

HOPPINGS MANAGERS

There has always been a manager in charge of the Hoppings, ever since that first Temperance Festival in 1882. This article looks at the six people who have had the honour to be called Fairground Manager.



1882 – c1923 - Mr R. F. W. Liddle was Temperance Festival manager.

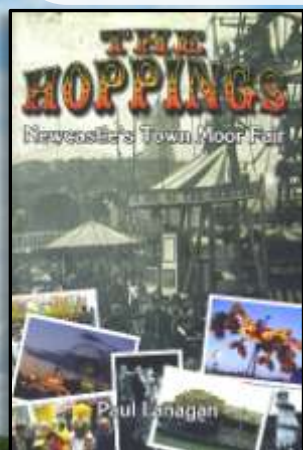
c1924 – 1956 - George Wright was Festival Site Manager and acted on behalf of the Newcastle Corporation and the Stewards' Committee of Freemen. His responsibilities included trouble-shooter, diplomat, administrator and guardian. He was in this role for over thirty years and retired in 1956.

1957 - 1982 - Fred Didsbury (seen above), Newcastle City Council's Chief Building Surveyor, became Fair Manager and was known to the showmen as 'The Guvnor'. In 1959 Albert Austin assisted Mr Didsbury with the setting out of the fairground for the first time, having gained employment with the Council as a Building Inspector the year before.

1982 - 1987 - William H. Tait, known as Bill, of Bedlington was Fair Manager. When asked how he regarded the fair he said it was the low point of his year!

1988 - 1993 - Albert Austin was Fair Manager.

1993 - present - Susan Stokel-Walker was Fair Manager. In 1993 Albert Austin was made redundant from the City Council following a departmental reorganisation which saw the responsibility for the Hoppings pass from the City Engineer's Department to the Leisure Services Department. Susan Stokel-Walker, who came to the UK from Arkansas, USA, in 1977, is the only female Fair Manager in the history of the Hoppings. Albert continued to be involved with the fair - he was hired as the Fairground Surveyor.



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The Hoppings: Newcastle's Town Moor Fair

By Paul Lanagan ISBN: 978-0-9555059-0-4

www.newcastle-hoppings.co.uk

FAIR MANAGER: Q & A

The following questions were answered by Susan Stokel-Walker, the manager of the Hoppings fairground, around 2004, as part of the research into the Hoppings book.

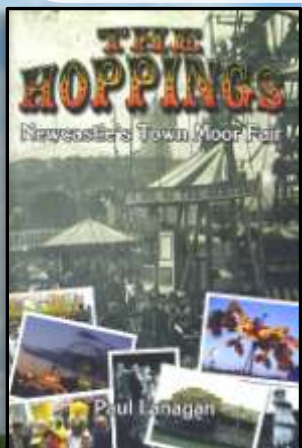
Thanks are extended to Susan for her help and co-operation.



1. What is your role at the Hoppings?

My current title is Fair Manager - one that I don't really like because it isn't a true reflection of my role. I am the City Council's nominated officer with responsibility for the provision of certain services to the site and to members of the public - such as:

- organising and servicing the Safety Advisory Group for this year's Hoppings to produce an event manual (major breakthrough).
- provision of a crew to help set out the lines for the showmen to build-up on; however, there are other areas of the fairground site that the showmen mark out themselves.
- provision of a plumber to ensure that there is an adequate water supply on site and that the toilets are in working order.
- provision of bin men, gully men, skips, to remove both domestic and trade waste from the site during the event as well as service the showmen's toilets.
- provision of toilets attendants during the event.
- provision of a Lost Children's attendant during the event.
- first contact with the police to secure their services on site and provision of their meals.
- liaison with St. John Ambulance to secure first aid provision.
- close liaison with the Freeman of the City regarding the site, its security, and its reinstatement.
- provision of the hired portable administration cabins on site.
- lots of other miscellaneous things the all add up to an exhausting ten days.
- on site every night until the fair closes.
- arrange and service the debrief meeting.
- manage the budget for all of the above.
- that's about it!



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2. When did you become involved with the Hoppings?

