

TRENTHAM THURSDAY – The origins

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“Everybody goes to Trentham on Wakes Thursday” was a typical local fable during the 19th century. However, many now wonder “what was Trentham Thursday all about”? Well, the first mention of a Trentham Thursday first appears in 1843 when the writer talks about the approaches to Trentham Park being thronged by groups who came on foot, in vehicles of every description and barges along the canal. There was a brass band playing in the park where the young and old “tripped the light fantastic” as they felt free from the daily grind of the pottery factories of Stoke to the green park and clear air of Trentham. The year following tens of thousands were reported promenading around the park, setting up picnics and games for children were in abundance.

The park was part of the estate belonging to the Duke of Sutherland of Trentham Hall who allowed it to be enjoyed once a year by the people of North Staffordshire. A worthy description of 1845 clearly illustrates the atmosphere and importance of this annual festival. “Early in the morning, the clustering towns of the entire district poured forth their gaily attired inhabitants in their thousands. Pedestrians and vehicles of every description, groaning beneath their burdens of laughing, buoyant, joyous people crowd the entire lengths of crowded roads as they made their way to Trentham”. From this period onwards, each following year the event attracted more able-bodied of the Potteries exchanging the smoke for the enjoyment of the sylvan groves of the Duke of Sutherland.

In 1854, the Independent Order of Odd-Fellows appealed to the Duke to allow the gardens to be opened for a special gala to raise funds for the North Staffs Infirmary. Admission was one shilling for adults and six pence for children obtainable in advance from local booksellers. Never before had so many people congregated in one place at the same time for an incredible 61,000 plus attended that day.

During the Victorian period attendance numbers maintained an average of over 51,000 each year. By the mid-1860s, special trains were running every hour from all stations on the Knotty line to Trentham, the demand was so great that wooden sheds were placed in each town for the purchase of train tickets in advance to save complete chaos at each station on the day. The short walk from Trentham station to the park defies the imagination with itinerant stall holders providing food, alcohol, side shows, music of all kinds in attempt to persuade revellers to part with the odd penny or sixpence as they passed.

By the late 1870s Trentham Thursday was viewed as the crowning finale of the Stoke Wakes and no wonder, for what more pleasant way to end a week’s jovialities than to ruralise for a day amidst the most enchanting scenes of nature and for free. However by the early 1880s there were reports of a slow decline in numbers as it had done over the last few years that in a decade there would be no more Trentham Thursday.

Until the 1880s the weather, rain or shine played little part on the day, but in this decade, it was a good excuse not to travel to Trentham reducing further attendance figures then amounting to just a few thousand who were determined to cling on to the importance of the day.

Once the decline was established, the excursions from Stoke station to seaside resorts and historic cities surpassed all expectations and thus was as predicted the death-knell to Trentham Thursday as potters wanted to explore further afield. It was reported in 1912, that again numbers were down at Trentham from years past of sixty to seventy thousand to just a few. The fairground, stalls and booths that once lined the way from the station to the park became just a shadow of its former

glory. Weather was at its worst and as trains arrived with people with high expectations of the day the platforms were full of those wanting to return home. For those who remained the weather changed for the better at noon and people returned on foot together with mats, baskets of food and the children as always paddled in the stream as they had done for the last seventy years.

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