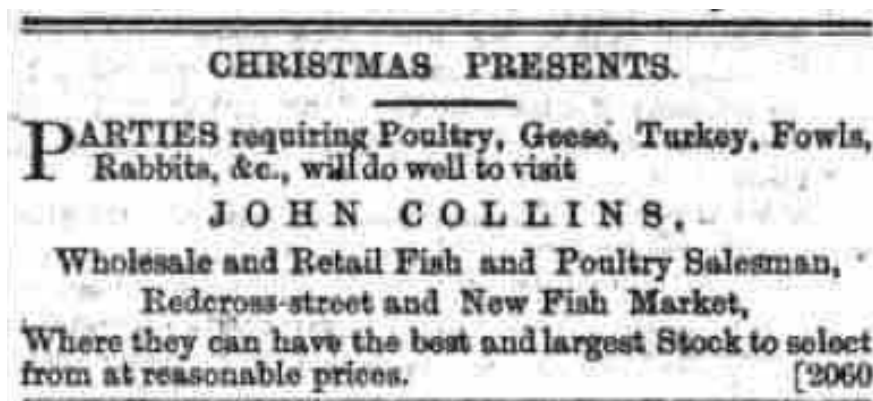


## Trading Stories, Working Lives

### Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with John Collins, a Victorian fishmonger and game dealer

Wander through Leicester Market Place today and you'll see that it's in transition; the 1970s indoor market has been demolished, plans are in hand to create a piazza behind the Corn Exchange, and a new food hall – angled and curved in glass and steel – is set out with tempting displays of fresh fish, cheeses and cooked meats.

Such change is nothing new; it's simply the latest instalment in the history of a market that has evolved since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. My relative John Collins – a Victorian fishmonger and game dealer – also witnessed many changes hereabouts. I delve into the archives to find out more.



A newspaper advert from December 1877 helps set the scene. Since the late 1860s, John had lived and worked in Redcross Street, but his advert also mentions for the first time the New Fish Market that had opened two months earlier.

**THE NEW FISH MARKET.**—The above market was opened on Saturday, for the sale of fish and game, and will supply a want which has long been felt. The building has been designed by Mr. W. Millican, and is very attractive in appearance. It is about 100 feet long, by 30 wide, and the width will be increased by the addition of a covered passage. The roof is arched, and is supported by iron pillars; the lighting will be by means of a lantern light in the roof in daytime, and star gas jets at night. Messrs. Henry Bland and Sons were the builders, Messrs. Richards and Co. the ironfounders, and Mr. Hill the plumber. The stalls have been designed by Mr. Padmore, the market clerk, and are substantial and convenient. The total cost of the building will be about £1,650. A supply of water will be secured by means of hose pipes.

Imagine a walk through the new fish market, surrounded by the hubbub: “A fine selection this week, ladies! Geese and turkeys, 10 pence a pound! Just look at these best English rabbits from 2 shillings apiece!” Fresh salmon, halibut, and plaice are laid out on marble slabs, together with cold-smoked Finnan haddock, kippers and trays of bloaters; there’s a smell of the seaside in land-locked Leicester. And the overhead rails are laden with pheasants, geese, rabbits and hares.



**COVERED FISH MARKET.**  
*Fish and Game Dealers.*

James Burton		John Collins
Charles Hinks		Henry Dent
Richard Cavner, jun		Wm. Daines
William Warner		William Cooper
Thomas Headley		Thos. Shipman
Joseph Sharman		G. Stones
Joseph Robinson		Edward Skipper
James Hincks		A. G. Bloxam
Henry Thompson		John Kearns
Joseph Jacobs		Abraham Clark
John Grove		James Hunt
Charles Hincks		Mrs. Jane Hincks
Thomas Bernard Hunt		

The supply of game changes according to the season and might include grouse (Aug-Dec), hares and rabbits (Sept-Mar), pheasants and partridges (Oct-Feb). Mrs Beeton advises, “Game varies very much in price, being generally very expensive on the first day or two of the season, whilst, on the other hand, anyone watching the market may often, at any subsequent period of the season, buy it more cheaply than ordinary poultry.” And she comes up trumps with recipes for roast partridge, rich rabbit stew, and jugged hare.

And for poultry, there might be roasting chickens and boiling fowls, wild duck, pigeon or goose: “When fresh, the eyes should be clear and not sunken, the feet limp and pliable, stiff dry feet being a sure indication that the bird has not been recently killed; and if the bird is plucked there should be no discolouration of the skin.”

