

'I've had two wives. You're not with your wife all night, you're on your own. Things happen'

IT'S 3am and while the rest of London sleeps, Smithfield Market comes alive.

An unending stream of white vans drive to the bays of the ancient market, where, once loaded, they sail off to different corners of the capital to bring meat to our plates. There are dozens of people doing their shopping inside the grand Victorian arcade in the early hours of Friday morning where three corn-fed chickens cost a tenner. Two paramedics, just finishing their shift at nearby St Bart's hospital, hold a bag filled with pork belly with smiles on their tired faces. Meat sellers push their trollies laden with carcasses of lambs, pigs and cows through translucent curtains while neon lights take the place of the sun.

"I'm a cutter and a salesman. I cut the meat then sell the meat," said Biffo, real name Johnny Griffiths. The 71-year-old market veteran is wide-eyed despite living in an upside down world where he gets up at 7pm.

"I've been here for 50 years. It's a job, innit? Been down here my life, since I was 21. I hold the record for cutting the most pigs – 150 in one night. That was when I was 25," he said. Biffo is



Chopping and changing

Emily Finch sets her alarm for a close-up peek at the twilight world of Smithfield Market

a legendary market figure and even featured in a BBC documentary on the market almost a decade ago. His grandfather worked here and it's in his blood. He also has splatters of blood on his white coat.

Speaking of the difficulties of market life, he said: "I've had two wives. You're not with your wife all night, you're

on your own. Things happen."

Others speak of how they started in the market. Grant Burton has been here for 20 years and is now a manager with PJ Martinelli Ltd, a firm that's also celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

"I came down here on Christmas as a lookout for all the rascals that thieve. I've been here ever since.

With time, you move yourself up and get bigger, it took me a long while to get here. It was worth it definitely," he said.

The owner of PJ Martinelli is Paul Martinelli, a classicist-turned-company director whose father Peter started the business after working his way up from a cashier. When a client unexpectedly calls, Paul takes a pen from his white coat and quickly scribbles down their prospective order on the material. Each second counts when you're selling perishables.

Norman Gregory, a seller for long-established firm William Warman & Guttridge, speaks of the changes he's witnessed in his 45 years.

"We never used to have refrigeration. It keeps the meat a bit longer. We never used to have that before, it was in and out. It all had to go in one day. Everything was bigger, people came in big time and left big time. It was messy,

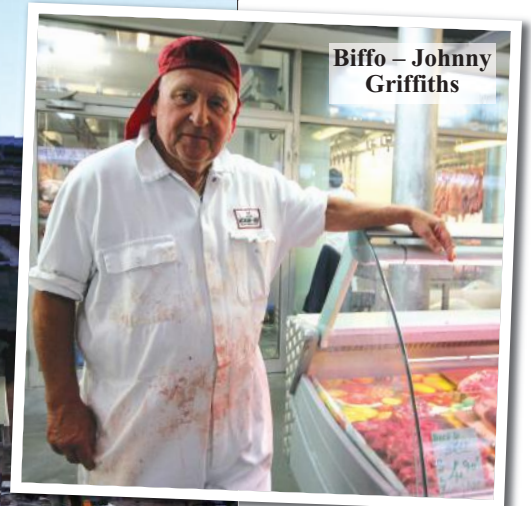
messy, messy," he said.

The 10-acre site is ordered, sanitary and calm. It is a world away from the vision described by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* where "the ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above".

The market has seen

waves of change since it was built in 1868 by the City of London Corporation. Thousands

Horace Jones could be built on top. As described in detail in Alec Forshaw's book *Smithfield*, there has been meat trading on the site for nearly a millennium. The market, which is officially named The London Central Markets, has seen numerous challenges in the last few decades including the outbreak of foot and mouth disease along with the rise of the

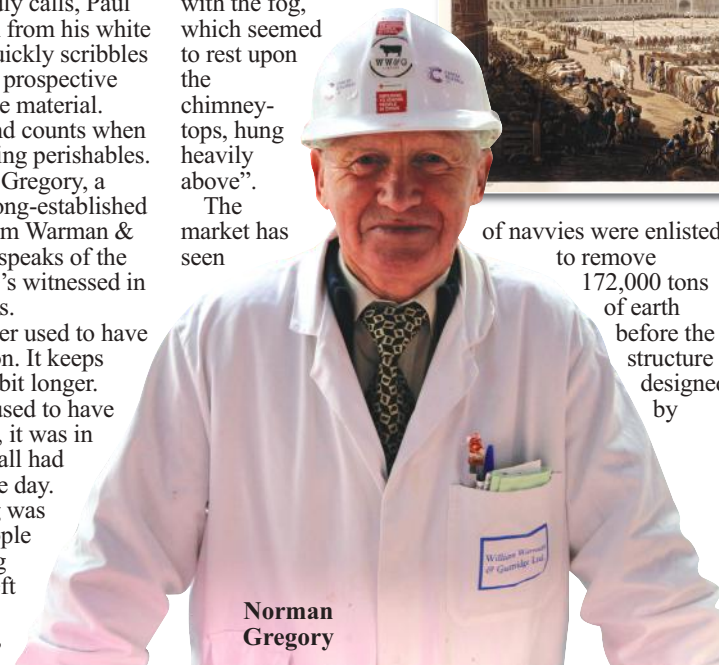


Biffo – Johnny Griffiths



Smithfield Market in 1811

PHOTO: MUSEUM OF LONDON



Norman Gregory

of navvies were enlisted to remove 172,000 tons of earth before the structure designed by

supermarkets which source meat straight from abattoirs. Its future was thrown into uncertainty earlier this month with the announcement by the City of London corporation that "a proposal has been agreed in principle" to merge Smithfield with Billingsgate and New Spitalfields markets on a 100-acre site. The plans are a long way off in the future but what is currently known is that Smithfield is booming.



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Meat and greet: Smithfield's birthday bash

AN array of musicians will take to the stage at Smithfield Meat market to celebrate its 150 years next weekend in what is touted to be the capital's biggest birthday party.

Families, residents and the casual passers-by are all invited to the party, which will feature a festival zone for under-fives alongside a sausage dog parade on Saturday.

"It's going to be a fantastic family event," said Sharon Ament, director of the Museum of London. She said: "We will

draw on the history of the whole area and there will be great food on offer. I'm so excited about the sausage dog parade and to kick off there will be a peel of bells from St Bartholomew-the-Great."

More than three-quarters of the acts performing over the weekend will be women to commemorate the centenary of some women gaining the vote for the first time.

Stealing Sheep, an all-female pop band from Liverpool, are headlining and

children can also enjoy a performance by *Horrible Histories*. Other events include roller discos, communal feasts, a helter skelter and food art created by the award-winning duo Bompas & Parr.

The Museum of London is scheduled to move into a long-abandoned section of the market in the next few years while maintaining its original character and structure. They have teamed up with the City of London Corporation and Smithfield Market Tenants'

Association (SMTA) to come up with the programme for August 25 and 26.

Gregory Lawrence, who chairs SMTA, which represents the Smithfield Market meat traders, said: "We are looking forward to celebrating 150 years of the Victorian market with our friends and neighbours and the wider community and to showing people what the area has to offer."

● To find out more go to: <https://www.culturemile.london/festival/smithfield-150/>