

# WHEN THE CANAL CAME TO BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

As two previous articles in this series have dealt with the coaching days and the building of the railway, it is appropriate that attention should be paid to a third transport system which has played an important part in the development of Berkhamsted—the canal. It preceded the railway by about fifty years, and had a much bigger influence on local affairs than is generally realised to-day.

In the first place, the canal made Berkhamsted a distinctly healthier place. Previously the valley was an unhealthy swamp, with the Bulbourne—then a fairly broad stream—meandering hither and thither and sometimes flooding neighbouring meadows for months at a time. The cutting of the canal—originally called "The Cut"—changed all that. Overnight, as it were, the Bulbourne dwindled into an insignificant stream, and gradually the swamps drained away. No longer could it be said, as a visitor of 1776 recorded in his diary, that "Berkhamsted stretches along the south side of a swamp."

## Serious Difficulties

The construction of the canal brought an army of labourers to the district. Here, owing to the steadily rising character of the land, they were faced with difficulties scarcely less serious than those which beset the railway pioneers of the 1830's. Between Boxmoor and Tring it was necessary to concentrate no fewer than 20 of the 55 locks required to carry the canal from the Thames to the Chiltern gap at Tring—405 ft. above sea level, and the highest canal level in the country. Naturally enough, the course of the Bulbourne was followed wherever practicable, but, to the joy of water-mill proprietors, this stream was allowed to retain a separate identity. Besides providing work for hundreds of navvies, the canal made heavy demands upon the services of carpenters, bricklayers and masons, who were engaged for years on the picturesque hump-backed bridges which still survive here and there. One of the most interesting undertakings was Castle Street bridge, since the road approaches had to be raised several feet above the level of neighbouring cottages.

## Industrial Possibilities

The canal opened up industrial possibilities undreamed of in days when transport was limited to slow-moving wagons. For the first time coal could be procured in the district in large quantities, although it must be confessed that few people, other than industrialists, knew how to use it. Cottagers of the period depended for fuel almost entirely upon wood and gorse gathered on Berkhamsted Common; in fact, few fireplaces were

suitable for burning coal. However, coal was essential for industrial purposes, and in almost every town new factories sprang up beside the canal.

After the novelty of this new transport system had died away, the Canal Company came in for a good deal of criticism. There was a strong feeling that transport costs were too high, and the Company was accused of abusing its monopoly. Cause for complaint there certainly was, judging from the enormous profits made. At one time £10 shares in the Grand Junction Canal Company soared to the £290 mark.

## Passenger "Cruises"!

The Company had nothing to fear until the advent of the railway, for the canal not only weaned most of the heavy traffic from the roads, but provided a limited passenger service as well. The canal was even used for transporting troops, and one day in 1806 no fewer than 2,000 soldiers passed through Berkhamsted on the way from London to Liverpool. Sixty soldiers were accommodated in each barge, and it is recorded that the convoy reached its destination in seven days "with comparatively little fatigue, as it would take 14 days to march that distance." No one

could complain about the time in view of the fact that about 200 locks had to be negotiated.

## "Express" Barges

At first the railway did not prove such a serious rival to the canal as was anticipated. It was impossible to compete on equal terms so far as speed was concerned, but barges were encouraged to complete their voyages in the shortest possible time. Having regard to delays caused by the locks, some remarkable speeds were attained. A veteran blacksmith living at a village near Berkhamsted once told me that he was often aroused at dawn to shoe horses for barges attempting to create new records with their "express" barges to London.

## The "Father" of Canals

No article on the canal would be complete without a reference to that great local notability known to all schoolboys as the "father of inland navigation"—the Duke of Bridgewater, whose monument on Moneybury Hill, Aldbury, is a landmark for miles around. To provide funds for his early canal projects he was forced to allow Ashridge House to fall to rack and ruin; but his faith in this new transport system was justified, and from the great wealth that subsequently accrued to him he was able to build the present grandiose mansion on the same site. But that is another story, and perhaps it will be possible to tell it in a later *Review*.

# J. J. Stevens

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