

## The Foresters

The first mention of the Ancient Order of Foresters and Beckett that can be found in the newspaper, appeared in the Swindon Advertiser, edition dated Monday, August 7, 1876. The article described the event that was to become the Annual Fete of the Foresters Court known as Vale of White Horse, number 2161. This particular court had been established in 1846 and was one of the rapidly growing, 'Friendly Societies,' that became very popular through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To belong to one and to subscribe regularly, gave the member a certain amount of insurance which offered help and relief during times of ill-health and hardship.

The article explains that the Court, '*Celebrated their anniversary by a grand procession and a fete in the beautiful grounds of Beckett Park, kindly placed at their disposal by Viscount Barrington. The day was gloriously fine, and large numbers of people assembled from the surrounding district.*' It goes on to give a detailed analysis of the Court's finances and stated that, '*The court, from the last balance sheet, appears to be in a prosperous condition.*' It continues, '*The procession was a very showy affair, the members wearing the regalia and quaint dresses of the order, the following being the principal characters; Robin Hood (Bro Thomas Simmonds), Little John (Bro Messenger, of the Juvenile Order), Will Scarlet, (Bro Godwin), Friar Tuck, (Bro John Underwood), Shepherd and Shepherdess, (Bro Fulcher and Sarah Hill). To the strains of the Appleton Brass Band the members paraded the village, and afterwards attended divine service at the parish church, where a very excellent Sermon was preached by the Rev G.W. Murray. The sermon throughout was listened to with much attention. At its conclusion the members reformed in procession and again paraded the village. A visit was paid to Beckett House, and then a move was made to that part of the Park set apart for the fete, where, in a large marquee, Host D. Pocock, of Watchfield, had placed an excellent dinner on the table. The chair was taken by the Vicar, the Rev G.W. Murray, who was supported by Dr Parker in vice-chair, and Mr Skurray, Mr Cook, Mr Read (Baulking), Mr Chillingworth, Mr Pocock and others.*' After some lengthy comment on the various toasts and speeches, the article explained that '*an immediate move was made to the Park, where arrangements had been made for various sports.*'



The next Foresters Fete mentioned in the Swindon Advertiser was not until Saturday August 2, 1879. However, at one stage in the organisation of the event, things were not looking good as the article states, *'In consequence of the serious illness of the Hon Florence Barrington fears were entertained almost up to the last moment that the arrangements for holding the fete in the Park at all would be upset, but on the previous night permission was given to use a portion of the Park on the Watchfield side, some distance from the house, and here preparations were made for the various amusements provided.'* It was a successful fete and dinner was provided in a large marquee by Bro D. Pocock of Watchfield.

After all the usual toasts, the revelry began and the Swindon Advertiser reported that, *'The weather continuing fine until between five and six o'clock, there was a large assemblage of visitors, many no doubt being attracted by the natural beauties of the place. The beautiful flower beds round the house were much admired, being in themselves sufficient to reward those who went over from Swindon for the time spent in getting there. Excellent arrangements were made for dancing, and this healthful exercise was entered into with much spirit by a large number of visitors, even after the rain had commenced to pelt down and umbrellas had to be raised. On a stage in the centre of the field the band played at intervals, and the New Swindon Christy Minstrel troupe gave a couple of performances in their well-known excellent style, including, in addition to a number of comic songs, duets, solos, dances, etc, a comical farce entitled, "Who dies next," and a Military extravaganza "The Lodging House Brigade." The jokes of "Bones" caused roars of laughter. It is expected the committee will have a good surplus after paying all expenses.'*

If proof were needed that the English weather is, and always has been, plain fickle, then the attempt at holding the Foresters Fete on August 25, 1881, is a clear

example. The Swindon Advertiser reported glumly, *'A more unfortunate day than Thurs last could not have been selected by the Foresters of Shrivenham for their fete in the beautiful grounds of Beckett Park. From early morning until night there was an incessant downpour of rain.'*

The Foresters seemed to have been put off by the weather of 1881, for it was not until July 24, 1884, that another was reported. The Swindon Advertiser noted, *'After a lapse of a few years the members of the Shrivenham court again determined to hold another fete this season, trusting that the "clerk of the weather" would smile more propitiously upon them than on previous occasions.'* Once again, with the consent of Lord Barrington, it was held in the grounds of Beckett Park. Apart from the odd shower it was a great success and very well attended.

