

Sandbach History Society

At the May meeting of Sandbach History Society, Graham Dodd from Nantwich Museum gave a highly informative and interesting talk about “Drovers, Their History and Visits to Nantwich”. Dr Dodd said he and Wyn Jones had researched this topic to find out more about drovers and their link to Nantwich.

Dr Dodd explained that the trade in cattle between Wales and England developed a long time ago to meet the demand from England for meat-based products and hides which the people in Wales could not afford. Thus, herds of up to 400 cattle were driven from places like Anglesey where there was flat, rich pasture through the hilly lands of Wales to England as far south as London and Hampshire. Drives could take as long as four to six weeks and were highly organised by the drovers. They were not without hazards as for instance the cattle from Anglesey had to cross the Menai Strait. A local cow which was used to swimming across was hired and used to guide the cattle over when the tides were right. Despite this, many animals were drowned.

Even though there was ongoing conflict between England and Wales for many hundreds of years, the trade continued despite it as it was in the economic interests of both countries. For example, when Offa’s Dyke was constructed along the border of Mercia and the Welsh Kingdoms in the eighth century, gaps were left which allowed the droving trade to continue.

Nantwich became an important border town for this trade and Dr Dodd explained that this was because of the salt production there. Welsh drovers would bring their cattle to the town and exchange them for salt which was an important product used to preserve food during the winter. There are significant links between Wales and the town which has the Welsh name of Yr Heledd Wen, translated as the white salt pit. As there were already routes used for transporting salt from Nantwich called the Saltways, it was not surprising that the drovers also used them. There were two principal routes, one west to Farndon and from there to Wrexham and the other north-west to Chester and into Flintshire.

There are many examples of the influence of the Welsh in the area not least the road west out of the town which is called Welsh Row. Dr Dodd gave examples of names relating to the Welsh drovers in places along the routes that were taken. The Welsh were still visiting the town in the time of King James 1, but salt making was by then starting to decline.

Dr Dodd then talked about droving in general and said that it was not just cattle that were driven but also sheep, geese, turkeys and even donkeys. Once delivered to the customers these were used for meat-based products and hides. Droving tended to take place either in spring or autumn. In spring the high-quality cattle could be taken for

summer grazing whilst in autumn the light small upland cattle were desired for their ability to graze on coarse last summer grass.

With regards to the journey, droves could cover about 15-20 miles a day once the cattle had got up to speed. The drovers rode alongside using dogs such as collies and corgis to help control the animals. Tolls had to be paid, and overnight accommodation found for the cattle and the drovers. From the times of Queen Elizabeth 1, drovers had to fulfil certain conditions to obtain a licence; they had to be over 30 years of age, be married and own a house as well as being English speaking and numerate.

As well as delivering the cattle, drovers also used to conduct other business. They would carry mail, books, and money. They could take passengers such as young people looking for work in England. They carried substantial amounts of money and hence often wore long great coats with long leather pouches to carry gold sovereigns. This can be seen in the statue of a drover in Llandovery. The statue commemorates that Llandovery was a central meeting point for farmers to bring their black Welsh cattle to be driven to London.

The end of droving was brought about by the advent of the railways, making the transportation of cattle quicker and easier. In 1856 the railway reached Shrewsbury from where the stock could be taken to London. Many of the drovers settled down as farmers in England but still retained their Welsh identity. Others emigrated to America where their skills in transporting cattle were useful.

To find out more about this topic, Graham and Wyn Jones have produced a booklet entitled "Drovers, Their History and Visits to Nantwich" which can be ordered and downloaded from the Nantwich Museum website <https://nantwichmuseum.org.uk/>