**Forest Fair**

Throughout the second quarter of the nineteenth century the Forest Fair was the great event of the neighbourhood, though it first took place many years earlier, probably in the late eighteenth century. It was held on Newhill Plain in Wychwood Forest, about two miles north-east of the centre of Leafield. The date of the fair varied from 11 to 17 September, for it was always on the Wednesday after Witney Feast. The fair was overseen by the Forest Ranger's staff with additional special constables being sworn in.

**The attractions at the fair**

Many different types of stalls were set up. A number sold cloth, hosiery and hand-spun linen for smocks and others sold provisions. Books were also on sale, ranging from children's farthing and half penny chap-books to "penny lives" of notorious criminals. The person who produced the "penny lives" attended hangings in London and drew portraits of criminals as they were hanged. The books would be available for sale the following day.

There was also a wide variety of entertainment, including "Wild West Shows", "Travelling Theatres", "Atkins and Womwell Menageries", "Monsieur Columbier and his French Company with Fireworks" and "the Vauxhall dancing saloon, with harps and violins, lit up at night with hundreds of lamps, and retailing its famous sandwiches at thirty shillings a pound". Many local fiddlers were present and the Charlbury Yeomanry Band performed from Lord Churchill's pleasure boat, the Fanny, on the lake. There were boxing tents, silhouette artists, monstrosities such as the pig-faced lady and the two-headed calf and much more.

**Opposition to the fair**

As the nineteenth century progressed the numbers attending the fair rapidly increased. In 1810 some 10,000 people attended; by 1846 this had increased to 20,000 and in 1853 to some 50,000, many of them carried by rail from the industrial Midlands. However, many thieves, pickpockets, bullies and card-sharpers were also attracted by the rich pickings and there was much drunkenness and debauchery. The Fair consequently ended up with a very bad reputation.

The Methodist blanket factory owners in Witney became most concerned at the evil influence of the fair on its work-force. Around 1800 Charles Early announced to his workforce that anyone discovered drunk after attending the Fair would be instantly dismissed. However, he promised to provide alternative entertainment for them, by way of a Methodist picnic in Wychwood Forest.

Lord Churchill barred the fair in 1831-3, 1843 and 1845, all years of political unrest. The fair was eventually stopped in 1856, though the only way in which Lord Churchill managed to achieve this was by digging trenches across Newhill Plain so that nothing could be driven across it!