

# THE ALRESFORD HURDLE HOUSES

*by*

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The origins of the Alresford Sheep Fairs can be found in the grant given by King John, in the thirteenth century to Bishop Godfrey de Lucy to be held on the feast of St. John the Baptist and the following two days. Arising out of this grant it is fairly assumed that the Alresford Sheep Fair was firmly established as a market for sheep by the commencement of the sixteenth century being held continuously from then until the last Fair in 1972, a period of some five to six hundred years, and the Hurdle House standing in the corner of the field on the northern side of the Bishop's Sutton road is the only visible link that remains of this historic Alresford Sheep industry, the main source of the Town's original importance and prosperity.

This purpose built Hurdle House appears to be a unique survival of the Sheep industry as far as the county of Hampshire is concerned - a gem of Industrial Archaeology - and is the third such building in a continuous history of the past two hundred years.

The assembly of the several large flocks of sheep and the need to control and pen them for the duration of the Fair necessitated the provision, and the storages of large numbers of hurdles. The traditional hazel woven hurdle developed from the hazel or wattle weaving used for the construction of buildings and enclosures by our Iron Age ancestors. and so clearly illustrated by Mr. Peter Reynolds at the Experimental Iron Age Farm at Butser Hill, does not appear to have been a local industry except for the one photograph on page 79 of Mr. Edward Robert's book on Alresford showing "About 1885, Mr. Stephen Smith of Box Cottage, Tichborne making hurdles." And yet in the coppiced Woods around Kings Somborne, craftsmen are still continuing to make the traditional hurdle using techniques that have survived for over three thousand years. and now supplied to country sheep fairs. agricultural shows and even televised Sheep Dog Trials.

There are several references in the Bailiff and burgesses accounts to the purchase and delivery of hurdles for the Alresford Fairs, the earliest being in 1772 "Paid for carriage of Hurdles to Pound - 11s.5d." and purchase made in 1815 "August 28th New Hurdles - £14.15.0." A local Wood dealer Mr Jas. Wigmore of Old Alresford Was paid £6.7.10½. for hurdles on the 18th October 1817 and there are further transactions recorded. The firm of Jas. Wigmore moved to West Street and then to East Street, becoming Frank Wigmore, no doubt continuing to supply hurdles to the Bailiff and Burgesses and then the Town Trustees over the years. It is interesting to note that at the diamond Wedding celebrations of Mr. and Mrs. F.C. Wigmore on Christmas Day 1940 at the age of 84 years Mr. Wigmore recalled "The prices we made in my young days were about a quarter the present level, I used to be glad to sell hurdles at 6s. a dozen, but now they are about £1 - and in the last war wood was so scarce that I made up to 34s. a dozen.

Generally at most sheep fairs it was usual practice to store the hurdles, between market days, by stacking them in a corner of the fair field and forming a temporary protective covering of straw thatched roofing. There are references to such storage of hurdles in Mr. Melville Shield's "Appleshaw - The Chronicle of a Hampshire Village" Where at the Sheep Fair Field 'it was necessary to take down the piles of hurdles Where they had been left in the previous autumn' and 'Drawed out Fair Hurdle Pyle today (Friday November 2nd 1827) also 'On November 12th after the hurdles had again been dismantled and stacked as before for winter storage.' However in Alresford the sheep fairs Were historically held in the main streets of the Town, indeed some of the Wills of the men living in Alresford in the eighteenth century refer to property in Sheepcoop Street, now West Street, also Ram Alley, now East Street and the Bailiff and Burgesses minute Book records at the meeting on 18th September 1831 "The bailiff and Burgesses discussed the removal of the Sheep Fairs and markets from the streets of this Town to some adjoining field. They resolved it not expedient at the present time to remove the fairs and markets from their

ancient situation." Now the most important Fair was held in July though the accounts show receipts from Fairs held at Michaelmas and on Holy Thursdays while markets for sheep were also held in November and December every year. To control the sheep with the frequent erection and dismantling of the pens the hurdles were stored in the pound on the North side of Pound Hill, but undoubtedly due to the importance and success of the Alresford markets a need for more practical measures and indeed a permanent building to house the hurdles became necessary and the first mention of a Hurdle House was in 1776 in the account of Richard Wools who was Bailiff for that year.