1993 was my first year. I shadowed the outgoing Fair Manager, Albert Austin, to learn the 'trade'. I asked him every year since to come out of retirement and help me with the setting out. We made a very good team.

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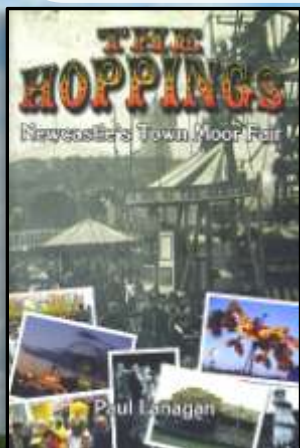
Albert Austin and Sue Stokel-Walker, 2004

3. When does the setting out take place?

We normally start looking for the surveying pegs in late May around the Bank Holiday time. This is always done in advance so that when the setting out crew starts on site we can get on with the grass cutting and white lining, etc.

4. When will the showmen start arriving?

The Showmen are allowed on the site from 6 am on the Sunday. They enter from the Grandstand Road entrance of the Moor. It is worth coming to watch. There is usually a full breakfast being cooked in some kiosk by 8 am and the smell is fabulous!



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A MANAGER REMEMBERED

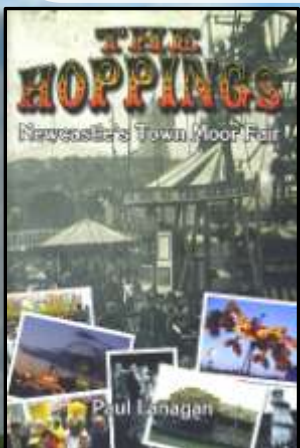
The following memories were shared by the former Fair Manager, Albert Austin, around 2004. Albert was made redundant from the role in 1993 but went on to become the Fairground Surveyor, responsible for setting the Hoppings out. Sadly, Albert passed away on the 23rd of February 2010.



I first met Albert in June 2003, in the early hours of the morning when the fairground was pulling onto the Moor. Albert became a good friend and helped me along every step of the way with my research into the Hoppings; in the first four days he kindly bought me a new-fangled digital camera! In the years that followed he gave me his time, contacts, photographs, support and encouragement.

Albert was a very special man, and if you've ever visited the Hoppings, it's down to Albert that the fair was laid out accurately, neatly and on time! I would often see him walking around the huge moor, tape measure in hand, un-noticed by the members of the public who were distracted by all the fun of the fair. Albert had his own pace and he would weave in and out of the crowds as he went about his duties.

Paul Lanagan



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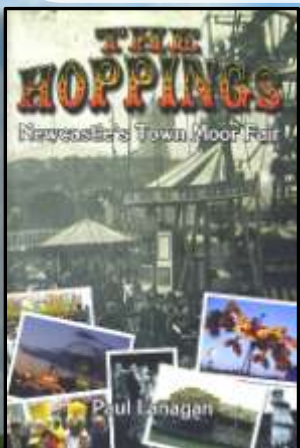
A MANAGER'S MEMORIES

"I AM OFTEN asked the question 'what year did you become associated with the Hoppings', but most people haven't got time to hand around to listen to the answer. My very first memory of the Hoppings is of walking there with my parents. I guess that I would have been about five years of age, so that would have been in the year of our Lord 1937. We lived near Heaton Park, in a downstairs flat, in common with hundreds of other families, who, as I recall, felt no shame in being called 'working class' and having no money. At that time, I had four brothers older than myself, and a sister younger than myself. There was about three years difference in each of our ages; so at the time I speak of, my oldest brother would have been about seventeen, and our little sister, two. Our father was a bricklayer, when jobs were available.

I can never remember any of us receiving regular 'pocket money'. An odd half-penny might occasionally reach us as a reward for running a message; and this would buy us an ounce of sweets at the corner shop. My father's principle method of keeping us lads in check was a quick cuff across the head. He was by no means a cruel man, and with a squad of young boys, someone had to be in charge. Even today I find no fault in his method. The hand raised to cuff was also the first to protect. My mother's chief method of keeping us in check was by taking us for long walks through Heaton Park, Armstrong Park and Jesmond Dene; after which, we didn't have the energy to misbehave. The walks would vary from time to time. During Race Week, a favourite change would be to walk to the Hoppings – a distance of perhaps two miles.



