

COWPER & BERKHAMSTED

BORN AT THE OLD RECTORY

By "BEORCHAM"

It has been said that if Berkhamsted had never figured in the royal intrigues and tragedies of old, it would still be celebrated in history as the birthplace of William Cowper, the poet. The greatest of all local notabilities, he stands among the immortals—a man of exceptional poetic spirit, and one of the greatest letter writers the world has ever known.

Cowper's connection with Berkhamsted is not, as is often thought, merely a fleeting one. His father, the Rev. John Cowper, was one of the most distinguished of Berkhamsted's long line of rectors, and it was in the old rectory on the hill overlooking the Parish Church that, in 1731, the poet was born.

HIS EARLY LIFE IN BERKHAMSTED

In the woods and fields around the rectory Cowper made his first acquaintance with nature—an acquaintance which influenced many poems written years after he had left Berkhamsted. "My very dreams were rural; rural, too, the firstborn efforts of my youthful muse"—and if you read carefully you will find many such references to his early life in Berkhamsted. Cowper's memory, indeed, was nothing short of marvellous, and although his mother died when he was only five years of age, the poet wrote many years afterwards:—

"I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nurs'ry window, drew
A long, long sigh and wept a last adieu."

In the same poem Cowper recalled his daily ride to the dame school in High Street, and thus immortalised his father's gardener, Robert Pope ("Robin"):—

". . . the gardener Robin, day by day,
Drew me to school along the public way,
Delighted with my bauble coach and wrapp'd
In scarlet mantle and velvet cap."

A SAD BREAK

At six years of age Cowper was sent to a school in Bedfordshire—a break with the old town which almost broke his heart. He was destined to return on very few occasions, and on his last visit, three years after the death of his father, in 1756, he wrote: "A parson has no fee simple in the house and glebe he occupies. There was neither tree nor gate nor stile in all that country to which I did not feel a relation, and the house itself I preferred to a palace . . . I felt for the first time that I and my native place were disunited for ever, and sighed a long adieu to fields and woods from which I once thought I never should be parted."

Many of the fields and woods remain, but of tangible reminders of Cowper's associations with Berkhamsted there is now but one—the site of the old Well House in the Rectory gardens, where to this day an inscribed marble tablet reminds us that it was this well which, "with daily crystal draught, refreshed the poet's fragile youth." The poet's birthplace was pulled down and rebuilt higher on the hill, and his old dame school, too, was demolished. The Parish Church, of course, provides reminders of the Cowper family, and it is interesting to note that the fine memorial window was designed after consultation with the Rev. J. E. Greathead, son of one of Cowper's most intimate friends.

A PARISH CHURCH SUNDIAL

An engraving of Berkhamsted High Street, dated 1832, often arouses curiosity. The Parish Church is depicted in the background, and a dark, diamond-shaped object is clearly visible on the west side of the tower, slightly to the right of the clock. At the present time there is no trace of any such object on the tower, but it was almost certainly a sundial. Close inspection of an enlarged reproduction of the original engraving fails to settle the point for certain, but the engraver is absolved from any charge of inaccuracy by the fact that a photograph of 1870 shows a dark stain and "scars" on the tower, suggesting that a large sundial had only recently been removed. The photograph, incidentally, depicts another sundial above the old south porch, which was demolished when the church was altered and restored in the 'seventies.

MOTHERS' UNION ACCOUNTS

The summary of accounts in connection with the Berkhamsted Branch of the Mothers' Union, for the year ending June 30th, 1941, has now been issued. Commencing the year with a balance in hand of £5-12-11, tributes, subscriptions and magazine money added £10-3-4, contributions to overseas fund £1-9-5, and proceeds from "bring and buy" stall £1-11-6, making a total on the receipts side of £18-17-2. Expenditure was as follows: Diocesan quota of tributes £4-7-9, cost of magazines £3-16-2, overseas fund £1-9-5, contribution in respect of the use of St. Peter's Hall £1, sundry items £1-19-6, petty cash (including speakers' expenses) £1-5, a total of £13-17-10, thus leaving a balance in hand of £4-19-4.