

## Binegar's Fair – a silver lining?

Wells once had three great *Charter Fairs*. They had run since the time of Bishop Robert (1136-66), he who put Wells back on the map. The High Street, Silver Street and other places hosted the fairs. Their names were the Holy Days of the church calendar. For all that, they were, by all accounts, riotous but very profitable.

As we approach the mid-1300s, our Bishop was Ralph of Shrewsbury. He was a good man. He built Vicar's Close. In 1343, he tried to bring order and decorum to the fairs, sending his officers out to police them. The revellers, though, had a different idea and, bruised and beaten, the officers went home, tails between legs. In the end, Bishop Ralph did prevail but he had not foreseen the visitation of the Black Death in 1348.

The Black Death was devastating. Fairs in a Wells stricken by plague were out of the question. No one in his or her right mind would go. The Wells May 3 *Holy Cross* fair is the obvious candidate for what became *Binegar Fair*.



*Binegar Fair*, held for Whitsun week in the *Fair Field* by Holy Trinity Church, prospered and grew. Just 20 years after the Black Death, we find the first record of it. Lopen is a village 28 miles distant, near South Petherton in South Somerset. Yet Lopen gives us our first evidence.

Lopen Parish sent officials and drovers to Binegar to buy sheep. They bought a flock of 100 and drove them back to Lopen. That is a good two-day journey on foot with a flock of sheep.

You ask, how much did they cost? Did the drovers have fun at the fair? Where did they stay? How long did it take to drive the sheep back? There is a lot we wish we knew.

We do know that *Binegar Fair* continued to prosper from the arguments over who owned the rights to the profit. In 1670, the fair brought in 15 shillings profit (75 pence). That is £20,000 of economic power today. It was worth fighting over and three times the profit of Priddy Fair.

Bishop Ralph himself was not entirely innocent as part of his plan to bring order to the fairs was to establish the right of the church to take the profit!

There was one great tradition, you will be pleased to know, that *Binegar Fair* carried on from its days in Wells: it was riotous, raucous, drunken and vulgar, in short, fun!

Maybe it was the silver lining of the storm clouds of the plague. By the way, Wells still celebrates the *Holy Cross* fair. Now, it is the Wells May Day *Charter Fair*