The following year, the Foresters Fete was described by the Swindon Advertiser as, *'one of the most successful which has hitherto been held.'* The date chosen was Monday August 3, 1885, and as customary, it was held in Beckett Park. Once again, the author of the article waxes lyrical about its beauty, *'The picturesque nature of this very beautiful and very pleasant park has been frequently descanted upon. Its charm to many is its refreshing quiet and the contrast it presents to the turmoil and bustle of everyday life. Its gardens, its secluded walks, its winding sheets of water, and other surroundings, make it a paradise, whilst those who desire a few hours rest for a weary brain find a panacea amidst scenery so delightful.'*

Emphasis for the success of the day was placed upon the shoulders of Mr W. Warren (Barrington Estate Steward), Mr Meads (Barrington Estate Head Gardener), Mr T. Hill (Committee Secretary), Mr David Pocock and other Committee members.

The newspaper article noted that after the church service, *'At 1 o'clock the members and friends partook of an excellent dinner, under canvas, provided by Mrs Smith, of the Folly Inn, Faringdon. It is no exaggeration to say the viands were substantial, choice and ample, and reflected much credit upon the cateress. The tables were exceedingly well laid out, and very prettily adorned with a profusion of flowers. The Rev G.W. Murray occupied the chair, and Dr Nixon the vice-chair. Among the visitors were, Mr C.C. Olliver, Mr Rogers (Wantage), Mr R.W. Hedges (Broad Leaze), Mr Charles Warren, Mr Daniel W. Day, Mr J. Baker, Mr H.J. Fowler, Mr Hedges, jun., Mr Phipps, Mr C. Williams, Mr Lee, Mr Thomas Coulbert, Mr Jason Twine etc.'* After the usual list of toasts and accompanying speeches in reply, the newspaper noted, *'We need not describe the pleasures of the afternoon and evening, suffice it to say that men were hilarious, women loquacious, and children joyful. The stage performances were admirable and caused much amusement. Dancing, kiss-in-the-ring, swinging, cocoanut shying, cricket etc, were heartily engaged in, many enjoying the walks and seeing the varied designs of flower beds, which, notwithstanding the adverse season, looked almost perfection.'*



The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Court, Vale of White Horse, No. 2161, was held in Beckett Park on Monday August 2, 1886. It proved to be a successful day and the weather favourable. The Swindon Advertiser noted that the Foresters met, *'at the Courthouse at ten o'clock, the members, including several on horse-back, dressed in character, paraded the streets, headed by the Wootton Bassett Band, under the able leadership of Mr H. Maslin. There was a profusion of flags, banners, etc.'* The article continued, *'After leaving church, the members again paraded the streets, calling at the residences of the principal inhabitants. Whilst meeting in front of the house of the late Mr W. Messenger, who was senior trustee of the Court, the band played, in a most impressive manner, the sacred anthem "Sing unto the Lord" (Ed Newton), as a mark of esteem for the late brother.*

*Arriving in the park, the members and friends sat down to a sumptuous dinner, provided by Mrs Smith, of the Folly Inn, Faringdon, which reflected great credit upon her catering abilities. Through some misunderstanding the Juvenile Foresters were not allowed to partake of the dinner.'* However, with such a diversity of amusements available, I suspect the juniors didn't fret for too long over their lack of dinner.

The following year saw another well-known and respected Forester pass away, and in the edition dated May 21, 1887, the Swindon Advertiser reported, *'On Sunday afternoon last the remains of Bro William Godwin (Shrivenham Court) were interred in the parish churchyard. The deceased being well known, nearly 190 members, including several from the neighbouring Courts, attended as a mark of esteem. The service was impressively read by the Rev C.G. Wheeler, after which Bro David Pocock read the*

*Forester' address appointed to be read at the grave. Several friends sent wreaths, crosses etc, including a beautiful cross from the Hon Mrs Barrington, of Beckett House.'*

In the edition dated Saturday August 6, 1887, the Swindon Advertiser reported that, *'Notwithstanding the many counter attractions held within a radius of six or eight miles, the demonstration of Court 2161, "Vale of White Horse," maintained its popularity as of old, on Monday last. The assiduous committee did all in their power to make the fete a success. An attractive programme, bright genial weather, the gardens of Beckett Park (wherein the fete was held by kind permission of the Right Hon Viscount Barrington), in all their summer beauty, and the picturesque surroundings made up a most charming and delightful holiday, of which some thousands of persons availed themselves. Early trains, and all kinds of vehicles brought into the village large numbers, whilst pedestrians flocked in on every side, the result being that no larger assembly has gathered within the Park since the last Great Western Widows' and Orphans' fete, held very many years since. (July 30, 1861).*



