

A BERKHAMSTED BENEFACTOR

EARLY DAYS OF THE BOURNE SCHOOL

By "BEORCHAM"

In days before the railway took travellers away from the town's quaint old High Street, visitors were often intrigued by the unusual attire of a number of local schoolchildren. Not for them the rags and tatters with which many children of the poorer townspeople had to be content. The lucky "Bourne children," as they were called, derived many advantages from their attendance at Mr. Thomas Bourne's Charity School, not the least of which was a completely new outfit of clothes at Easter.

The style of the clothes, determined by the founder in his will, pleased the parents, whatever the children themselves may have thought. Until as late as 1880 the boys were still to be seen in blue coats and waistcoats, with bright brass buttons, leather or corduroy breeches, coloured stockings, low shoes, and blue caps with red tassels. The girls wore neat blue cloth dresses and cloaks, white aprons, and straw "cottage" bonnets. In days when Berkhamsted was still a country town they must have looked appropriately rustic! It is not difficult to picture the scene as they set off to school in the early morning—at 7 a.m. in summer and an hour later in winter.

Warm Affection for the Town

Thomas Bourne is undoubtedly the best remembered of the town's benefactors, with the one exception of Dean Incent, founder of Berkhamsted School. It is a matter for regret, however, that little is known about the man himself. The late Mr. R. A. Norris, who published a scholarly little history of the Bourne Charity about a dozen years ago, says he does not think we should be very far wrong in claiming Bourne as a townsman of Berkhamsted, and there can be no doubt that he had the warmest affection for the town. In his will, after remembering his relatives and the Worshipful Company of Framework Knitters, of which he was a master, he provided for a new charity school in Berkhamsted for 20 boys and 10 girls. Clothing for the children was to be provided; parents were given 1s. or 1s. 6d. per week; sums were set aside for apprenticing boys on leaving school; and another small sum was earmarked for distribution among the poor on his birthday. It was also stipulated that the birthday was to be commemorated by a special sermon in the Parish Church, during which the benefactions were to be mentioned.

Berkhamsted thus benefited at a time when many high-minded men were establishing charity schools throughout the country. As so often happened, several years elapsed between the death of Bourne and the actual fulfilment of his plans, but

eventually a school was built in High Street—the quaint building now converted into a branch of the National Provincial Bank.

As Mr. Norris recalls in his history of the Bourne School, the trustees were most anxious to observe the letter as well as the spirit of their trust, and the will was often consulted. Because the founder stipulated that the children were to be taught to read, write and cast accounts, a special application had to be made to the trustees before the children could be taught to sing psalms. At first the idea does not appear to have been welcomed, but at a subsequent meeting the trustees decided that the schoolmaster was not bound to keep to the "three R's" alone. "We do think it very decent and proper for him to instruct the children in singing psalms, as is usually taught in other charity schools," they commented.

A New Scheme

No arrangement was made until 1761 for teaching the girls to write. Then, with the appointment of a new schoolmaster, it was agreed to teach the girls to write in their last year at school! Knowledge of spinning was

no doubt a much more useful acquirement in the 18th century, for a spinning wheel and flax were provided to teach the girls to spin.

As with many other charity schools, Bourne School had to be reorganised when the Education Act of 1871 was passed. The school ceased to have a separate existence, and in 1880 a new scheme for administering the charity came into operation. Only minor provisions of the will, such as the annual service in the Parish Church, were retained. The most important departure was the creation of scholarships, worth £5 per annum, for a limited number of boys and girls attending the Church Schools in Berkhamsted and Potten End.

After a century and a half the school had outlived its age, but the charity, in its new guise, continues to benefit the children for whom it was intended. That far-sighted Guild Master of the early 18th century would have approved the change.

THANKS

An expression of grateful thanks has been received from the St. Albans Diocesan Mission to the Deaf and Dumb in acknowledgment of a contribution of £7 9s. 10d., representing the offertories at the Communion services at both churches on Sunday, August 31st.

J. J. Stevens

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