

# Exmoor Ponies Change Hands at Picturesque Fair

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D. T. 30. 10. 1952

**B**UT for its October Fair it is doubtful whether the name of Bampton would ever have penetrated beyond the deep rural solitudes of East Devon.

There is not much of Bampton: a surprisingly wide street, sturdy cottages, a couple of inns, some good Georgian houses, St. Michael's Church and 1,400 souls—that is all. Yet to-day, all the world and his wife and their children, too, will be flocking into the little grey town and the ponies will have come down from the moor.

Bampton stands on the Bathern, which joins the Exe in its sylvan valley a mile below St. Michael's, and the single-track Exe Valley line makes a detour up the Bathern to bring the trains into Bampton on their way north from Tiverton to Dulverton.

North and west of Dulverton stretch the 20,000 acres of the old Royal Forest of Exmoor: a land of storm and mist and loneliness, the haunt of the wild ponies and the red deer.

When Bampton Fair first began is a matter of some dispute. It is quite certain that it was established by 1258, for a charter was granted in that year to the Rector, but as every Bamptonian knows, the Fair is much older than that.

## *Traditional Date*

For many years it has been traditional to hold the Fair on the last Thursday of October and when in 1951 a General Election was fixed for that day, there was righteous indignation amongst Fair-goers. It didn't seem right to have the Fair on a Wednesday.

It is only in the last hundred years or so that the main activity at the Fair has been the pony sales. In earlier times, this was the biggest sheep sale in the West Country.

The points to be watched in an Exmoor pony are good quarters, a mealy muzzle, short legs, pricked ears and good bone. Built like a miniature cart-horse, they are wonderfully sure-footed, lion-hearted creatures. Their long thick coats and shaggy manes defy the worst that Exmoor storms can do. They live as wild as the deer, and the

sight of the shy herds roaming freely over the moor is not easily forgotten.

A few days before the Fair, the moorland round-up begins. Mounted on their own ponies, the farmers drive the wild horses into pounds in the combes or on the farms. The spring branding enables the mares and stallions to be claimed by their owners, and the new foals—"suckers"—and some of the older ponies are retained for the Fair. The brood mares and stallions go back to the moor.

In the old days the ponies were driven into Bampton by road; a drove of a hundred was no uncommon sight. Now, many of them come down from Dulverton by train. The R.S.P.C.A. transports them from the station to the sale-pens, thus avoiding the wild stampede that often resulted when the once-free creatures encountered the sights and sounds and smells of a town for the first time.

## *Brisk Bidding*

Corralled near to the sale-ring and grouped according to the moorland district from which they have come, they move uneasily in the pens as the sale proceeds. The bidding is brisk, for the auctioneer knows ponies and the buyers he is handling.

The trample and thud of feet in the pens, a surging crowd of on-lookers, farmers, dealers, fathers of families trying to buy a pony for the children, raucous shouts of advice as a frightened pony breaks loose from a ring attendant and charges the railings, movement, noise; and above all, the voice of the principal figure, the high priest of these annual mysteries—"Four—four, ten—five?—lady in the green hat by the post said five, ten—six?—thank you—in guineas—going—"

And when the sale-ring behind the Tiverton Inn is at last quiet and the ponies have gone far from the wild free moorland that bred them, the streets of the little town keep up the revelry of Bampton's gaudy night. A jovial, noisy, laughing, pushing crowd, enjoying the best night of the year as their fathers did through all those long-gone ages.