

Binegar Fair, Bishop John Still goes to law and writes a comedy about Gammer Gurton and her needle

From the earliest Fairs of the 1300s, Fair Day was a big event. You will remember we traced it back to 1380 when people came from the far side of Somerset to buy a flock of sheep.

It was a big enough event for people to fight over it. Early on, its profits enriched Wells Cathedral. The Reformation, however, allowed the hoi polloi – the lower orders – the great unwashed - to claim title to the Fair.

In 1592, Henry Norris, Gent. of Tetbury sold the rights of “Bonyer and Whitnoll Fair” to William Myles, Gent. of Elmhurst for £38. Today, that would be around £350,000.

What were two Gents of Gloucestershire doing owning our Fair? A good question and one that our Bishop, John Still, asked.



Bishop John is interesting. He rests in a beautiful tomb in Wells Cathedral, remembered as a fine preacher. He is possibly the author of one of the earliest English comedies. It is difficult, though, to reconcile this serious churchman (just look at that face) with the farce and buffoonery of *A Ryght Pithy, Pleasaunt and Merie Comedie Intytuled Gammer Gurton's Needle*.

Like many a prebendary, Bishop John was happy to go to law to get what was his, or what he thought was his, in this case, “right and title to the profits of a fair called Bonyer Fair in the Prebend of Whitchurch”. In 1599, he put the case to the Court of Exchequer, which judged property disputes.

It seems Bishop John won as 75 years later, Bishop Peter Mews delights in the profit of the fair – 15 shillings (£20,000 now). You wonder, what sort of Gent. was this Henry Norris? No better than a

trickster who pitched up at fairs hawking his cheapjack wares, it seems.

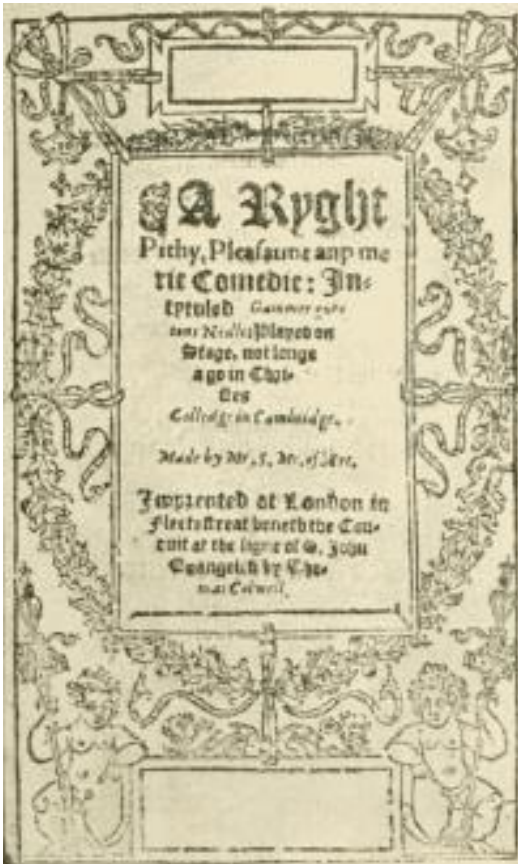
The Diocese continued to profit from the Fair. If you brought horses, beasts or pigs to sell, you paid 3 pence (£7.50) a head in 1787. A pitch for the week was 6 pence or 1 penny by the day.

Bishop John married twice, second time to Jane, daughter of Sir John Horner of Mells Manor. The story goes that Richard Whiting, the last Abbot of Glastonbury, sent Thomas Horner, his steward, with property deeds (hidden in a plum pie) to bribe the King to spare the Abbey. You know the rest!

Aged only 27, John Still became *Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity* at Cambridge University. Twice he was University Vice Chancellor before becoming our Bishop in 1593.

Gammer Gurton

GAMMER GURTON and her needle are too good to pass by especially since the author may have been our own Bishop. It is also interesting as an insight into the humour of the day.



Title page of Thomas Colwell's edition of Gammer Gurton's needle

How did this serious churchman get mixed up with a farce like *A Ryght Pithy, Pleasaunt and Merie Comedie Intytuled Gammer Gurton's Nedle*? The play's title page says it was "made by Mr S, Master of Art" and "played not long ago at Christ's College, Cambridge". The only MA whose name began with S was John Still. Elementary dear Watson.

The tale goes: Mistress Gammer Gurton, mending the breeches of her servant, Hodge, loses her precious needle. Consternation reigns and everyone has to join the search. Diccon, a mischievous fool, claims Dame Chat, the village gossip, stole the needle. Then he tells Chat that Gammer accuses her, Chat, of stealing her cock. Gammer confronts Chat but Chat soundly beats her and Hodge. In search of justice, Gammer enlists Dr Rat, the Curate. Diccon helpfully shows Rat where to hide in Chat's house. Chat thinks it is Hodge inside her house, stealing her chickens and beats the unfortunate Rat. Finally, Bailey, the Clerk, discovers that Diccon was behind all the misunderstandings and, when Hodge is slapped on the backside, his cry of pain reveals that the needle was in his breeches all the time!

What a lark!