

Boroughbridge Farmers Auction Mart Company Limited
Mr Paul Johnstons Memories (Sept 2010)
.....mjrjones

Boroughbridge's heritage was shaped by many events over the years, none more so than by the farming community. This varied community in all its shape and sizes, working with all that the seasons threw at them together with its diverse supporting businesses paint a rich tapestry that depicts events which have moulded, and shaped the town to what it is today. The following story illustrates an apt flavour of times long ago.

March Winds & April Showers
Bring forth May flowers

*March said to Averil
I see three hogs on yonder hill
And if ye'll lend me days three
I'll find a way to gar them dee
The first o' them was rain an' weat
The second o' them was snaw an' sleet
The third o' them was sic' a freeze. It froze the birds' nebs to the trees
When the three days were past and gane,
The silly hoggs came hirplin hame!*

Known as borrowing days. Legend relating to the last few days of March, and the generosity of April.

A legendary shepherd promised to give March a newborn lamb if he would calm the weather to suit his seasonal lambing period. His wish was granted, but he refused to keep his promise to March, whereupon a spell of devastating winds and snow was wrought upon the shepherd.

Nevertheless the old style notions of one-month "borrowing days" from another, usually wintry in nature are spread throughout the springtime months of the year.

"March borrowed of April, April borrowed of May, three times they say, one rained, one snaw, and the third was the worst day that ever blew."

One such supporting business was the "Auctioneer" who played a pivotal role in the farming community ensuring a competitive market thrived and flourished to the benefit of the buyer, seller and ultimately the consumer. One family spanning four generations made that happen in Boroughbridge. That family was known as the Johnston's.

The name "Johnston's" of Boroughbridge is recognised and remembered as a highly respected family business of auctioneers, surveyors and estate agents. A family spanning four generations from a great grandfather to present day Paul. Great grandfather James the founder of the business left his roots in Carlisle and came to Boroughbridge in the 1920's. It was about that time that a company called "Boroughbridge Farmers Auction Mart Company Limited" was formed with the issue of 15,000 shares for which there was a considerable demand. There was a requirement at the time for such a Mart to manage the needs of farmer's, slaughterhouses and the wholesale and retail meat trade in the buying and selling of livestock.

The site of the Livestock Mart often referred to as the cattle market was where now stands the modern housing estate built in 1993 known as "Market Hill". How many residents living there today are aware of this? Across the road, where now stands the Old Goods Yard,

Milby stood the parking space for the many vehicles of various sizes that transported the cattle, pigs and sheep to and from the Mart. It was here the vehicles were washed during the day in readiness to transport their cargo to destinations north, south, east and west of the town. The Mart including the parking area covered three and a half acres, not an inconsiderable area. The Mart was adjacent to the old railway which also provided transportation for the livestock.

The Mart operated on a Monday from 5am till late. In the old days farmers gave notification of their intention to attend and what livestock they would bring. Later on farmers resorted to just turning up on the day. The Mart housed about 300 individual stalls for cattle, and a significant number of larger pens to house 10 -15 cattle each. There were 400 – 500 smaller pens to house sheep and pigs. Apart from local farmers, many came from as far a field as West Yorkshire, The Midlands, Lancashire, and points north. The Mart was well known for the quality of livestock bought and sold at the site. Sales that went to slaughter houses were separated into retail and wholesale. The Mart peaked between the 1960,s and 1970,s when typically 700 fat cattle, 2 - 3,000 sheep, and 500 pigs were auctioned per week, a staggering quantity for a small market town like Boroughbridge.

Apart from the economic benefit the Mart brought to Boroughbridge it offered a unique social gathering of people from all walks of life as well as farmers and professional business men. This was the weekly event where everyone could keep in touch, catch up on the news, and pass on information. This was the day when sales people from farm machinery companies, tractor reps, fertilizer reps, spraying reps, insurance reps, professional hauliers, contractors, grain merchants, vets, and a myriad of other traders interacted with each other and oiled the wheels of commerce. Conversations on the day would be for instant a grain merchant asking a local farmer Mr Pickersgill “Do you have any grain for sale farmer Pickersgill?” Farmer Pickersgill nodding replying yes he had ...discussions would take place and a deal struck. Similarly a farmer wishing to sell his farm would approach the auctioneer and arrange instructions for the sale of his farm.

