

An Early Reference to the Welsh Cattle Trade

By H. P. R. FINBERG

HOW old is the trade in Welsh cattle? According to the standard authority, Wales before the Edwardian conquest was a predominantly pastoral country. It imported iron, cloth, salt, and much of its corn; but nothing seems to be known about its exports.¹ In a paper read some years ago to the Royal Historical Society Professor Caroline Skeel remarked that one of the Welsh words for cattle, "praidd," is derived from the Latin *praeda*, meaning booty. From this circumstance she drew the unkind, but probably not unhistorical, inference that "cattle-lifting rather than cattle-selling prevailed in early Wales." She also noted that the word "porthmon," signifying drover, occurs in Welsh literature as early as the fourteenth century. By that time cattle were frequently being purchased in Wales for royal and noble households; but the earliest date cited in this connection is 1312.² It is hardly necessary to point out that occasional purchases of this kind could take place quite independently of any organized traffic that might be carried on at regular markets. But a piece of evidence which I have been fortunate enough to discover in a hitherto unpublished source carries the history of the trade back to the middle of the thirteenth century, and tells us something of the way it was conducted.

In 1253 the abbot of Cormeilles, in Normandy, obtained leave to establish a yearly fair and a market on Tuesday every week in his Gloucestershire manor of Newent.³ Royal grants of this nature usually included a proviso that no injury should be done to neighbouring markets and fairs, as there was always the possibility that a new market would be attacked as prejudicial to some established interest. And it seems that the one at Newent did not go unchallenged. The exact nature of the objections to it has to be inferred from the rejoinder made on behalf of Newent, since no complete record of the enquiry has come to light. Apparently the complainants declared that this new competitor was doing much harm to the old-established markets of Gloucester and Newnham-on-Severn. Merchants who in the past had come straight to these markets now lingered at Newent, while corn grown at New-

¹ J. E. Lloyd, *History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 1939, p. 606.

² *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.*, 4th Series, ix, 1926, p. 137.

³ *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, 1226-57, p. 435.

ent was now being sold locally, and not, as hitherto, in "Ebrugge-strete" (i.e. Lower Westgate Street), Gloucester. In consequence, the price of corn at Gloucester had gone up.

A special jury, empanelled in 1258, gave sworn testimony rebutting these allegations. They denied that prices had risen in the Gloucester corn-market, and that traders arrived there any later than in the past. The small chapmen of Newent still went to Gloucester and Newnham to buy fish, hides, and salt. So far from injuring those markets, the Newent market had positively benefited them by bringing about an alteration in the routine of the Welsh drovers. And the jurors go on to explain that "the Welshmen who come from the parts of Wales to sell their cattle" arrive at Ross-on-Wye on Thursday. They cannot reach Gloucester in one day's journey from Ross, so on Friday night they lodge at Newent, which is more than eight leagues distant from Gloucester. They continue their journey the next morning, and when they have transacted their business in the Saturday market at Gloucester, they no longer push on further into England, as they used to do; instead, they make a circuit. They attend the Sunday market at Newnham, reach Newent again on Tuesday, and are back once more at Gloucester by Wednesday, which is also a market-day there.

A transcript of this statement is entered in a finely written cartulary of Newent which is now in the British Museum.¹ It is interesting to note that the Welshmen did not take what is now the most direct route from Ross-on-Wye to Gloucester. This leads through Huntley, and in places the road is very steep. There are several details in the statement that one would like to have seen amplified. Why did the Welshmen retrace their steps to Newent and Gloucester, instead of going straight home? Presumably in order to dispose of any cattle that remained unsold, and to purchase those other commodities which, as we have seen, they had to import from England.

One remarkable feature of the statement is that it makes no mention at all of the chief sufferer. Dymock, which lies about three and a half miles north-west of Newent, had its weekly market and annual fair. A survey taken early in the reign of Henry III credits it with sixty-six burgesses, and at that time it must have seemed well on the way to becoming a prosperous little market town. Perhaps it could have withstood the competition of Ledbury, only four miles away to the north; but unfortunately for Dymock, it lay off the drove road, and the rise of Newent proved fatal to its urban prospects. The market failed, and many houses fell into decay.² Newent, on the other hand, flourished sufficiently to be taxed, in 1307 and 1313, at the higher rate imposed on

¹ Add. MS. 18,461, fo. 60.

² S. Rudder, *A New History of Gloucestershire*, 1779, p. 409.

boroughs recognized by the crown,¹ although the Welsh wars of Edward I must almost certainly have involved some interruption of the cattle trade.

What route, one wonders, did the drovers follow when they travelled further into England, as we are told they used to do before 1253? Did they leave Gloucester by the Ermin Way, the old Roman road that led to Cirencester? If so, it would bring them, after some thirteen miles, to a track which branches off from the Ermin Way near Bagendon, and leads through Barnsley and Fairford to the Thames at Lechlade. On the Ordnance map this track is called the Welsh Way. It is certainly a drove road; one would like to know at what period it acquired its present name.

¹ James F. Willard, 'Taxation Boroughs and Parliamentary Boroughs', in *Historical Essays in honour of James Tait*, 1933, p. 431.

Notes and Comments

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HAY

When a partition wall was demolished recently in an old house in Billericay, Essex, it was found to be stuffed with hay, presumably for insulation. The wall is thought to date from the end of the eighteenth century. A sample of the hay, which was in quite good condition, came into the possession of the Museum of English Rural Life and was analysed. The analyst's report is as follows. "It would appear to be a sample from poor meadow land, and from the grass seeds and remains of the inflorescences we can say that the sample contains Bent (*Agrostis* species), Yorkshire Fog (*Holcus lanatus*), Rush (*Juncus* species), and Moss (probably *Hypnum* species)."

It is impossible, of course, to tell whether hay required for such a purpose was deliberately taken from poor meadow or whether in fact the contents of this sample are typical of a late eighteenth-century pasture in Essex.

PREHISTORIC SOCIETY

On the afternoon of Saturday, 10 April 1954, a hundred and seventy members of the Prehistoric Society visited the Museum of

English Rural Life and inspected its collection of ploughs. Three demonstrations were also arranged. The first was a demonstration of modern ploughing technique with a tractor and trailer plough, in order that members of the Society might compare the action of the modern share, mouldboard, and coulter with earlier methods. The second demonstration was arranged and conducted by Dr E. C. Curwen, who with the help of Miss Isabel Smith ground corn with a rotary quern and a saddle quern. The highlight of the afternoon was a demonstration, conducted under the direction of Dr Iversen of Denmark, of felling a tree with a flint axe. A small Douglas fir was selected, about nine inches in diameter at the base, standing some fifteen feet high. It was cut about three feet six inches from the ground and members of the Society were amazed to find that the whole process took only a little more than twenty minutes. The Douglas fir was not ideally suited to the operation, for the wood was too spongy to obtain a clean cut. Nevertheless the demonstration was most illuminating, and showed that prehistoric man could fell small trees with comparative ease.