Albert Austin in his cabin at the Hoppings



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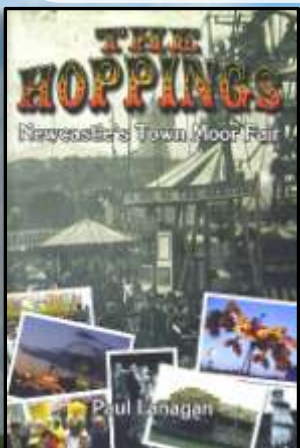
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I would ask you to imagine us then – my mother with a pushchair, containing my two year old sister, my brother Leonard, eight years of age, holding onto one side of the pushchair, and myself on the other side. It is likely that brothers Edgar (eleven) and Harry (thirteen) would have been walking in front with Dad, with brother Stephen bringing up the rear, perhaps. The route was mainly through the closely-built terrace flats and houses of Heaton, Sandyford and Jesmond. Not a particularly scenic route even today; although it was interesting to watch the stone-crusher in the Corporation's Newington Road depot, if it happened to be working. Another bit of excitement which urged us forward was the sight of a dried porcupine fish in a fishmonger's window in Clayton Park Road.

We would reach the Town Moor eventually though, and here is a remarkable thing. I have no recollection of any of us going on any of the rides. We certainly looked around, because I can recall the sight, sound and smell of traction engines (long since consigned to history) and also the 'steam yachts', although I could not see any resemblance between those contraptions and sea-going vessels (still cannot). I remember Dad buying us a penny ice-cream cornet (or was it a half-penny?); while he and mother had an ice-cream sandwich – but that was it. We were told that there was no money for anything else. From childhood, we know one of the most important facts of life – when you pocket's empty, it's empty. So we all trudged back home.



The Hoppings fairground in the 1930s



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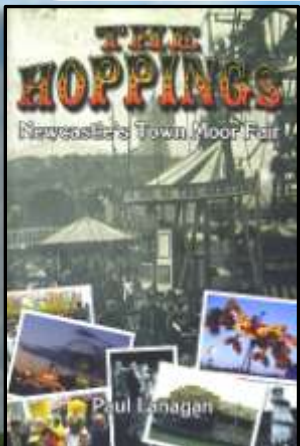
Then why did we bother going in the first place? Well, because if you are born in Geordieland, that is one of the things that you do when you are young. Ask anyone raised on Tyneside when they first became associated with the Hoppings, and like myself, they cannot answer in one sentence. The Hoppings are as much a part of Geordieland as brown ale and stottie cakes. It's in your blood.

If you have been good enough to read on, it will not be too difficult for you to imagine me growing older, and being able to go to the Hoppings by myself, or with friends. It was during this part of my life that I learned another important fact of life, that is, that if you roll a penny down one of the stalls, you never come away any richer. Even if you do manage to get the coin exactly within the square, and you are rewarded threefold, there is something in human nature that makes us stand there rolling pennies until they are all gone. An important fact still used to full advantage by today's generation of showmen. It would be remiss of me not to mention that a most vicious war had been fought while I was growing up; and this had affected the Hoppings, like everything else, in no small degree. I have no exact memories of just what years the Hoppings were held, or not held, during the Second World War. Copyright © Paul Lanagan 2010 - not to be



Making final amendments to the Hoppings layout plan

At the age of fourteen, I left the elementary school which I had been attending, and went to work with a Jesmond building firm – Thomas Clements & Sons, Ltd. After two years as a 'can lad' (that is, making tea for the men, and doing other odd jobs, like sweeping up) I began a five-year apprenticeship as a bricklayer. I had commenced attending evening classes in the same year that I had left regular day-school. I didn't quite know why, at the time. It was just that people said I should.



