WHEN THE PARISH CHURCH WAS A HOSPITAL

STORIES OF THE CIVIL WAR

By "BEORCHAM"

At a time when it is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper or magazine without reading about the war, it may seem tactless to devote an article in this series to the Civil War of the 17th century. But it so happens that this was a particularly interesting period of local history, despite the fact that Cobb's "History of Berkhamsted" dismisses it in a few lines. Berkhamsted had a very full share of the excitement, adventures, distress and misery of the Civil War, and possibly no other town in the county, with the exception of Hatfield and St. Albans, witnessed so many stirring scenes.

Some of the town's most curious legends date back to this period. For instance, it was once fondly believed that Cromwell set his cannon on Wigginton Common and thus destroyed Berkhamsted Castle — an obvious waste of shot and shell, for the Castle had long been left to fall in ruin! The old lane at the foot of the Hockeridges, known as Soldiers Bottom, is said to have been named after Cromwell's forces, and tradition has it that the ghosts of the soldiers have sometimes been seen in the lane. Another lane in the vicinity, Gallows Lane, is reputed to have derived its name from a gruesome incident when a traitor to the Cromwellian cause was interred there with the proverbial stake through his heart—a grim warning to any other fifth columnists in the ranks!

Local Mansions Ransacked

But let us turn from legend to fact. The first hint of trouble came when Berkhamsted refused to pay the notorious Ship Money Tax. There was a levy of £25 on the borough, and eyebrows were arched in official circles when, in 1638, it had to be reported that the sum was "still unpaid." Apparently that sort of thing was scarcely expected of the royal town of Berkhamsted, then newly restored to the dignity of a corporation.

There were still five tranquil years ahead for Berkhamsted. Then, in 1643—a year after the war broke out—the countryside rang with stories that Ashridge House had been looted by Parliamentarian soldiers, who imprisoned the frightened servants, hewed down doors they were unable to open, and even smashed the ceilings. After searching "all rooms, studies and closets," to quote an official record, they took away plate and arms, destroyed all the deer in Ashridge Park, and made off with 44 of the Earl of Bridgewater's horses. A month later Berkhamsted Place was ransacked.

A Battle that Didn't take Place

Perhaps the outstanding event for Berkhamsted was the marshalling of thousands of troops in the town in readiness for the threatened march of the Royalist army on London. Berkhamsted was deemed to be the best point of defence, and to the blare of trumpet and the beat of drum thousands of infantry soldiers from all parts of the country surged into the town. Five hundred cavalry arrived from Windsor, and heavy stores of ammunition and powder, with £10,000 in coin to pay the troops, were rushed along the highway from Watford.

Excellent preparations—but there was no battle according to plan. The Royalists altered their route, and the forces dispersed with no conflict occurring in the district. Yet long afterwards Berkhamsted remained a military town, and for some time was the rendezvous of Colonel Fairfax. The Parish Church had the dubious distinction of being converted into a prison and hospital for soldiers wounded in the battle at Colchester. To mitigate the horrors of huddling hundreds of men together in the church, the windows were taken out and afterwards replaced at the expense of the ratepayers.

An Outspoken Churchwarden

Harassed by soldiers, ravaged by epidemics, Berkhamsted looked forward to the Commonwealth to restore the borough's old-time prosperity and tranquillity. Instead, there was widespread distress and a most uneasy peace. The execution of Charles I caused a violent reaction in favour of the monarchy, and at least one Berkhamstedian was not silenced by the ruthless way the Commonwealth dealt with expressions of sympathy for the late king. He was Nathan Paine, a prominent townsman and churchwarden of St. Peter's, who awed the guests at a wedding feast by telling them that the execution of the king was "the most horrid murder that ever any history made mention of .... it was a plot worse than the gunpowder treason, with the one difference that one was above ground and the other under ground." Proceedings were taken against Nathan Paine, but the outcome is lost to history.

Nathan Paine's views obviously did not tally with those of another local man, Daniel Axtell, of Berkhamsted Place. He pressed so vigorously for the execution of Charles I that he, too, lost his head at Tyburn when the monarchy was restored.

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Yes, it was the spirit of Nathan Paine and not that of Daniel Axtell which eventually triumphed. In 1660 England had her king again, and the town did honour to Charles II by indulging in an orgy of feasting and rejoicing. Gunpowder and match were ordered for a primitive firework display ; gallons of ale were purchased at the expense of the parish ; and the bellringers of St. Peter's, after calling the townspeople to prayer, were each presented with ten shillings and a new set of bell ropes. The good burgesses of Berkhamsted knew how to celebrate the occasion !