The next Fete of note was to take place in the summer of 1891. The Swindon Advertiser reported it enthusiastically in the edition dated Saturday July 18. *'For some weeks past the village and neighbourhood has been plentifully besprinkled with gaily coloured bills and flaming pictorial posters announcing that the members of Court 2161, or Shrivensham Lodge of Foresters intended, "giving the public a treat as never was," on Wednesday, July 15<sup>th</sup>; so much so that, "Are you going to the fete?" was the question which seemed to leap unbidden to every lip, and formed the almost universal topic of conversation. The committee having obtained the permission of the Right Hon Viscount Barrington to*

*hold the fete in Beckett Park, which has such seductive charms for pleasure-seekers, did wisely in fixing Wednesday last for the occasion, when the G.W.R Works and the various tradesman's shops in Swindon were closed, thus giving an opportunity to hundreds to spend a pleasant day. The committee to their credit be it said, spared no expense or trouble in providing amusements worthy of the occasion and the satisfaction evinced on all sides was ample recompense for labour bestowed. Mr Alfred Montgomery, fete and variety agent of London, brought down a troupe of artistes which did him infinite credit, the performances consisting of horizontal bar acts, serio-comic songs and dances, champion rifle shots, canine acts, grotesque negro comicalities, Japanese sword walking, comical performing terriers, etc, also the latest novelty in galloping horses by steam-power, aerial navigation, shooting galleries, cocoa-nut bowling, swings, and various other amusements. Refreshments were provided by Mr C.A. Clack, of Uffington, and dinner and Tea by Mr F.E. Tipper, of Swindon.'*

To round off a very long article on the event the newspaper concluded, '*Dancing and various games were indulged in until nine o'clock, when the park was cleared. Between two and three thousand persons were present, and it was a grand sight to see numerous parties picnicking beneath the shelter of the noble trees which adorn the Park, and strollers wending their way around the water walks and ornamental grounds, the day being gloriously fine.'*



Following the Fete held in July 1892, an article appeared in the Swindon Advertiser dated August 6, announcing that two local dignitaries had been admitted honorary members of the Court, '*On Monday evening last, after the transaction of*

*the usual business in connection with Shrivenham Court of Foresters, the Right Hon Viscount Barrington and A.W. Fairthorne, Esq, were initiated honorary members, the ceremony being conducted by Bro PDCR David Pocock, assisted by Bros C.R. Stone, D.W. Day, secretary, and others. At the conclusion of the rite, Bro Pocock thanked the new members for conferring an honour upon the Court. Lord Barrington and Mr Fairthorne in reply promised their aid to encourage and help forward the court.'*

The general success of the annual Foresters Fete was heavily reliant upon the use of Beckett Park. This fact was readily acknowledged during the dinner of July 1893, when the Swindon Advertiser newspaper reported, *'The health of Viscount Barrington was proposed by Bro Pocock, who referred to the kindness his lordship had shown the Court in again allowing them to use his grounds in which to hold their annual fete. It would be no use for the Foresters of Shrivenham to attempt to hold a successful fete if Beckett Park were not placed at their disposal. Since they last met, they had initiated Lord Barrington into the mysteries of their ancient order.'* However, times and fortunes were changing for the aristocratic family, as the next chapter will attest.

Although the Fete of July 24, 1895, was not considered very successful on account of the inclement weather, the article written about it in the Swindon Advertiser provides a detailed description of the amusements provided when it lists, *'roundabouts, swings, shooting galleries, knock-em-downs, etc, and at stated intervals the stage performances were given by a company of artistes provided by Mr W.G. Sylvester, the well-known London caterer. They included comic songs by Mr George Stanger, songs by Miss Amy Villiers and Miss Rose Alladin, minstrel entertainment by the Two Veas. Prof. Hawthorne was without the slightest doubt the star of the stage in his quick change of clothes and character entertainment. The Mechanical Mannikins also deserve a word of praise. Mr Edward Mortimer also gave some illustrations of lightening drawing of notable persons. The Stratton St Margaret Brass Band, also added to the days enjoyment by playing a number of selections and accompanying in the evening dancing.'*

The last three Foresters Fetes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a mixture of good and bad. All three were covered by the Swindon Advertiser. The event held on August 2, 1897, was timed so that it didn't clash with what was then to become known in Swindon as *'Trip Wednesday,'* whereby all the railway workers headed off to Weymouth. The day was a success though and noted that, *'the attendance at the fete was much larger than usual.'* On August 1, of the following year, it was noted of the fete dinner that, *'one of the largest companies that have assembled in the history of the Court.'* However, on a less positive note it stated, *'As last year visitors were not allowed to cross the lake and take the view of the private gardens and front of the house, much to the disappointment of many.'* The new tenants were not of the same mind as the Barringtons had been. Unfortunately, the last fete of the century was considered a washout, when the sub-title of the newspaper article labelled it, *'rain mars the days enjoyment.'* But even though it was the last one of that century it

was to continue on into the next.