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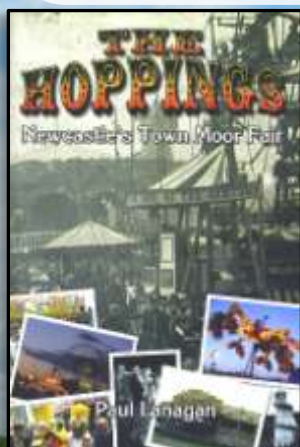
Within the terms of my apprenticeship indentures, I was allowed one day from work each week, during the winter months, to attend the local Building College, until I was eighteen. My employers must have been so astonished that I took advantage of this day-release scheme (the other apprentices refused to have anything to do with it) that they continued to let me go until I came out of my apprenticeship at the age of twenty-one. The result of all this was that I obtained a Higher National Certificate in Building. Such certificates were not given lightly. We covered a wide range of subjects, ranging from the science and physics of building, to the more practical subjects, such as surveying and levelling. I continued working on the building sites for a further two years. (I must have been the most highly-qualified bricklayer in Newcastle). As an occupation, I can recommend bricklaying. As I left the site each evening I could look back and see what I had done – simple pleasure missing in many of today's occupations. It doesn't pay too well though; weather conditions on building sites can be atrocious, and you are forever working yourself out of a job.

In 1955, I was fortunate enough to get a job as a Junior Building Inspector at South Shields. In the Autumn of that year I passed the Building Inspector's examination, and never looked back. I have a lot to thank South Shields for – especially my very loving wife Maureen, whom I met in a cafe there.

In 1958, I obtained a position as a Building Inspector in the City Engineer's Department, Newcastle upon Tyne. It was much the same as what I had been doing at South Shields, watching building work in progress (to see that it complied with Building Regulations), dealing with dangerous structures, and so on. It came as something of a surprise, therefore, when the following year, my boss, Fred Didsbury, MM, said that he wanted me to help him set out the Town Moor Hoppings. The engineer, who normally helped him, had caught chickenpox!



Maureen and Albert Austin at the Hoppings, 2005



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It was thus that I learned that in Newcastle, whoever was Chief Building Surveyor was also Fair Manager for the period of the fair. I cannot account for the reason. There is no direct link between buildings and fairgrounds that I know of. I usually account for the mystery by saying that perhaps the Chief Building Surveyor was the only one who had a tape measure. It seems likely that when the Council decided to hand the organisation of the Hoppings over to a syndicate of showmen, they wanted to retain some semblance of control; and this was a method of doing so. Perhaps the showmen themselves wished to have assistance in setting out the fair.

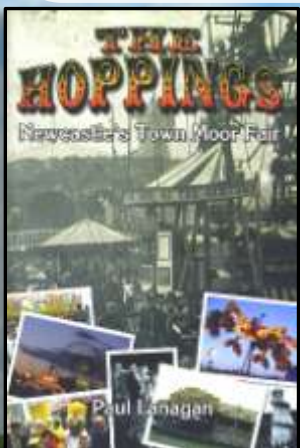
Fred Didsbury took up the post of Chief Building Surveyor in 1957; but he was not the first Fair Manager. That honour went to his predecessor, George Wright. Being directly involved with the Hoppings was something I had never imagined myself doing, but it came very naturally. Marking out a fairground and marking out a housing estate is much the same thing; except that if you make a mistake on a fairground, you have to live with it for a much shorter period! Fred Didsbury was Fair Manager for twenty-five years, and over that time I had the privilege of assisting him on several occasions. I say privilege because that is how it seemed to me; and I have found that there has always been a sense of pride amongst the many Council manual workers who have been seconded to assist us over the years, in being associated with the big event. As I have said, it's in the blood.

When Fred Didsbury retired in 1982, the next Chief Building Surveyor was William H. Tait ('Bill Tait' was the title he preferred). He retired in 1987. He only asked me to assist him once in his stewardship of the Fair – not that there was any animosity; it was just that younger men were available with the Department. Bill was not a Hoppings enthusiast. I asked him once how he regarded the Fair, and he said it was the low point of his year; but I suppose, coming from far-away Bedlington, it wasn't in his blood.

In 1988, I was appointed Chief Building Surveyor, and thus inherited the title of Fair Manager.

