

VILLAGE ECHOES

Nowadays the Goudhurst summer fete is one of the firmly established events in the community calendar. Its origins, perhaps, many centuries ago, are not documented, but it undoubtedly evolved through a number of different stages before settling into its present form, as can be seen from some Victorian and Edwardian programmes.

The Goudhurst Amalgamated Fete of 1882, organised by the Goudhurst Benefit Society and the local lodges of the Foresters and Oddfellows Friendly Societies, was described in the local press as a “novelty in this village” though this may refer to its “amalgamated” status rather than meaning it was a completely new event. It was an elaborate undertaking: the start was heralded by the ringing of the church bells and was followed by a procession consisting of dignitaries from the organising societies through the village to the cricket field where they promptly sat down for a meal provided by the landlord of the Star and Crown (now the Star and Eagle) Hotel. Afterwards, the more energetic villagers - one has to assume the younger members, although the news item is silent on this point - were free to take part in or watch such activities as walking, running, jumping, bicycle riding and a peg-race (which seemed to involve removing pegs from a washing line without dropping any). For those uninterested in such athletic amusements, an alternative means of entertainment was provided in the rather strangely named dancing saloon.

New or not, the event evidently caught on and, ten years later in 1892, Goudhurst's Athletic Sports Day was held in a field near The Grange. Entrance fees ranged from 6d, presumably for those on foot, up to 5 shillings for a two-horse carriage. The programme cost 1d and from this we learn that music was provided by the Tunbridge Wells Royal Military Band who played a selection of music including waltzes, polkas, quadrilles and grand marches. In all there were 15 races, with first prizes ranging from 30 shillings (a significant amount of money, more than the majority of the villagers in those days would have earned in a week) for the one mile race, down to 8 shillings for running 150 yards. The small programme lists the names of the participants for each race, mostly boys, although there was a special egg and ladle race for girls which had attracted precisely two entrants.

By Edwardian times the fete seems to have become an annual event, although the date varied from year to year between June and September. In July 1909, villagers spent a very happy day and evening patronising the “sundry amusements” provided by the organisers, the latter having “partaken of a capital repast” supplied, once again, by the landlord of the Star and Crown.

Local History Society