

THE FIRST SCHEME

In the relocation of both the Cattle Market and the Corn Exchange another force – other than market improvement for commercial gain – was at work. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Bury evolved as an increasingly polite Georgian society and benefitted from that sustained wave of urban improvements which towns across Britain experienced at this time. Its elite lived in the town centre in such places as Guildhall Street, Northgate Street and the Angel Hill and to these people the obnoxious noises and smells of markets and livestock really mattered. In short, they were enthusiastic to smarten up the town centre, and the move of the cattle market to the other side of St Andrew's Street and the concentration of corn trading in a covered market building went far to achieving this.

But with two nuisances gone, another remained in the Buttermarket. Here crowdedness and untidiness existed alongside noises and smells of a different sort, generated by its multiplicity of stalls and sellers. This was the very centre of the town and it was a vibrant place. In June 1821 the diarist and banker, James Oakes found the town 'very full ... Hogg Hill [Cornhill] and Butter Market full: Hawkers & Pedlars' stalls of all sorts of goods. More like a fair'.⁵ On one market-day – Wednesday in 1854, 39 'butter and egg women' and 13 'vegetable women' – all the wives of farmers – sold at individual pitches located between pedlars' and hawkers' stalls that were filled with hardware, leather, 'iron' and the like. And these stalls could be quite large; that of one greengrocer measured eight feet by four and overspilled into '23 hampers and a basket besides'.⁶



5 Jane Fiske (ed), *The Oakes Diaries. II. Business, politics and the family in Bury St Edmunds, 1801–1827*, Suffolk Records Society, 1991, p265

6 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 2 Aug 1854

As early as 1827 a *Bury & Norwich Post* editorial had referred to '*the great inconvenience of the place in which the poultry and butter market is held in this town*' and that it '*is always a subject of complaint ...*'.⁷ Twenty years later, in 1847, complaints were voiced again, this time in Corporation meetings although with inconclusive results. The issues then covered were, inter alia, congestion on market days when traders' stalls prevented access to shops and also poor attendance by traders in bad weather which drove up the price of provisions. A bold plan – referred to as a '*scheme of markets*' – was then discussed which involved rebuilding the Corn Exchange and attaching to it a covered provision market but all of this came to nothing on account of costs. Instead, the Corn Exchange was extended rather than rebuilt.⁸

With the Corn Exchange extension completed, a firm grasp on the provision market issue was now taken for the first time. In November 1851 a leading-light on Bury's Corporation – Captain William Hubbard RN ret'd - voiced his concerns at a Town Hall meeting about the state of the Buttermarket which he saw as '*a most serious hindrance to trade ... for ... [it] was so crowded that the thoroughfare was positively obstructed ... The*

state of the market was now such that ladies sent their servants to buy instead of going themselves; and people who had things to sell, sold them to a huckster [door to door seller or stallholder] rather than attend the market themselves, and the buyers had thus to pay for a double profit'.⁹

At a following meeting of the Corporation on 16th February 1852 Captain Hubbard again ranged over his subject, this time giving insight into the numbers and functions of stalls and pitches that would relocate to the Market. They would comprise 26 butcher's stalls, 60 stalls selling vegetables, 6 fish, and 100 butter and eggs (60 on Wednesday and 40 on Saturday). It added up to the extraordinarily large averaged total of 142 traders! To these must be added stalls selling categories of goods not classified as provisions; the Buttermarket in 1852 must have been a very crowded place indeed.¹⁰

The upshot of the Captain's intervention was the formation of a Corporation Committee to study the options available; initially it was dubbed the Committee for the Removal of the Buttermarket and comprised Captain Hubbard and Estates Committee members. These options ranged from providing covers for individual stalls to the far more radical

7 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 3 Jan 1827, p2/3. I am grateful to Dr Pat Murrell for this reference

8 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 17 Feb 1847 & 19 May 1847

