

THE SPARROWS HERNE TRUST

LOCAL REMINDERS OF THE TURNPIKE SYSTEM

By "BEORCHAM"

In my "coaching days" article of a few months ago, reference was made to the fact that the main road through Berkhamsted was once maintained by the Sparrows Herne Trust. "What was this Trust?" I have been asked by a reader, who recollects seeing beside the road an occasional cast-iron post bearing the words "Sparrows Herne Trust." There is one, by the way, against the wall of Underhill and Young's garage in the High Street.

Few of these posts remain to-day, but they are of great historic interest in that they provide our only local reminders of the turnpike system which came into vogue about the end of the 17th century. Previously the highway was maintained by the parish, the inhabitants of Berkhamsted, like their fellows everywhere else in the country, having to work without payment six days each year on road repairs. This duty was largely evaded, with the result that the highway was perpetually in a lamentable state. Then the Sparrows Herne Trust—one of hundreds throughout the country—came into being. The Trust was empowered by Parliament to erect toll-bars and there levy tolls on all passengers other than pedestrians. In return the Trust had to maintain in good condition the few miles of road committed to its care. Charges ranged from a penny for a horse to fivepence for a score of oxen and twopence for a score of pigs.

A Busy Highway

The Sparrows Herne Trust, operating a section of one of the busiest highways to London, had plenty of revenue. Vehicular traffic was heavy for the period, and in addition large herds of cattle were constantly on the move to the great fairs and markets in and near London. This traffic was so great that special pens were maintained for resting the cattle, such as at the Cow Roast (said to be a corruption of "Cow Rest") and on the site of Victoria Road, where, in paddocks attached to the Goat Inn, large herds of Welsh cattle could often be seen grazing and resting on the way to Barnet fair.

The Sparrows Herne Trust flourished, and the trustees, unlike some contemporaries who were notorious for their corruption and neglect, kept our highway in what was considered good repair. But in those days "good repair" meant that in wet weather the road would not be much more than ankle-deep in mud. And it wasn't the mud alone that was so objectionable—in fact, it was better to travel in open country where the mud was deep but at least "clean," rather than through towns and villages where smells and filth were in greater evidence than sanitation. As a Berkhamsted writer of the period

tells us, "All kinds of vegetable refuse were cast into the street, and pigs were the recognised scavengers. On private property cesspits were the only method of dealing with sewage, and it was no uncommon thing to see on the south side of the street the drainage flowing from manure heaps."

The Town Complains

It must not be imagined that no attempt was made to improve matters. In 1758 the "principal inhabitants" of Berkhamsted complained that the High Street was out of repair and so dirty that they could not walk along the road without great discomfort and inconvenience. One William Bates was appointed scavenger for the year, but he could not perform his duties until the parish levied a special rate of 6d. in the pound to "repair and cleanse the High Street from the parish of Northchurch eastward, to the parish of Northchurch westward."

One of Bates' predecessors in the broom and shovel business was actually brought before the magistrates for not clearing away "the dirt and other annoyances" in the street, while in 1678 a Berkhamsted man was summoned for "annoying the King's way near the Church by littering it with straw, so that it was impassable for carts." Fifty years later a Berkhamsted staymaker was fined 1s. (paid in court) for "obstructing a certain watercourse adjoining the High Street with gravel, dirt and other material, causing it to overflow into the highway." Presumably this was at Bank Mill.

Stonewardens were appointed for maintaining the footpaths, and their only claim to fame is that they "totally neglected their duty. If attention was bestowed upon any favoured spot, say, the front of their own doorways, it was to pave them with small round pebbles. A more exquisite form of torture for people with tender feet to walk upon could scarcely be invented. The more neglected parts were in many respects preferable."

As late as mid-Victorian times, it is interesting to note, the office of Surveyor was a part-time one, held by a grocer!

Part of Akeman Street

By the way, it is sometimes forgotten that our High Street forms part of Akeman Street, the Roman highway which ran from Akemanchester (Bath) through Cirencester and, Alcester (near Bicester) to Aylesbury Tring and Berkhamsted. South of Berkhamsted its direction cannot be traced with any degree of certainty, but in all probability it was along Bank Mill Lane, continuing north of the Bulbourne to Boxmoor, Verulamium (St. Albans) and Colchester. The present main road through Bourne and is of much less antiquity.