

ST. JOHN'S WELL

A LINK WITH MEDIÆVAL BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

Many Berkhamstedians must regret the disappearance of one of the town's least spectacular but none the less interesting links with the past—St. John's Well. Of late years it has never sent more than the merest trickle of water down the lane to which it gives its name, and in recent months it has dried up altogether.

Yet in years gone by St. John's Well was famous locally on account of its alleged curative properties. Way back in the Middle Ages it was the town's principal source of drinking water, and two keepers or wardens were appointed to regulate the use of the water and save it from pollution. That they carried out their duties zealously is shown by the fact that in 1400, a number of people were summoned for washing clothes at the well.

Those were days of unbounded superstition, and it is not surprising that all sorts of curious legends concerning the well gained currency. For instance, it was popularly believed that St. John the Baptist himself visited the well and baptised Berkhamsted's first Christians there—a story almost on a par with the legend (quoted with due reserve in Cobb's "History of Berkhamsted") that St. Paul extended his travels to Berkhamsted, and cast out thunderstorms and serpents from the neighbourhood.

Taking the "Cure"

But the most interesting tradition of all was that the waters of St. John's Well cured sore eyes. Until 50 or so years ago scores of people regularly bathed their eyes at the well, and some idea of its fame is shown by the fact that eye-sufferers travelled from neighbouring towns and villages specially to take the "cure."

It was no unusual thing to see a string of carriages at the top of the lane while the owners walked down to bathe their eyes and perhaps bring away a bottle or two of the precious water for home treatment. An old resident once told me a delightful story of an elderly lady who regularly sat in state in her carriage and pair while the coachman filled half a dozen old champagne bottles with the precious lotion!

Whether cures were effected or not I cannot say, but there can be no doubt that great faith was held in the healing properties of the water. At any rate, the treatment was painless, unlike the traditional Berkhamsted

cure for the ague, which involved wedging a lock of one's hair in an old oak tree (the original "Cross Oak") and then springing away, leaving the hair behind. The shock must have been enough to cure anything!

A Hospital for Lepers?

St. John's Well takes its name from a hospital for poor and infirm persons (and probably also for lepers) which, in the Middle Ages, stood on the allotments formerly occupied by Lane's nurseries. In Victorian days the land was still known as the "Spital Mead." The inmates of the hospital may have been poor, but they were rather careless with their money, for coins of various periods have been dug up in the meadow from time to time. Human remains, too, have often been found on the site, and about the year 1911, when excavations were being made for a new greenhouse, three human skeletons were brought to light. This gruesome discovery was made only a few yards from the High Street, in all probability on the site of the ancient burial ground attached to the hospital.

The "Parent" of Berkhamsted School

The hospital of St. John the Evangelist was one of several which existed in Berkhamsted in the Middle Ages. Another, known as the hospital of St. John the Baptist, is interesting as being the "parent" of Berkhamsted School, for its funds were put to better use in the 16th century by Dean Incent when he founded the "free schoole" which celebrated its 400th anniversary last year. The Hospitals of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist were both founded in the reign of King John by Geoffrey Fitz Piers, Earl of Essex, and it is a matter for regret that so little is known of their history. The same, unfortunately, must also be said of several other hospitals or religious houses which flourished in Berkhamsted in mediæval times—St. Leonard's, situated at the south-east end of the High Street; St. Edmund's, near the Rectory; and St. Clement's, presumably on the site of the Rex Cinema, since a seal belonging to the fraternity was found in the garden of Egerton House many years ago.

Before leaving the story of St. John's Well, it is interesting to note that the ditch which formerly carried the water down to the Bulbourn is still edged with granite sleepers from the old London and Birmingham Railway. The holes made for fastening the rails to the sleepers can be seen in some of the stones.

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