

JOHN SAYER'S ALMSHOUSES

A GIFT FROM THE HEAD COOK OF CHARLES II

By "BEORCHAM"

Berkhamsted's changing High Street still retains an old-world character near Cowper Road corner. For here, huddled behind a row of roadside trees, are six quaint, red-bricked almshouses which have remained unchanged for two centuries and a half—or, to be perfectly exact since 1684, for that is the date on a memorial tablet which has told generations of passers-by that the almshouses represent the "guift of Iohn Sayer, Esq."

All honour to John Sayer for his "guift". But did you know that during his lifetime he came to be regarded as an enemy of the townspeople?

Berkhamsted's Petition

Not a nice thought to entertain about a squire who lived in grand style at Berkhamsted Place! But then, Sayer should not have started interfering with the ancient rights of Berkhamsted. Revenues were diverted from the Church, the "Free Schoole" and the poor, and, in desperation the Rector, churchwardens and schoolmasters felt bound to petition Charles II, pointing out how Sayer "doth much trouble your petitioners with suites in your Majesties name, under pretence of a grant from your Majestie." The case was tried and Sayer won the day—but only at the expense of a further slump in his reputation locally.

Tradespeople and yokels continued to touch deferential forelocks as Squire Sayer cantered by on his mare. But behind his back he was apt to be contemptuously referred to as the "head cook and bottle-washer"—a name degrading for a Squire, but not quite so inappropriate as it sounds.

In Exile with the King

For Sayer had the distinction of being Master of the Household, or Head Cook, to Charles II, and is actually referred to as "your Majesties Servant and Cooke" in the petition quoted above. At a time when Parliamentarians held sway and the King's health was cautiously toasted behind locked doors, Sayer was abroad faithfully sharing his royal master's exile. A few years after the Restoration, Sayer settled down in his new home in Berkhamsted, where he no doubt received some of his distinguished relations—Sir John Sayer, the Attorney General, for instance, or the Rev. Joseph Sayer, who was both Archdeacon of Lewes and Rector of Northchurch.

However unpopular Sayer may have made himself during his few years in Berkhamsted, he rehabilitated himself by bequeathing £1,000 for founding the six almshouses still standing in the High Street. John Sayer's widow lived to see his plans fulfilled, and on her death a few years later she made further provision for the "tenants" of the almshouses, directing that 8s. per month be paid to each of the six widows "on the tombstone in the Parish Church of Berkhamsted, near the monument lately erected for John Sayer, Esq., on the Sunday after evening service."

A Difficulty Overcome

A trifle ambiguous? The Parish authorities thought so, too, and although in little doubt as to what Mrs. Sayer really meant, they wisely claimed that the statement was too indistinct to be followed out literally.

All the same, means were found of making Mrs. Sayer's bequest available to the aged widows it was intended to benefit, and other gifts have been made from time to time. In fairly recent times, too, the welfare of the almshouse widows has not been forgotten; the Citizens' Association succeeded in raising a considerable sum for restoring the almshouses and providing a few modern comforts.

WOOLLEN COMFORTS FOR CREW OF MINESWEEPER

Many parishioners assisted last year in the Berkhamsted Rotary Club's scheme to provide woollen comforts for the crew of the Club's adopted minesweeper, H.M. Trawler "Fintray." In all 102 garments were made—the Skipper and each member of the crew receiving a helmet, a pullover, pair of mittens, pair of seaboot stockings and two pairs of socks.

A similar scheme has been adopted for the coming winter and the Club is again providing the necessary wool—the coupon difficulty having been satisfactorily overcome.

Any of our readers who would care to help are invited to communicate with Mr. S. H. Smith, "Darsdale," Cowper Road, (chairman of the Club Community Service Committee) who will arrange for them to be supplied with wool and knitting instructions.