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To understand the role of the Fair Manager, one has to know something of the legal status of the Town Moor. The land is owned by the City Council. The Freemen of the City have grazing rights, which they have guarded jealously for hundreds of years; a situation which prevents the Council doing anything major upon the land without first obtaining the consent of the Freemen. Therefore in order to arrange the annual Hoppings, a written agreement is drawn up between the three parties concerned; that is, the City Council, the Freemen, and the Northern Syndicate (the Northern Syndicate being a small group of showmen to whom the site of the fairground is leased). The agreement normally runs for a period of five years; and sets out the specific rights and duties of each party. In particular, the agreement provides that the Council shall appoint a Fair Manager, who is given wide powers, aimed at producing a safe, decent and trouble-free event. How the Fair Manager carries out the job depends on the individual concerned but he or she is, in effect, the eyes and ears of the Council and the Freemen while the fairground is occupied by the Syndicate.



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On a more mundane level, the Fair Manager also has the following duties:-

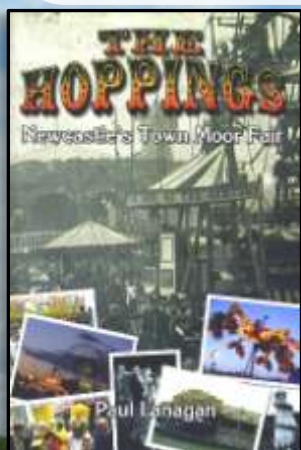
- Ordering the mobile cabins for use as site offices, first aid post, lost children, etc (including the mobile toilets for use by the public);
- Arranging for a plumber to connect the twenty or so standpipes to the existing underground water supply pipes (including the provision of a supply to the mobile toilets);
- Arranging for pegs to be located or replaced in the ground to mark the public aisles, etc;
- Arranging for the assistance of two manual workers, to carry out the physical work of cutting grass, and white-lining to mark the public aisles etc;
- Arranging for pegs to be put into the ground to mark the positions of the rides, and other fairground equipment once the white lines are in place.

These examples are not exhaustive.



Albert Austin and Sue Stokel-Walker, 2004

In 1993 I retired as Chief Building Surveyor. That same year, a Departmental re-organisation resulted in responsibility for the Hoppings passing from the City Engineer's Department to the Leisure Services Department; and in 1994 Mrs Susan Stokel-Walker became the next Fair Manager. Since then, I have been invited back each year to help with the setting-out work. For three weeks immediately preceding the Official Opening, I have been re-employed by the City Council, and given the title of 'Fair Surveyor'.



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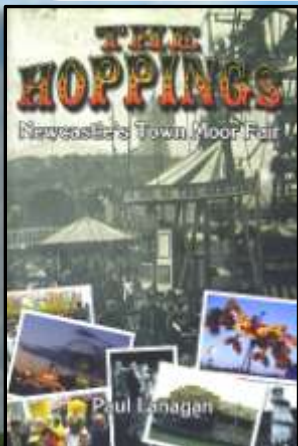
In 1996 I was approached by the Northern Syndicate and asked if I would be interested in doing the clerical work associated with the Syndicate's sub-leasing arrangements with individual showmen. I accepted the position, mainly because it gave me an opportunity to exercise some more of the skills that I had picked up over the years. I was given the title 'Administrator'. For three weeks of the year I am the Council's Fair Surveyor; and for the other forty-nine weeks I am the Northern Syndicate's Administrator."

Albert Austin



Members of the Austin family at the surprise tea for Albert
In recognition of his services to the Hoppings, 2008

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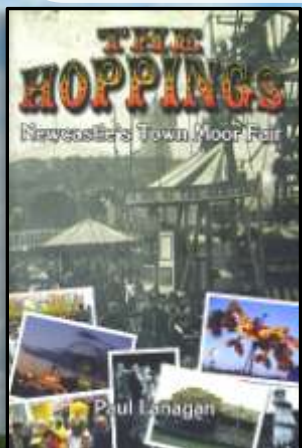
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ALBERT'S VIEW

On Sunday June 20th 2010, a memorial bench was unveiled at the north end of the Town Moor in memory of Albert Austin and was aptly named as 'Albert's View'. The ceremony of dedication was performed by David Wilson, Vice-chairman of the Steward's Committee.



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