

Fairs on Midsummer Common

One of FoMC's objectives is to encourage the public use and enjoyment of Midsummer Common. To this end, FoMC welcomes events held on the Common. Another objective is to work with organisers to ensure that these events have minimal impact and cause no nuisance to local residents. To this end, FoMC has raised issues of concern at Stakeholders' Meetings and changes have resulted. FoMC will continue to act as a conduit for those wishing to comment about the management of Midsummer Common and the events held thereon. What have people said about this year's Midsummer and Strawberry Fairs?

Midsummer Fair. This is a statutory event starting on the third or fourth Wednesday in June and lasting for 6 days. The general perception this year was of a smaller and less well attended Fair. As far as FoMC is aware, there were no significant incidents at the Fair or in the adjacent residential areas. The only adverse comments concerned the early arrival and parking of trucks on the Common - they are an eyesore and damage the vegetation. Do they really need to be on site 5 days before the Fair's commencement?

Strawberry Fair. This is a 1-day event that has grown in ambition and changed its style since its inception in the 1970s. In the words of the organisers it is now "a free performing arts fair" that takes place in the first week of June before which the cattle must be dismissed. It has always been held on Midsummer Common.

Problems in recent years caused the City Council to impose conditions when licensing the event this year. The organisers claim that the Fair met these conditions. The organisers also launched a campaign this year to encourage visitors to respect others (including those living nearby) whilst enjoying the entertainment. This "Play Fair" campaign failed to achieve 4 key objectives: responsible drinking, no peeing, no drugs and no litter.



1. Responsible drinking. The Fair, in its present form, helps promote a culture of excessive and under-age drinking. Much of this drink is bought locally and brought onto the site by visitors. Groups arrive with boxes of beer - in one case they were brought in on a supermarket trolley. Wines and spirits are also consumed - an observer reported seeing young girls each drinking from a bottle of vodka.

The Government is trying to stop this culture of excessive drinking. Cambridge City Council should be doing the same. This means stopping visitors bringing alcohol into the Fair - the usual practice at many similar events held elsewhere. Ways must be found to achieve this.

2. No peeing, other than in toilets. Urinating and defecating in the streets and gardens alongside the Common had been a considerable problem in 2007, especially in the Brunswick area. The organisers wanted to stop this behaviour by ordering more toilets and blocking egress from the Common. The police promised to help by patrolling the streets and posting signs warning of an £80 fine. This promised an improvement but it did not have the desired effect. Soon after the Fair opened, long queues formed outside both the men's and women's toilets - users reported waits of 20 minutes and soiled facilities. As liquid intake increased, more relief was needed and people couldn't wait. As a result they started drifting off the Common into the alley ways, streets and gardens to relieve themselves. We are not talking about isolated incidents, the numbers were in their hundreds - both men and women - and starting from mid afternoon and going through into the night. The police effort to deal with peeing was no more than token.

This cannot be allowed to happen again. A vast increase in the number of toilets is required and they must be kept in an acceptable condition. Furthermore, ways must be found to stop people leaving the Common and relieving themselves in the surrounding streets and gardens.

3. No drugs. Drug taking and trading were a considerable problem in 2007. They remained so this year. The streets and alleys around North Terrace were particularly attractive to traders servicing the needs of those coming from the Fair on the Common. The police patrolled the area and made arrests but much trading and drug taking went unchallenged.

There is no easy answer to this social problem. A more active police presence should help. That said, the Fair's existence exacerbates the problem and the City Council must recognise this fact.

4. Leave no trace, take your litter home. Each year after the Fair has left, the Common is strewn with litter. This year was no different in spite of more litter bins being provided. Litter is normally cleared by volunteers in the 2 days following the event - and the Common is normally left in a clean and tidy state. This year the clearing lasted only 1 day and the Common was not left in its usual tidy state. Much litter remained and would have prevented an early return of the grazing cattle.

This situation must be corrected. Those who visit Glastonbury, the Cambridge Folk Festival and other similar events report no such littering of the site. More and bigger labelled bins are provided elsewhere and they are cleared on a regular basis throughout the event. Litter collectors are ever present tidying up the site. Fines are imposed on offenders. Strawberry Fair organisers should be made to adopt a similar litter control regime.

Parking. Parking was not on the Fair organisers' agenda but it had been a bone of contention in previous years. The adjacent streets and gardens attract illegal parking and there was much of that this year. Some of these vehicles were ticketed but that did not resolve the immediate problem for residents.

The City Council and Cambridgeshire Police might explore ways of blocking access to those streets where parking is restricted to those holding residential parking permits.

The way forward

At public meetings before this year's event, the Council promised the termination of Strawberry Fair if conditions did not improve. Whilst those attending the Fair might have sensed improvements, local residents did not. Something needs to be done to prevent a repetition of anti-social behaviour next year. Local residents need protection. What are the options?

1. Stop Strawberry Fair. This would alleviate the anti-social behaviour in the surrounding neighbourhoods. But it would also deprive many Cambridge citizens of an enjoyable event.

2. Impose a gap year. This would serve as a strong steer to the organisers and might serve to break the culture of excessive drinking and anti-social behaviour at the event. But there is no certainty that it would remove the problems in later years.

3. Move the Fair elsewhere. If the Fair were moved to Stourbridge or Coldham's Common, those living around Midsummer Common would be spared the agony. But this would likely only move the same problems elsewhere.

4. Enforce preventative measures. Further conditions could be imposed on the Fair's organisers when granting a license. What preventive measures might be effective?

- If the organisers were forced to fully fence the event, as permitted under the *Cambridge University and Corporation Act 1894*, access and the importation of alcohol could be controlled and excessive drinking would be less of a problem.
- If the organisers were forced to install vastly more toilets, there would be less demand for urination in neighbouring streets and gardens; fully fencing the event should stop this anti-social behaviour completely.
- If the police were to fund a much larger and evenly spread police presence, this might force the drug traders out of the area; fully fencing the event would make neighbouring streets less attractive for trading.
- If the organisers were forced to introduce a better litter collection regime (bigger labelled bins with continuous emptying and an army of ever-present litter collectors), it might remove that visual eyesore and its after effects.
- If the authorities were to sanction road blocks, illegal parking in the neighbouring streets would be restricted; fully fencing the event would further ease this problem.

If the Council wishes to keep the Fair running on Midsummer Common next year but to protect its electorate from its adverse effects, it might consider all of these preventative measures as the way forward.