

THE SIEGE OF BERKHAMSTED CASTLE

By "BEORCHAM"

Recently, thanks to the Urban Council's efforts, a favourite walk has been restored to the public. Once more it is possible to wander along the banks of the Castle moats without payment, and inspect at close quarters the earthworks of one of the county's most interesting historic monuments.

Everyone knows that William the Conqueror was offered the crown of England on the site of the Castle and that subsequently it became a minor royal palace. In fact, we pay so much attention to the romantic side of the Castle's history that we are apt to overlook its importance as a fortress. It is even possible that many people regard the great system of earthworks as having been built for show rather than for military reasons.

In King John's Time

But there was a time—we have to go back more than seven centuries—when Berkhamsted Castle withstood a siege which would be famous were there not so many other incidents to crowd the pages of local history. For a whole fortnight a gallant garrison held out against heavy odds, and even made surprise raids on the enemy.

The siege began on December 6th, 1216, when unpopular King John was still being mourned by loyal Berkhamsted subjects who, in April of that year, had received the King in the Castle and had been commanded by him to take as much timber as was required from neighbouring woods to put the defences in order.

A wise move on the part of the king—but did he know how soon those defences would be put to the test? Evidently he anticipated that the long, bitter feud with the Barons would develop into open warfare, but he could hardly have expected that the Barons would offer the crown of England to Prince Louis, the French Dauphin, as the prize for leading them to victory.

When John died in October, 1216, the Barons were already getting the upper hand, and by December, Prince Louis made himself master of Hertford. Over the hills, trailing across rough quagmires of tracks, came his army to secure another prize—the capture of the Castle in royalist Berkhamsted. Perhaps they remembered that Berkhamsted was the town where, in 1066, another Frenchman rode to victory and was offered England's crown.

Defenders' Successful Sorties

But this time there was not a group of timid noblemen to welcome the Frenchman. The drawbridge was up, and the Castle garrison, loyal to a man, barricaded themselves in as Prince Louis' army encamped on the higher ground of White Hill. Day after day huge stones were propelled against the Castle with such good effect that years were afterwards

spent in putting the defences in order again.

In the midst of the terrors of the siege, the defenders showed they were good opportunists. One murky morning, before the daily bombardment started, a party lowered the drawbridge and dashed forth to find Prince Louis' army completely off their guard. Chariots and provisions were seized, and the banner of William, Earl Mandeville, carried off as a trophy.

An incident of this kind should have been enough for Prince Louis. But the defenders were able to attack successfully a second time. Bearing at their head the captured banner of Earl Mandeville, they sallied forth again and threw the enemy's camp into confusion—while dinner was being served! The Barons were actually disarmed as they sat at table.

According to Holinshed's Chronicles (1587), "the captain and his people behaved themselves so manfully that a great number of the Frenchmen were left dead in the ditches." Successful as the garrison were in that engagement, they could not hold out for ever, and after a fortnight they surrendered by order of the King.

(Continued at foot of next column).

THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

(Contributed)

The Healing of the Nobleman's Son.
St. John iv, 43—54.

In all healing, mental and spiritual conditions play a vital part, often the predominant part. At times our Lord could "do no mighty works" because of the atmosphere of disbelief. On the other hand, in cases like the healing of the Nobleman's son, when Faith was strong, absent healing would take its place. A materialistic age needs to be faced with such works as part of the "demonstration of the Spirit and of Power." Let us pray that, in our intercessions for the sick and others, we ourselves may have a Faith like the Nobleman's, that can make our prayers channels through which Christ's Power can flow.—*Bible Reading Fellowship Notes, Jan., 1942.*

(Continued from previous column).

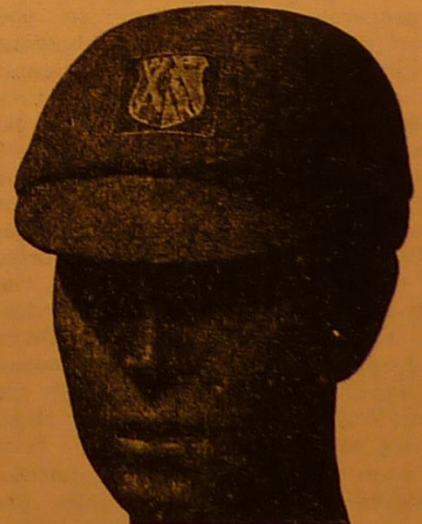
The date of the surrender was December 20th, and perhaps something of the Christmas spirit was already prevailing, for it was decided to spare the lives, goods and houses of the defenders. And so they lived to see the cause for the rightful king prevail, in spite of the temporary successes of the French Dauphin; the Barons had already begun to distrust their foreign allies, and a year later Louis went back to France—without the English crown.

J. J. Stevens

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