



DROVERS

Drovers spent their lives walking with cattle across vast areas of the country to rich pasture lands, in order to fatten them up before taking them to livestock markets. There is evidence to show that a great export of Welsh cattle to the rich pasture lands of England existed in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is likely that those drovers were continuing the trade of their medieval ancestors.

Drovers were part of the national as well as local economy. In the nineteenth century beef was needed in the rapidly expanding urban industrial centres. Every part of the animal was used: meat for the growing population, bone marrow for making glue, hides for the tanning and leather industry. Northampton, in the heart of the Midlands of England, became an important centre for tanning and for the new mechanised shoemaking industry.

Welsh cattle were driven as far as the meadows of Surrey and Sussex. Records of East Grinstead Fair show that Welsh cattle were sold to local butchers.

Batnor's Tannery in Lingfield, Surrey was owned by John Turner Kelsey; a particularly successful tanner, he exhibited a 'crop hide of North Wales runt of the great weight of 82 lbs' at The Great Exhibition in 1851. Tanneries flourished also at Edenbridge and Oxted.

The following account has been taken from an article on *Welsh Cattle Drovers in the Nineteenth Century* by Richard Colyer (published by the National Library of Wales Journal, 1972, Vol. XVII/4):

'Research has indicated the existence of a flourishing cattle trade since the mid 13th century.

By 1810 some 14,000 Welsh runts were being sent annually to the English Midlands, from Anglesey and the Lley Peninsula alone. In addition to the North Wales runts the larger Pembrokeshire cattle were found in abundance in the fattening lands of Norfolk, Essex, Kent and Surrey.

Although the majority of those drovers were Welshmen, not all could speak fluent English, occasionally English drovers were recruited to work alongside the Welshmen.

David Johnathon of Dihewyd traded throughout the Midlands and sold cattle at the fairs of Kingston, East Grinstead and Horsham.

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Most accounts suggest that the droves ranged in size from 100-400 cattle, which were attended by 4-8 drovers and their dogs. The cattle would normally be shod before the long trek to England. The drove proceeded at a leisurely pace of about 2 miles per hour. The drove would cover between 15 and 20 miles a day.'

Tom Knight was born in Lingfield c.1819. He was a drover, as was his father before him. The 1861 census records his address as Greybury Lane, Marsh Green, near Edenbridge, Kent. One of Tom Knight's smocks was presented to Eden Valley Museum, Edenbridge, where it is on display. The smock is olive green colour and is made from waxed linen. It is hand-smocked on the bodice and the sleeves. It was originally trimmed with 10 mother-of-pearl buttons: 3 on the front bodice, 3 on the back bodice (1 is now missing), 1 on each sleeve and 1 on each of the 2 pockets.



TOM KNIGHT, THE DROVER

A small pamphlet, *Testimony carried on in Lingfield*, gives a contemporary account of Tom Knight:

'Tom Knight's home was Marsh Green but sometimes he would go on a tramp and make his way even as far as Wales. One day the rupture of a blood vessel in his leg nearly cost him his life. Dr Sydney Austin [a Lingfield doctor] feeling this to be a warning to the people, visited him with an evangelist to preach the Gospel at an open-air meeting, in about 1878. The meeting was so well supported that that growing numbers of Presbyterians began regular congregations that led to the building of a Church in Marsh Green.

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On his death bed, in about 1890, the old drover was visited by Rev. David Smith who reportedly said, 'Tom, you are under the wrong drover'! He read Matthew 8, v.23-34, about a herd of swine, and lovingly pointed him to Christ. On his next visit Tom greeted him with a radiant face, 'I am under the right Drover now' and lived long enough to show the reality of the change, dying happy in the Lord at 85.'

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