

# Walsall Market



**Walsall Market** in 1964.

Courtesy of Walsall Local History Centre

**Walsall has had a market since at least 1220**, when the Crown granted William Ruffus, the Lord of the Manor, the right to hold a market every Monday. In 1417 a further grant from the Crown changed the market day to a Tuesday. The Borough Charter granted by Charles I in 1627 gave control of the market to the Walsall Corporation.

**The market was** originally situated at the top of the High Street, where a market cross stood. This was replaced by a market house, known as

the High Cross or High Cross House, shortly before 1589. The market house was rebuilt in 1692, but was demolished in 1800 as it had become an obstruction to traffic. A new market house was built by the side of St Matthew's Church Steps in 1809. It was intended for the sale of butter, poultry and eggs, but by the 1830s it was little used, and was demolished in 1852.

**By the mid-nineteenth century** the market had grown in size, and had spread down from the High Street into Digbeth. There was an additional market on a Saturday evening, and Saturday itself soon became an important market day in Walsall. Pigs, poultry, dairy produce and grain were all sold wholesale in the market, while cattle were sold on the Bridge and surrounding streets. The pig trade was particularly important, and in 1815 the Corporation built a specialist pig market behind the High Street. By 1817 Walsall was regarded as one of the main inland pig markets in the country, and the 1855 Directory of Staffordshire claimed that the market sometimes dealt with as many as 2,000 pigs a day. However soon after this the pig trade went into decline, when the railways diverted much of the trade to Birmingham and Wolverhampton. By 1889 the pig market was rarely used, and the trade in livestock as a whole ended a few years later. The wholesale trade in grain came to an end in 1906.

**Walsall residents recall** the market selling a variety of goods in the early twentieth century, from fish, rabbits and vegetables to patent medicines and crockery. The Market Superintendent made sure there was a good balance of different types of stalls, while the cries of the different stall-holders trying to sell their wares kept the market lively.

**The market bell** was used to signal the closing of the market, and after it had rung, stall-holders were allowed one hour to clean up and leave. Up until the time of the First World War the bell was rung at 10pm, although the market would remain busy until midnight. Many of the poorest people waited until the end of the day before visiting the market, when goods which would not keep until the next day were sold off cheaply. Between the First and Second World Wars the closing hour was brought forward to 8pm. Since 1945, trading hours have been reduced even more, and today the market normally finishes between 4 and 5pm. It is not clear when the bell was removed from the market, but it has been in the Museum since the early 1970s.

**Originally the bell hung** outside the Guildhall, on the High Street. It was positioned on the side of the building, directly above the roof of the adjacent Green Dragon Inn. It may date from the time the Guildhall was erected in 1865, to replace the older civic offices which had stood on the same site since 1773. It is cast from bell-metal, an alloy of copper and tin, and may have been made by a local brass foundry. Although there is an iron staple for a clapper in the crown of the bell, there are no clapper marks inside the bell. The lip of the bell opposite the wheel is flattened where it has been struck by a hammer, which was probably the main means of sounding the bell.

**A number of other towns** in the Borough also have their own market. Willenhall has had a market at the Market Place in the town centre for several centuries. At Bloxwich the market was held at the junction of Elmore Green Road and Station Street. It was discontinued in 1942, but re-introduced in 1951. At Darlaston a market was established in 1896 on Church Street. It died out in the mid-twentieth century as a result of lack of support, but was revived in 1977. Brownhills market, on Tuesdays and Saturdays, is today one of the largest in the Borough.