

PERTSHIRE ADVERTISER

Fond memories as bull sales move on

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IT'S an overworked expression but it truly is the end of an era in Perth.

Next week sees the tight-knit Big County farming community lamenting the end of the famous Perth Bull Sales in the Fair City.

And it will be particularly poignant for weel-kent Blackford farmer Willie McLaren, who has been a fixture at every sale since 1938.

He'll be at the ringside mingling with familiar faces on Monday for the swansong four-day sale, reminiscing and reflecting on changes he's witnessed down the decades.

As a wide-eyed lad of five Willie took in the two-day pre-war sales.

But the Perth Bull Sales date back to 1864 and, in their heyday, enjoyed a worldwide reputation, with buyers with bulging wallets lured from as far afield as South America and New Zealand.

The Caledonian Road mart – on the site now occupied by Morrison's supermarket – opened in 1877 and in 1990 relocated to the western edge.

But Willie recalls the Caledonian and Highland Markets operated by McDonald Fraser, and Hays Market, all flourishing when Perth was the heart of the Scottish farming community.

Yesterday, he said: "Time moves on and you just have to accept and adapt to change. There's not enough livestock in the Perth area now and hopefully the move to Stirling will be successful.

"At least the name has been retained and it's up to us to recreate the Perth atmosphere in Stirling."

Casting his mind back to his first taste of the market, Willie even remembers that '38 champion Educate of Derculich fetched 800 guineas.

And he was there when the late Perth auctioneer Eddie Hutchison brought down the hammer on an all-time record bid of 60,000 guineas in 1963.

Willie fondly remembers the energy, spectacle, exuberance and excitement of the sales luring families in throngs to the Caley Road.

"The cattle were shown in the street and you could watch the bulls walking over the cobbles.

"The people of Perth would come in their droves to the market on Sunday afternoon, with prams and kids. It was virtually impossible to carry water or feed along the passages because of the crowded aisles, with children stopping anyone with a Stetson for their autograph."

Police would close off city streets as special trains brought in bulls from the south of England.

From 1947 to 1957, he stayed in the same room at the old Market Hotel but still shivers at the memory of a two-mile walk with his father through a ferocious blizzard from Blackford Station after one winter sale.

Famously, the sales pumped cash into the tills of Perth pubs. Willie told the Aberdeen Angus Review:

"The cattlemen used to sit round a big table in Room Five of the Market Hotel. If you wanted to join the company, the round was a bottle of whisky which would be passed around until it was empty."

Sustenance was provided at Jean Watson's tearoom in Market Street and she would fix up rooms in the surrounding tenements for stockmen before the buildings were bulldozed in the seventies.

Willie has traced the ebb and flow over the years and admits the 1980 sale was particularly depressing, with snowstorms and dearth of demand restricting sales to less than 100. Compare that to 1964 when around 750 beasts went under the hammer.

Willie also remembers the occasion when a Simmental bull was walked from the mart into the Station Hotel ballroom, where the Aberdeen-Angus dinner dance was in full swing.

"The bull, needless to say, did what was necessary in the middle of the ballroom floor," chuckled Willie.