



THE BOROUGH OF BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

Occasionally, at public meetings and dinners, visiting speakers have unsuspectingly referred to the chairman of Berkhamsted Urban District Council as "Mr. Mayor." The blunder usually produces a few restrained titters and perhaps an embarrassed look on the countenance of "His Worship," but there should really be nothing funny or strange about the idea at all. Berkhamsted was a borough for hundreds of years, and it was only because the burgesses were short-sighted and indifferent that the ancient privileges were lost. All that remains to remind us of the Borough of Berkhamsted to-day is its coat of arms, the design being chosen because "the glory of that place has proceeded from the ancient Castle there."

Revival Very Remote

Before discussing the old charters, it should be pointed out that there is no justification for the belief that Berkhamsted is still a borough in principle, with its ancient rights and privileges in "cold storage" but nevertheless intact, since they have never been rescinded. This theory might have held good up to the time of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1836, which removed whatever chances there might have been of reviving the old Corporation. Should Berkhamsted now want the added dignity of a Corporation, it would have to seek an entirely new charter. And precious few chances there are of a town of Berkhamsted's size receiving such an honour nowadays. It is useless to point to the fact that many boroughs are smaller than Berkhamsted—they owe their higher civic standing to the fact that they jealously guarded their charters.

To all intents and purposes Berkhamsted was a borough before the Norman Conquest, though we have no record of a charter until 1156. Henry II, then frequently a resident at Berkhamsted Castle, granted the men and merchants of Berkhamsted a charter by which they were to "enjoy their privileges as well and as honourably, and better and more honourably, than in the days of King Edward [the Confessor], King William, and King Henry." They were granted exemption from all tolls and duties, whether journeying with their merchandise in England, Normandy, Aquitaine or Anjou; anyone disquieting them was to forfeit £10.

A Town of Importance

In those days, it is worth noting, the Castle had made Berkhamsted a place of some importance, and in Edward III's reign the borough returned no fewer than three Members of Parliament.

The charter of Henry II was confirmed 300 years later by Edward IV, who, in addition, gave Berkhamsted a trading monopoly by directing that no market was to be held within eleven miles of the town. Hard lines on Tring, Hemel Hempstead and Chesham! The inhabitants of those towns were probably equally jealous of their Berkhamsted neighbours' new privilege exempting them from any form of jury service—a privilege cited with success less than 100 years ago, but now definitely withdrawn.

The charter was again confirmed by Richard III and Queen Elizabeth, and the benefits were further extended by James I. In 1618 he created Berkhamsted a "free borough town" with a bailiff and twelve chief burgesses

to form a common council. They were granted a common seal and had power to make and enforce bye-laws for the government of the town, its inhabitants and trades. Permission was granted for extra fairs on Shrove Tuesday and Whit Monday, and—this was not so pleasant!—the borough was permitted to have its own prison.

The Reason for the Downfall!

Some of the orders of the "common council" make strange reading. New-comers were apparently not welcomed, for they had to pay £5 to practise any trade in the borough, and inhabitants were not allowed to let a house to a stranger. And in a town which for centuries had regularly appointed its ale-tasters and was noted for its brew, an order was passed limiting the number of alehouses to six.

A cynic once suggested that the last-named order was so unpopular that it brought about the downfall of the Corporation! The truth is that the town had fallen upon hard times in the Civil War, and the impoverished inhabitants became indifferent to their rights and privileges. And so, in 1662 or 1663, Berkhamsted ceased to be a borough.

FLOWERS FOR THE ALTAR

April—Mrs. Breton.

May—The Misses Bald.

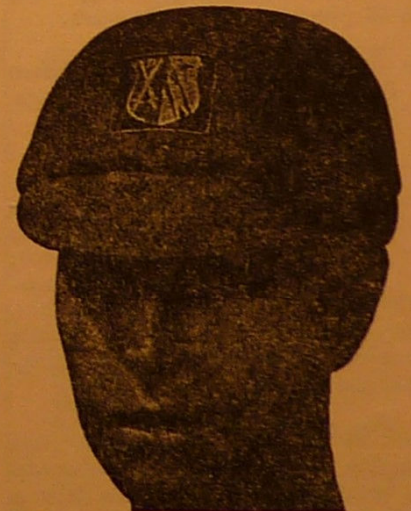
June—Miss King.

J. J. Stevens

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