

## THE HISTORY OF DAVENTRY

Daventry was, and is, a market town, one of several local centres of trade and administration in the county of Northamptonshire.

12th century Daventry had become home to the priory of St Augustine, a house of Cluniac monks; founded by Hugh de Leicester, sheriff of Northamptonshire, in the 1090s, with the permission of his lord, the Earl of Northampton. Over the next few centuries, Daventry was patronised by local gentry and nobility in return for masses said for their souls, but the Priory declined in the fifteenth century and Cardinal Wolsey obtained permission from Pope Clement VII in 1524 to dissolve it, in order to found Christ Church, Oxford.

In 1255 Daventry was granted a charter to become a market town. In 1576 Queen Elizabeth granted Daventry borough status. The town was mentioned by William Shakespeare in *Henry VI, Part I*, which refers to "the red-nosed innkeeper of Daintree".

The "Daintree" Shakespeare wrote about, the name persisting to this day, spelt *Danetre*, grew from a tradition that Danish settlers planted an oak tree on the summit of Borough Hill to mark the centre of England. This part of the town's history is reflected in the town's seal of a Viking/Saxon axeman and an oak tree. The town appears as *Dauentre* on the Christopher Saxton map of 1637.

Daventry had 292 houses and about 1600 inhabitants in 1720, 2582 in 1800, 3326 people in 1821, 4565 in 1841 and 4124 in 1861. It is very close to the Warwickshire border.

In 1645 Charles I slept in the Wheatsheaf Inn in Daventry the night before the Battle of Naseby - which he decisively lost. Certainly his troops were milling around the area that week.

English Dissenters founded a Dissenting chapel in the town around 1722 in buildings opposite The Wheatsheaf on the southern end of Sheaf Street. Later a Dissenting Academy was moved from Northampton to this site. The chemist and theologian Joseph Priestley studied there from 1752 to 1755.

In 1830 its position on the main road artery to Ireland and the North-West meant that 180 coaches a week stopped in the town: 82 to London, 56 to Birmingham, 19 to Liverpool, 7 each to Shrewsbury and Holyhead (Irish packet) 4 to Cambridge, 3 to Rugby and 1 to Northampton. There were also numerous local carriers picking up goods for nearby villages. Weedon, about 4 miles away, had a massive barracks and was a major troopship transit point for Ireland. It was on the canal, and in 1824 a convoy of 28 boats of soldiers passed through.

In 1851 half the inhabitants of Daventry were under 25. There were 5 times as many in the 0-9 age group as in the 60-69 group. The oldest was 91. Half were born in Daventry, 600 in nearby villages, and 85% in Northants or Warwickshire. The incomers were mostly English, and professional, but included 36 Irish, 21 Scots and 5 Welsh. 550 people (1 in 10 over 10 years old) were in shoemaking and 214 in domestic service.

Daventry had a full range of traders but the big growth in population was associated with the shoe and boot trade, and with the mechanisation of that trade in the mid-19th century. There were 3 boot and shoe factories - Stead & Simpsons in Church Walk, Rodhouses in Oxford Street and Mountain and Daniels in Warwick Street. Women would fetch the pieces of leather from the factories, sew them together into shoe uppers at home, (mostly by machine by 1900) and return the made uppers to the factory.

There was an annual Mop Fair on the Market Place the 1st Wednesday in October, also the following Wednesday but this was much quieter and was the day for hiring people. (Kelly's Directory says "3rd Wednesday following Old Michaelmas Day".) There were 13 horse and cattle fairs a year, held on the 2nd Tuesday of each month and 27th October. There was also a Cheese Fair on the 2nd Tuesday of April and October.

The 1900 'Memories' says: The Winter Hunt met in the Market Place. Winter had the Muffin Man. A Horse drawn fire- engine was kept in the Moot Hall in the Market Place. A water cart came round on hot summer days, down Sheaf Street and up High Street spraying water on the dusty roads. There was also horse-racing on Borough Hill. Figs were eaten on Palm Sunday, warm Hot Cross Buns for breakfast on Good Friday and Easter Sunday saw coloured hard boiled eggs - pink, blue or yellow - and chocolate eggs. Oranges were a Xmas treat.

In 1925 Daventry became home to BBC Radio and one of its engineers left this recollection: "the most surprising things can cause transmitter breakdowns. Mice are especially fond of the insulation of cables. They like the taste of the wax, but when they have eaten through to the wire the result may be a sudden termination of both programme and mouse. In a case like this the tiny saboteur gives its own form of assistance to the engineer trying to spot the trouble. A strong smell of cooking mouse pervades the transmitter concerned and the searcher has only to trace the scent to its source."

Cummins have their largest UK plant at the town where they manufacture some of their largest diesel engines that are suitable for marine, railcar and generator set uses. Ford had one of its factories here, but this has since become a parts and distribution centre.

The town once had a railway station on the former London & North Western Railway branch-line from Weedon to Leamington Spa, but it was closed on 15 September 1958 and is now demolished. The local weekly newspaper, the *Daventry Express*, is nicknamed 'The Gusher', after the steam engine that used to serve the town.

Today the old town has a centre of about eight streets, surrounded by a large area of Victorian housing, and then ringed by dual carriageways, with a mass of post-war building for housing and commerce. A street market is held every Tuesday and Friday in High Street, although its original site was on the aptly named Market Square. There is a modern shopping mall, small and pushed through to the High Street. It is still the only town in that part of the county, and a local centre, but nowadays most of the traffic is on the M1.

*The above description was compiled by Heather Cotton from "Memories of Daventry, early 1900" and "Kelly's Directories", various dates, held in the Local Studies Section of the library in Daventry.*