The Johnston's besides having office accommodation at the Mart also opened in 1934/35 an office in St James Square. This became their main office for the operation of the many facets of their business operation which had a very busy and varied schedule. From great grand father James the business was passed down to Paul's grand father “Basil”, then down to Paul's father James. The knowledge of the business and the technique of the language (auctioneers speak) were passed on down over four generations from father to son to present day Paul who took command of the business at the age of 30, some twenty five years ago. Paul like his fore fathers before him is well aquatinted with all the local farming community. He has seen the many changes that have occurred in farming, with the smaller farms being bought out by larger farms. Similarly the area has seen a huge reduction in the rearing of livestock, with the move to a more exclusive arable operation by the bigger farms, no doubt due to economic pressures.

In the 1970's when local county boundaries were redefined, North and West Ridings were formed into North Yorkshire. Prior to this North and West Riding were separated by the river Ure. When North Yorkshire County Council was formed it inherited a sizeable number of small farm holdings from West Riding. Since then the number of holdings have been disposed of by sale to private larger farms. Thus the number of farms in the area has quietly reduced in number and with it a reduction of livestock of all types being kept. Trade began to diminish at the Mart with eventually a decision was arrived at to cease trading in 1988. It was

a sad loss to the area, both in economic and social terms. This marked a passing away of a rich and satisfying way of life never to return again

Local butchers would also attend the Mart to buy small numbers of fat cattle, pigs and sheep. Usually the auction timetable started with pigs, followed by sheep then cattle. A local butcher from Horsefair Mr Greenwood was a regular visitor who would typically buy two beasts maybe some sheep, and a pig or two. The livestock would be driven on foot from the Mart to the field behind the shop in Horsefair where there is even to this day a disused slaughterhouse. The livestock would be slaughtered; the meat cut up and put on sale to the public.

Decimalisation threw the Mart into confusion with one week beasts being sold by the hundred weight (cwts), only to be followed the next week with everything being traded in pence per kilos metric measurements, not only that but pounds, shillings and pence now transposed into decimal coinage. This was a shock to the system particularly to the farming community where sudden change is an anathema. However these changes were quickly accepted and things soon settled down to a normal routine.

The highlight of the year was the Christmas Fatstock Show held in early December. A big show was put on, and everyone made an exceptional effort to be there, the four tiers of seating surrounding the ring where animals were paraded would be packed with standing room only. There would be anticipation in the air and a great deal of merriment. This was an event that included judges making their pronouncements after much inspection, discussions, and head scratching on the many fine animals that were paraded around the ring, and adjoining pens. Prizes were awarded to the proud owners, and much talking took place about the relative merits of the winning animals. The local hostelries no doubt profited on this day.

Apart from livestock auctions the family also held and still hold furniture, farm, and farm implement auctions. These auctions attract wide interest from all walks of life. There is an air of expectancy of what is up for auction, what will it sell for, who will buy it, and will any undiscovered masterpieces turn up? Many attendees find the auctioneer language fascinating and never cease to be amazed at how the auctioneer spots who has made a bid as it all happens at high speed. Paul recalls a recent property auction at Aldborough where a small parcel of land just outside of Aldborough was up for sale, the room was packed with standing room only. The land was successfully sold for a considerable sum no doubt due to the competence of Paul doing his job well. Paul also recalls holding auctions of 800 lots plus of antique and household furniture at the mart, and quickly dispatching of that amount within the day, adding that he felt quite worn out at the end of the day.

The Johnston's business and office in St James Square was sold off in 2002 to the present owners Lister Haigh who continue to trade as auctioneers, valuers, surveyors, land and estate agents with Paul in the hot seat as manager.