Mr Glide was paid £25 for building the Hurdle House on Pound Hill, also £3.13.3½ for repairing the pound and public gated, the site being that now occupied by Nos. 44 and 46, a pair of semidetached villa type houses, immediately adjacent to the New Arlebury Park Recreation Ground. The accounts also include:

"paid Mr Hawkins for bricks and lime	.19 0
paid Robert Bricknells bill	7 6
For ashes and carriage; to make mortar for the Hurdle House	8 0
carriage of bricks and lime	8 0
Paid for digging foundations	2 4
Do. for levelling the ground and carrying off the earth	3 6
Do for 3 loads Straw for thatching	£3. 3 0
Mending the key of the Pound	4

John Glide was a carpenter and it is likely that the Hurdle House was made of wood, constructed on a brick foundation and roof thatched with straw.

In 1792 repairs were required to the Hurdle House and Mr. Roberts was paid 10s. 6d. for supplying straw to mend the roof and John Mitchell 5s. 7d for repairing the thatching. And in 1808 "Bills were incurred by the enlarging and repairing the Hurdle House" - the sums involved being:

"Thatching the Hurdle House	18 9
Mr. Dancaster a Bill	12 10
Thomas Hughes for Thatching etc.	£10. 9 6
To James Harvey Bricklayer	6.. 0.11½
Paid Mr. Clark for Straw	5 5 0
Mr. Robert Waight	37 4 0

From the Bailiff and Burgesses accounts with Alresford from 1762 to 1814 it appears that the business of running the Fairs was let to an Agent in return for a revenue or fixed fee of £20. From 1815 this is changed and details appear in various forms for the years onwards in quoting the total revenue received from the sheep at each Fair or total for the year, sometimes also giving the numbers of sheep. Thus : -

"1816 July 25th	By amount of produce of this market for 9,635 sheep	£36. 2 6
Oct 15th	By receipts at Mich	15.19. 1½

	Fair for 4,255 sheep	
Nov 28th	To market the second - 7,092 sheep	26. 12. 1½
Dec 5th	To third market - 1,967 sheep	7. 7. 6
	also	
1815 July 17th	Received for 10,313 Sheep and Lambs	£38. 13. 7
1818 July 30th	Receipts at this Fair	38. 2. 11½
1821 July 26th	14,630 sheep	54. 17. 3
1828 July 31st	Coopage 18,500 sheep	69. 7. 6
	and	
1824 Sept. 24th	By amount of coopage fees of Fairs during the year	107. 3. 1

Incidentally these figures consistently work out at a standard charge of approximately 33/4d per sheep.

It now appears that in 1834 probably due to further pressure from the residents of the Town, the Bailiff and Burgesses reconsidered their 1831 decision and agreed to move the Sheep Fairs to a suitable field outside the Town and in the account of Edward Hopkins, Bailiff for 1835 are the costs for the new Fair Field and necessary new Hurdle House.

	"of Mr. Bennett purchase money for old Hurdle House	£50. 0. 0.
	of Dancaster for Stock of Hurdles	54. 15. 9.
	and	
June	Paid Bennett for erection of New Hurdle House	130. 16 7
	To Francis a Bill for do.	. 35 11½
	To Dyer Bill for Slating do	20. 3. 1.

This account does not give the location of the new Fair Field but information is given in the report of the Alresford Lamb Fair in the Hampshire Chronicle in July 1834, "Arrangements have been made for the accommodation of Farmers and Sheep Dealers to hold the Lamb Fair on Thursday next in a spacious and convenient field on the Bramdean road Within two minutes walk of the Town. To prevent confusions it is particularly requested that sheep may be penned as soon after 6 o'clock as possible." Part of this site where the New Hurdle House was erected can still be seen in a meadow opposite Edward Terrace in Sun Lane. previously called the Bramdean road. This Hurdle House, possibly built of bricks and roofed with slate, was in use for the next thirty years.

But from the Title deeds of the villas, Nos. 44 and 46 Pound Hill, dated 5th May 1835 we learn that John Bennett, bricklayer of New Alresford, purchased from the Bailiff and Burgesses of the Town the old Hurdle House on the 'piece or parcel of ground whereon the same now stands' and this can be seen on the 1843 Tithe Map. It was bounded on the north by a field belonging to John Rawlinson, on the south by a public footpath and on the east and west by the "waste". This Hurdle House had been in the possession of the Bailiff and Burgesses for upwards of fifty years. John Bennett obtained a lease from John Rawlinson for the land for a term of 2000 years, having a

frontage to the road of 220 feet and then leased the West part of 78 feet, which included the Hurdle House. to Isaac Gunner, who was a wheelwright. Isaac Gunner occupied the building as his workshop making farm carts and waggons until he died in 1882 when the property Was valued by Mr. W.H. Hunt (see below) and the family agreed that the second son, George Gunner, could purchase it for £450. In 1902, this Hurdle House Was old and probably falling to pieces and George Gunner decided to clear the site and build the semi-detached villa we see today.



