

The Boot Fair – Money for old rope

I once bought a tennis racket at a boot fair in Northumberland, then had to carry it back home to Kent on the national express coach. I'm not sure why I bought it – I had never played tennis in my life. But it was a bargain though at 50p.

Boot fairs have been around in the UK for about 50 years. One theory of its origin was that in the 1970s a catholic priest Father Harry Clark from Stockport saw something similar in Canada and thought it a good way to raise funds. Although this has never been verified the idea certainly took off and in 1980 a fair of over 200 stalls took place in Wrotham Heath. The weather was not good but despite this over 2000 people turned up. No doubt all looking for their tennis racket bargain.

Someone recently told me they had never been to a boot fair. So let me enlighten you to this wonderfully strangely British past time. There are many weird and wonderful things to be seen and I don't just mean what is on sale. The site is normally a farmer's field which is divided into two, half for the stall holders and the other for buyers' cars. Only sellers pay for their pitch.

There are so many things to think about as a seller. The first one is how you packed your car. You can always tell a newbie as they realize they have actually put their required trestle table in their car first so have to unload everything to get to it. A rookie mistake which can be costly. Not only in time but in attracting 'traders'. They are like vultures circling dead prey and at the scent of fresh meat they swoop. 'Got any jewelry, got any militaria, and got any jigsaw puzzles? The questions come thick and fast and you have to have your wits about you so not to sell at unbelievably low prices.

My first boot fair came after clearing my late mothers' house. Now she did love a bargain and would have delighted in seeing her valued possessions i.e. tat being sold rather than thrown away. We did quite well but had no idea how to price our goods. One kindly sole told us jigsaws should be sold for more than 25p. To be honest I was just pleased to get shot of them. I had found a length of old rope in mums shed and sold it for £1. I did have a sleepless night about that as the buyer thought it would make a good tow rope. As it had been in mums shed for the best part of 30 years to my knowledge I wasn't convinced. But if he was happy to give me money for some old rope who was I to quibble?

It doesn't matter how early we set off to the fair we seem to find ourselves parked in exactly the same position as the year before. We are normally near to a man selling old garden implements. How one man can acquire so many used forks, spades hoes etc. is beyond me? I did once have my garden shed broken into – just saying.

After the initial tussle with the traders everything settles to its gentle rhythm. The burger van has a constant stream of customers. It must have arrived at silly o'clock as it was already trading when we arrived before 0700. The smell of frying burgers and onions wafts over the field seeking out its next customer. It's amazing how many people see a burger and fries as breakfast. You could also get a coffee or tea in a plastic cup. I steer clear of that as I would much prefer not to have to venture into the very few on site toilets.

As there are many things to consider for sellers so too for buyers. Haggling is key, rather un British but its surprisingly easy to get into the swing of it. Normally you start high, they start low and you meet in the middle. On my first year I was definitely under selling my goods. One extremely well dressed lady was interested in a bottle opener which I was selling for 50p. She refused so I reduced it to 20p and she said I'll give you a pound! Apparently she used to sell at fairs on a regular basis and

grew tired of people wanting something for nothing. My item she said was worth more. In fact she gave me a £2 coin and would take no change.

Although I'm there to sell, my main enjoyment is watching and interacting with an extremely diverse range of people. Fairs attract a great cross section of the public and it would be all too easy to engage in a form of snobbery. For some this the only way to buy something new (new for them), for others it is the quest to find that hidden treasure being sold for peanuts. For a few this is a good way for some form of social interaction. People are really happy to confide so much to a complete stranger. I've heard heartbreaking stories of illness, loss and general struggles with life. But there are also moments of pure joy and amusement. One lady was very keen on a blouse I was selling but threw me completely when she asked if I had it in a different colour. I had to gently remind her that I was not a shop.

Each year there seems to be a particular item that is a must buy item. One year we lost count of people walking by with pillows tucked under their arms. Another year it was extremely large potted plants.

As with the people, there is also a great variety of dogs being dragged around and are always a good way to initiate conversation. There was one seller who had a mountain of jumbled clothing piled high on a ground sheet - £1 per item. We watched as one small dog casually relieved its self on the merchandise unseen by the seller or its owner. What do you do –say something or pretend you saw nothing, a real dilemma?

So what of the tennis racket I hear you ask? It lasted one game at the local park. I hit the ball reasonably hard and amazingly it reached the other side of the net. Unfortunately the head of the racket had detached itself from the shaft and actually flew further than the ball. Match over.

1100 words