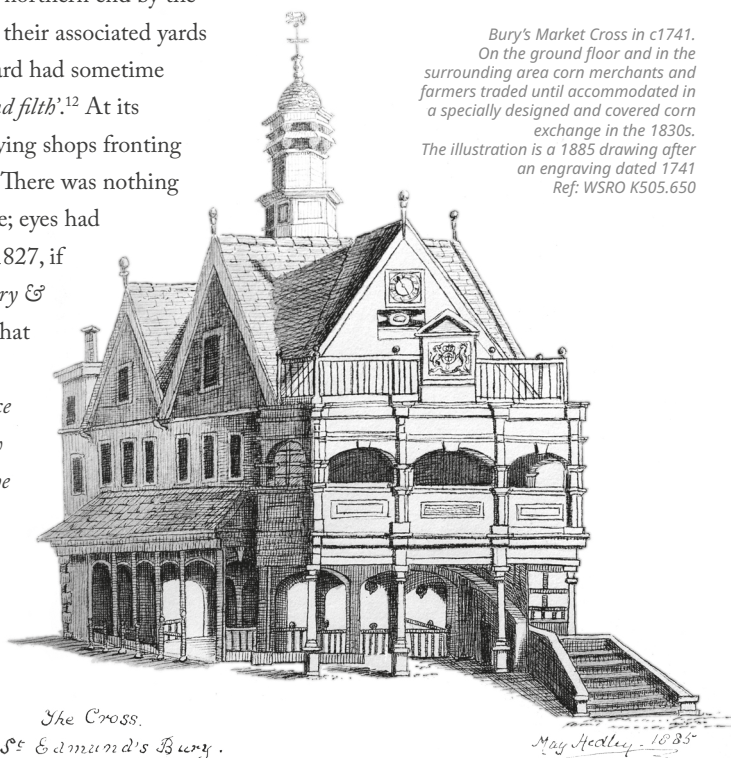
9 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 12 Nov 1851, reporting a Corporation meeting of 10 Nov

10 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 18 Feb 1852, reporting a Corporation meeting of 16 Feb 1852. Captain Hubbard also gave estimates of likely rents per stall

solution of turning the Buttermarket into some giant arcade through the erection of an iron and glass roof. The Committee finally resolved that because of the *'exposed and crowded state of the Buttermarket it be removed to a better place and that it be covered and protected from weather'*.¹¹

The *'better place'* was the large and prominent site of the present-day Corn Exchange, all of which was in Corporation ownership. It was then occupied at its northern end by the Butchers' Shambles and their associated yards – which Captain Hubbard had sometime found *'a mass of damp and filth'*.¹² At its southern end were decaying shops fronting on to Abbeygate Street. There was nothing new in this choice of site; eyes had settled on it as early as 1827, if not earlier, when the *Bury & Norwich Post* reckoned that *'a better [situation] could not be found than the space behind the Shambles, now occupied by the yard for the inspection of hides and a few small tenements'*.¹³

The construction would be of iron and glass, then very much in vogue as a result of its use in the recently completed Crystal Palace, built to accommodate the 1851 Great Exhibition. Shops would be incorporated into the Abbeygate Street frontage to replace those demolished, while the seven butchers' shops which occupied the Shambles would be replaced by stalls within the new Provision Market. It was a neat but as yet unworked-up proposal with little to say about costs.



11 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 19 May 1852, reporting a Corporation meeting of 17 May 1852

12 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 16 Nov 1853 reporting a Corporation meeting of 9 Nov 1853

13 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 3 Jan 1827, p2/3



The Shambles as shown in a watercolour by George Scharf in 1817. The building would have been demolished to make way for the new Provision Market in the early 1850s. It was finally demolished in the early 1860s when the Corn Exchange was built on the site
Ref: WSO K515.1022

Perhaps sensing this, one supporter – a Mr Beard – at a personal level had acquired from the Crystal Palace builders, Messrs Fox & Henderson, a broad costing for a building 350 feet [sic, presumably 150 feet] long by 80 to 90 feet wide. It came in at around £2,775 – a surely wildly optimistic sum.¹⁴

The Committee's report was subject to lively debate. Some Corporation members questioned the true level of nuisance generated by the Buttermarket; Mr Frederick Nunn, a butcher based in the Shambles, had never heard '*a single individual complain of the market*' while Captain Hubbard had heard '*hundreds complain of it*'. Another and very significant line of attack focused on money at

a time when, according to Councillor Prigg, the Corporation had not *'even the money to pay interest of what they had borrowed'*. In short, this boiled down to the question would rents charged to the market's traders be sufficient to cover interest payable on the monies raised to build the market? No other significant costs were envisaged.

Another councillor wanted to know why Bury people should foot the bill when the chief beneficiaries from a roof over the market – the traders – lived outside the town and made no rate-contributions. For his part Captain Hubbard objected to a covered arcade in the Buttermarket which he reckoned would ‘*spoil the finest street in Bury*’.

14 *Bury & Norwich Post*, 19 May 1852 reporting a Corporation meeting of 17 May 1852