The 1835 Hurdle House continued in use until 1864 when a new Hurdle House and Fair Field became necessary owing to the construction of the railway from Alton to Winchester, which opened on the 1st October 1865, and comparing the Tithe Map of 1843 and the OS Map of 1870 it can be seen that this railway line bisected the former Fair Field. A new site was chosen on the north side of the Bishop's Sutton road, the lease of this field being purchased in 1863 from the owners, Winchester College, for the sum of £300 and with a rent of £2. 2. 0. per annum. The Accounts for 1864 give "To cash to build the New Hurdle House - £80. 0. 0." perhaps this was compensation paid by the Railway Company for disturbance or the sale of the old Hurdle House; also details of the New Hurdle House which was erected in this field by Mr. William Hunt, who was paid £100 and later, the remainder £22. 15. 0., together with his charges of £10.

Mr. William Henry Hunt was an architect and surveyor who lived, and practised in West Stree, Alresford for over forty years from about 1860 to 1905. He was an Alresford man, born in 1834 into the Hunt family who were Brewers and Maltsters in the Town from about 1787 until they sold out to the Alton firm of Crowleys in 1902. He was a director of the firm of Hunt and Company and also the local agent for the Royal Exchange Insurance Company. He died in 1914. William Henry Hunt during his professional career carried out many commissions in Alresford displaying a sensitive feeling for sound classical form and detailing in his several works, utilising a happy approach to good red brick facings sometimes contrasted with that most durable and self cleaning of facing material the knapped flint.

So in 1864 the Bailiff and Burgesses (now the Town Trustees) instructed Mr. Hunt to design and erect the new Hurdle House in the Sheplands field on the Bishops Sutton road, being one of his early commissions, and he tackled the work in a sound and practical manner. The resultant building as we see it today, being about 75 feet long by 19 feet wide and 12 feet clear height inside from floor to underside of the roof timbers, illustrates this love of good brickwork in the quoins. jambs and string courses together with panels of grey knapped flintwork and again red brick dressings around the door and Window openings, circular ventilation openings and including decorative eaves and gable ends. The smooth blue slated roof gives a carefully studied finish to the structure and forms a most satisfactory building for the use of the long established important Alresford Sheep Fairs.

Other well known Alresford buildings designed and built by William Henry Hunt include the Old Fire Station in Broad Street, Dean School in the Dean (recently demolished), the market House, now the Community Centre in West Street. the elevation now sadly covered with stucco and colourwash, the rebuilding of the Town Mill in 1893 and his own house and office N0.36 West Street.

The numbers of sheep penned at the Fair had steadily increased with over 20,000 recorded in 1885 and an old sheep drover recalls that it usually took his uncle, who was responsible for setting out the hurdles and pens for a Fair, some three days each time to perform the task in order to ensure a well run and efficient market.

Repairs recorded to this Hurdle House in the Bailiff and Burgesses accounts give:

	1870 Aug. 3rd	Wm. Cooper Fairfield Approach	£2. 8. 6
	" 11th	John Clark ditto	1. 4. 6
	Dec.21st	Mr. Marshall Fair Field Gates	15. 12. 7
		.French - balance (£20. having been allowed him for the past year and £5 towards expenses of Fencing the Fair Field by resolution March 4th 1873	25. 0. 0
1873	Aprill 30th		
		Less Tax	2. 10. 0
			22. 10. 0
1889	Jan. 25th	By Eddolls - Repairs of Hurdle House and Fair Field Fence	22. 13. 4½
	July 31st	Ford - Painting and guttering Hurdle House and Fair Field Gates	8. 8. 9

Since 1864 this Hurdle House has been in use every year except two. In 1923 the Fair was cancelled because of an outbreak of foot and mouth disease and again in 1971 because of too few entries of sheep.

The Hurdle House was handed over to the Freeholders. Winchester College, last year by the Town Trustees at the expiry of the lease and the field including the Hurdle House is now owned by Mr. W.H. Willis whom we understand is actively considering suitable measures for the future use of this historic building. Before completing the transfer the Town Trustees made application to the County Planning Department of the Hampshire County Council that the Hurdle House be made a listed building and the particulars have been forwarded to the Department of the Environment for consideration and agreement.

It is worth repeating that this purpose built Hurdle House is the only visual link we now have of the centuries old Alresford Sheep Industry and will be preserved and handed down to future generations to see and admire. It was built on the instructions of Alresford, by the men of Alresford, for the use of Alresford. Sadly much damage has been done to it by a fire in June, 1981