts in the 1720's, when wealthy landowner Daniel Day (1683 - 1767) travelled to Fairlop once a year on the first Friday to collect his rents. He was a popular man with the nickname 'Good Day', who owned a ship's pump and blockmaker's business in Wapping, part of the busy area along the River Thames. On his trip to Fairlop, Daniel arranged for a feast of bacon and beans to be sent from "The Maypole" pub then sited where the Fullwell Cross Health Centre is today, and he and his friends enjoyed a bean feast under a large oak tree - the famous Fairlop Oak.



By 1725 others joined in and the gathering took on the appearance of a Fair, with sales of gingerbread men, toys, ribbons, together with puppets, circus acrobats, wild beasts and other entertainments.

'the occasion was seized by other employers for giving a day's outing to their men. Thus the term 'bean feast' came to be applied to workmen's outings.'

'[Daniel Day's] business being that's of a ship's pump and block maker, he had a boat constructed to run on wheels and this strange craft with mast and rigging all complete, used to journey from Wapping by way of Mile end, Bow, Stratford and Ilford to Hainault,..' ¹

More boats on wheels joined the procession and in later years bigger wheeled ships, drawn by up to six horses with people seated in the bow (like a coach) were a

¹ Ilford Guardian Friday January 1st 1915 'All the fun of the fair', Walter A Lock

common sight. The procession developed into a carnival, crowds lining the route and the resulting congestion causing many incidents and accidents.

*'In the evening, crowds lined the roads of East London and the suburbs, waiting to see the return of the Fairlop Boat. Eventually it arrived heralded by the strains of a brass band and came to a halt at one of the public houses, where the crew partook of refreshment. When it again resumed its homeward voyage it was amid a scene of great hilarity and the craft was gorgeously illuminated by a blaze of coloured fires.'*²

Over the 150 years of its existence the Fairlop Fair grew from the traditional fry-up of beans and bacon in the forest to something like this eye witness account of 1840: *'The most prominent exhibition was Richardson's Travelling Theatre, and there were of course numerous smaller shows; swings, roundabouts, gypsy fortune tellers, thimble and pea rig cheats and scores of drinking booths.'* It was estimated that there were at least 200,000 people in the forest or attending the fair. In an extract from the Ilford Guardian Friday January 1st 1915 'All the fun of the fair', Walter A Lock describes the entertainments at the Fairlop Fair:

'..the gathering beneath the Fairlop Oak soon attracted the proprietors of roundabouts, swings-boats, and shows, until it assumed the proportions of a regular fair. There were boxing booths where you were not only able to witness bouts of between professional pugilists, but were also cordially invited to don the gloves and prove your dexterity in the 'noble art of self defence'. There was generally a show of an excessively fat lady, a real live mermaid' was sometimes exhibited and such oddities as the boy with white hair and pink eyes, and the living skeleton, were as sure of obtaining patrons as was the man who could break a stone with a blow of his fist.'

'The coconut shies were of the good old fashioned sort ...Skittles were highly popular... A gentleman in tights would invite some accommodating spectator to truss him, with ropes and then, when the only organ left unfettered was his tongue, he would harangue the crowd and invite them to throw their coppers into his hat.'

*'The professional fire-eater was usually in evidence, as was the man who, for a stipulated contribution, would eat broken bottles with apparent relish. Archery contests were very popular. There were stalls where the spinning jenny tempted the pleasure seekers to secure for a penny a lump of peppermint 'rock' which was obviously worth sixpence.'*³

² ibid

³ Ilford Guardian Friday January 1st 1915 'All the fun of the fair', Walter A Lock



Courtesy Vision Redbridge Culture and Leisure Information and Heritage

*'As dusk approached the fun waxed fast and furious. The blare of unmusical instruments, the shouts of hilarious youths, and the shrieks of timid maids caused a perfect pandemonium of sound. Lads with squirts discharged streams of not over clean water into each other's faces; some, armed with 'ticklers,' strolled up and down in search of mischief and horseplay increased as it grew dark. Strolling singers bawled broadside ballads of questionable taste, dancing was indulged in without restraint, and a gay rollicking riotous scene brought the day to a close'*⁴

During this period of the Fair's history, it was regarded as the greatest drinking bout for East Londoners. *The Religious Tract Society* at one of the Fairs counted 72 gaming tables 108 drinking booths and distributed 45,000 tracts. These 'goings on' did not endear the event to the local authorities..

In 1851 Parliament endorsed the disafforestation of the Fairlop plain, turning it into arable land. Although the Fairlop Fair continued for another some 50 years in

⁴ Ilford Guardian Friday January 1st 1915 'All the fun of the fair', Walter A Lock

differing guises things were never the same again. The last Fair of any size was in 1900.

The huge Fairlop Oak (whose shadow covered nearly an acre), was the pivot of the gathering and could well have been up to 700 years old. The last vestiges of the Oak were removed when the roots were grubbed up at the time the plain was cleared of trees. Before that it had suffered from wind, lightning, fires and vandalism. In the end its wood was put to good use in such things as coffins, pulpits and mementos. You can see a box made from the Fairlop Oak and other items from the Fairlop Fair at Redbridge Museum, Ilford Central Library.

The Fair was remembered for the Festival of Britain in 1951 when an oak was planted on the Fullwell Cross Barkingside round about opposite the Fairlop Oak pub. On the first Friday in July 2011 Vision Redbridge Culture and Leisure held a first get-together at Fairlop Waters in the spirit of Daniel Day's picnics but in 2012 the ambition is to recreate a full scale re-establishment of the fair with all the tumultuous shenanigans of the original fair.

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