Alongside his fish and game business, John was also a publican. Since 1869 he’d lived with his wife Sarah and their growing family – first four daughters, then four sons – at the Lord Rancliffe on Redcross Street. In 1883, it’s time to move to the Salmon Inn on Butt Close Lane – a fishy coincidence that wouldn’t have been lost on his fellow stallholders. And then in summer 1889, they relocate to the Old White Swan Inn in the Market Place. A grainy photo sent to me by one of his descendants evokes the scene; John Collins and his brother Robert pose in the doorway, Dulley’s Wellingborough Stout is on offer, and the front wall is plastered with bills advertising property auctions and sports fixtures.





Nip inside and you'd discover gatherings of the swimming, athletic and football clubs, freemasons' lodge dinners, smoking concerts, and billiards contests. From 1890 it also hosts rabbit, guinea pig and caged bird shows. And as a snippet passed down through the family recalls, "John Collins kept a lot of animals and horses which he lent to the Opera House for productions."

**D**ON'T forget the grand all England cage bird exhibition on Saturday and Monday, 16 and 17 November, 1890, at the White Swan, Market-place, Leicester. All the champions will compete. Admission 6d. and 3d., and don't forget it. 4479

By 1892, the problems of market congestion come to a head. An investigation by the Council observes: "From six o'clock in the morning till twelve o'clock midday, 790 horses and carts or drays passed into the wholesale market, and several hundred hand trucks. It was impossible for the business of the market to be done with that ease and comfort which the public ought to enjoy." The fish traders proposed to convert the ground floor of the Corn Exchange into a wholesale market, with the vendors of eggs and butter transferred to the fish market, which was due to be extended. The Council considers more drastic options, such as clearing the whole space between the Corn Exchange and Hotel Street and, rather surprisingly, the possibility that "the present Corn Exchange be pulled down as soon as opportunity offers, and replaced by one more worthy of the town."

Letters appear in the local press, tensions rise, there's talk of the fishmongers not being adequately consulted, and of a councillor having his expenses subbed. Adjacent properties – in Market Place and Horsefair Street – are acquired as they become available in 1894, and plans are drawn up to extend the fish market; there's even talk of using the space above for a concert hall or a new corn exchange.

But within months, moves are afoot to relocate all of the wholesale traders to Halford Street instead – midway between the retail market and the Midland Railway station to help with efficient transportation of goods in and out: "During last year (1895) over 6,847 tons of fish, poultry and rabbits were brought into Leicester by the various railways," the Council notes.

The new wholesale market didn't attract universal support – some doubted whether it justified a cost of over £50,000 – but on 6 September 1900, the foundation stone was laid with much ceremony and speechifying. Architect Walter Brand designed it with a 24-foot wide central roadway "so there would be no fear of that passage being blocked", offices on the mezzanine, and cold stores in the basement. The 21 fish stands were clad in cream glazed bricks and provided with individual water supplies. Electric lights were supplemented with sunshine coming through the roof lights. And the entrance archway was framed with William Neatby's beautiful art nouveau depiction of two mermaids, each casting forth a handful of fish.



Amongst the company attending the opening ceremony were two of John Collins' sons – Harry and Charles – but alas John himself did not live to see it. He died aged 60 in April 1899 at his home, 17 Northampton Street: a five-bedroom house, with stables and a smoke house behind, and The Leicester Pure Ice & Cold Storage Company next door.

**Collins J. & Sons, fish & game dealers, 27 & 28  
Wholesale market, Halford st.; 17 Northamp-  
ton st. & 10 Granby st**

John Collins' business was to continue successfully for another century in the hands of his children and grandchildren. But that, as they say, is another story. Today, only a few glimpses of his working life remain: the cast iron pillars and roof structure of the old retail fish market, and the two mermaids, relocated to West Bridge after the demolition of the Halford Street wholesale market. Over

the coming months, as the new market piazza opens up, I shall be sure to stand in his footsteps, by the spot where he posed for his photograph on the threshold of the Old White Swan Inn, one summer's day in 1889.

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**Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories**

To read some of Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles, visit his website at [www.auntiemabel.org](http://www.auntiemabel.org); as well as stories about Barrow lime workers, Loughborough boatmen, and postmen in Victorian Leicester, the site includes help and ideas for writing glimpses into your own family history.