

GREAT BOWDEN HERITAGE AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Part of Bowden Ridge Research project

Horse Fair on Bowden Ridge?



Great Bowden is currently the home of the Fernie Hunt and known for its links with John Henry Stokes But it seems the equine association could go back much further.....

During the development of the Alvington Way area, on land which is now a housing estate, an unusual volume and variety of small value coins were found by metal detection. The coins spanned the centuries the earliest being Roman. Most notably they included a coin of Scottish origin and some from France

It is rare to find on one site, so many coins from so many periods and so many places. When a numismatist from Oxford University saw the list of coins he took the view that the site had once been a trading post stretching back centuries, probably a horse fair. See the list of coins found at end of this article.

Fairs and Frolics.

Harborough Fair is first recorded in 1204 and by 1622 was an important Horse Fair - *"a famous fair 9th October, the Feast day of St Dionysus (St Denis), for horses, young colts and all manner of cattle"*. Later there are reports of up to seven fairs in Harborough throughout the year.

"In 1699 an attempt was made to establish a new fair at Harborough, which continued to flourish during the 18th century.. In 1750 a new fair was established on 29 April yearly,. In 1772 on 6 January and 31 July, and in 1779 on 16 February. About 1800 three more fairs were set up, in December March and Lent. By 1830 there were also fairs on 19 October, and 22 November. A yearly fair was still held in the middle of October in 1957" From: 'Market Harborough', A History of the County of Leicestershire: Volume 5: Gartree Hundred (1964), pp. 133-153.

Could the prominent hill top of Bowden Ridge be the original site for horse trading? A wonderful vantage point; the ridge top is flat and suitable for showing horses, with access to spring water nearby. Later the fair may have moved down the hill to Harborough perhaps near Fairfield Road to Horse Fair Close?.

Across the Welland in Northamptonshire, breeding mares were kept. The Stotfold Hundred comprised Little Bowden, Clipston, East Farndon, Haselbech, Hothorpe, Maidwell, Marston Trussell, Oxenden, Sibbertoft, Sulby and Lubenham. *Stotfold* means an enclosure for breeding mares. Was Bowden ridge the logical trading post for the horses, ponies and cattle, bred in the north and, brought down country to be sold alongside the foals from the local breeding mares?

Horses for Courses.

Archaeologists have deduced several types of horses in northern Britain in Roman times, the indigenous Shetland and Celtic types - the wild ponies of northern Britain, an Arab type probably imported from Spain or France and a "coarse" 15 hand animal imported from Frisia where the Romans recruited auxiliary troops. Most prized was the Spotted Pony, feral in The British Isles, found in paintings by Stone Age man and still bred today - a sturdy pony hardy and active, up to 14 hands, highly prized in peace and war.

Prior to the advent of the Vikings especially in the south, oxen were more likely to be used for ploughing, The Vikings introduced the idea of using horses to plough because they were faster. The Norsemen went "a viking" - in plain language, raiding and stealing - in summer, between sowing and harvest. Horses were faster than oxen and got the spring planting out of the way so the pirating season could begin!

There was some Saxon resistance not the least because oxen could be fattened and sold when their working life was over, and horses cost more to keep. Although the growing use of horses on farms and roads in medieval England would increase the number of fairs, in Leicestershire the substitution of horses for oxen on *farms* is discernible only from 1530's.

Horses were suited for ploughing only on lighter well drained soils, and hereabouts soils are generally of clay, and, on the flood plain of the River Welland, wet and heavy.

But horses had other uses including transport, carriage, and warfare. In mediaeval times and later, horses could be hired but were increasingly bought for a journey and sold on reaching their destination. Hence the need for a network of horse fairs and dealers across the country.

Evidence suggests that horse ownership came to be regarded as a matter of status. Expensive to keep, they demonstrated the owner's prosperity and superiority over the non horse owning population. So as time went on horses came to be used not only as transport, carriage, or farming, but were also bred as status symbols, and ultimately as we know for Hunting.

Coins and tokens found on spoil mounds in 2004 during construction of houses in Alvington Way area, Market Harborough .

Richard II - complete
Charles I - pierced
Charles I - hammered bronze - complete
Henry II - half-cut
Stephen (?) - half cut
Edward I - complete
Henry VIII - sovereign penny - complete
Elizabeth I - several groats and half groats - all heavily clipped
Silver hammered with Scottish thistle? - complete
19th century Canadian bank token
Great Bowden token
19th century vote for Robert's (Warwickshire) beer token
1668 Harborough token
French jetton
French seal matrix
Lead cloth seal and weights (James I marking dagger & crown)
Approximately 20 bronze coins - Roman
Hadrian - 1 silver coin