

Warwick Mop: Background Information

1. Introduction

The Warwick Mop is a traditional fair held each October in Warwick town centre. The origins of the Mop fair date back to the 14th century and the enactment of something called the Statute of Labourers.

Mops were originally hiring fairs with shows, entertainment and small hand-turned rides. Since then, they have changed with the times and the current format of larger rides arose in the late 1860's with the development of steam powered fairground rides.

The current licence has run from 2004 and will end this year (2014), and the rights to run the Mop are owned by Warwick District Council. The Showman's Guild of Great Britain has held the licence (in one form or another) to the Warwick Mop since the 1950's.

With over 700 years of history, the Warwick Mop is an important part of the cultural identity of both the town and the district.

In re-letting this licence, the Council recognises the role Mop Fair plays in the cultural heritage of the town, and that it continues to be a key part of Warwick's modern cultural calendar.

2. Location

The Mop covers a number of areas as shown on the map included at the end of this document. Street closures and suspension of parking spaces are in effect whilst the Mop is held. Roughly 160 spaces (from both car parks and on-street) are removed from Thursday afternoon to Sunday morning for the two Mop weeks.

It is important to note that the Mop *must* be held in Warwick.

3. Timings

Today, the Warwick Mop takes place on the two Saturdays following the 12th October each year. This is slipped by a week if the 12th falls on a Saturday. The fair also operates on the Friday evenings beforehand.

The Mop moves into the town on the Thursday afternoon and leaves by midday on Sunday. The fair does not remain in the town during the week between the two Saturdays; instead, it leaves and returns on the following Thursday.

It is important to note that the Mop *must* operate on these dates. They cannot be varied without an application to the Secretary of State.

The streets close in the afternoon of the Thursday preceding each fair to allow the rides and attractions to be set up safely. The main rides are brought into the market square and parked at 4pm to minimise disruption to rush hour traffic. The build-up of the rides then takes place from 6pm to minimise disruption to local shops.

4. Health and Safety

Health and Safety is incredibly important to the operation of the Mop fair. The local emergency services are consulted to ensure that they can access the area should they need to, and the police (along with the council events team) ensure the smooth arrival of the rides in the town. All rides must carry full public liability insurance, and risk assessments are required by Warwick District Council.

Noise levels are monitored during the event to ensure acceptable levels are maintained and, where possible, power cables are raised above head height to help keep the streets clear of hazards.

5. Background:

The Warwick Mop Fair tradition began back in the time of King Edward III and the enactment of the Statute of Labourers. This was an attempt to control the much diminished labour market following the Black Death. It was intended to suppress the labour force by preventing increases in wages and prohibiting the movement of workers from their home areas in search of improved conditions. In practice, this was poorly enforced and did not stop a rise in wages.

Warwick is one of dozen or so towns that have a history of holding mops and still hold one each year. These towns were once all medium-sized thriving market towns surrounded by a large number of smaller villages, and so were an obvious choice as the location for the mop.

When the Mop first started in the 13th century, the event was a hiring fair for local labourers to meet and find new employment. Employers would move amongst them and, once agreement was reached, the employer would give the employee a small token wage. They would then spend the wage amongst the stalls set up at the fair which would be selling food and drink and offering games to play.

Workers would normally be hired for a trial period of a week. This is the reason for the Runaway Mop on the following weekend; allowing either party to return if they were unhappy with the employment arrangement.

Mop fairs were traditionally tied to the harvest and not the calendar. When the Gregorian calendar was adopted in 1752, events associated with the end of the harvest moved eleven days later to 10 October. This date is known as "Old Michaelmas Day" and since 1752 the mop fairs have taken place on or around this date.

The name 'Mop' stems from labourers wearing a symbol to identify their trade. This could have been a tuft of wool for shepherds, a wisp of straw for farm workers, etc. These symbols meant that employers would instantly recognise the trade of those seeking work. The badges were believed to have been known as 'mops' – hence the term 'mop fair'.

6. Traditions

A pig roast, or ox roast, traditionally provided food for the visiting crowds. Today, the pig roast remains and is one of a number of ways the Mop fairs raise money for the Mayor's charity. The first slice of meat is auctioned and often re-auctioned a number of times to increase the charity donation made. The bidders include councillors, townspeople and showmen.

With the arrival of the industrial revolution, rides became a feature of Mops around the midlands. Whilst they originated as pedal-powered contraptions, the rides quickly moved to steam-power and then on to the high tech rides of today. The Mops have a tradition of adapting to modern technologies yet retaining the traditional value of family entertainment.

The Town Mayor opens the Mop at 12 noon on the first Saturday. They are accompanied by the Town Crier and representatives of the council in traditional attire. The Mop Charter is read aloud and the Mayor then takes a tour of the fair, granting free rides to anyone present.

In recent years, new traditions have come about with the support of the local residents. The pupils of local special schools are allowed access to the Mop before it opens to the public, and are allowed free access to the rides. There have also been a number of expressions of interest in a joint exhibition showcasing the cultural history of the town and the role that the mop fairs play in this.