

THE TOWN'S OLD-TIME MARKETS

By "BEORCHAM"

Last month, in an article surveying the statute fairs formerly held in Berkhamsted, it was pointed out that originally they were great seasonal markets, at which entertainment took second place to business. But two or three fairs a year were not sufficient for transacting the trade of the district in times when there were no shops as we know them to-day. For at least 700 years, and perhaps before the Norman Conquest, a regular weekly market has been held in Berkhamsted, and at various times in the town's history we have had two and even three market days a week.

In days when the Castle was in its prime, Berkhamsted had the reputation of being one of the best market towns in the county. The reason is not hard to seek, for our town enjoyed a status much the same as that of Windsor in more recent times. Even when royalty were not in residence, a large staff of courtiers and servants remained. They were among the few people in the land able to afford luxuries, and merchants were not slow to recognise Berkhamsted as a highly profitable venue for their silks, spices, and other costly wares. But, generally speaking, there could not have been much to buy or sell other than livestock, agricultural produce, and the woodenware for which Berkhamsted has always been noted. At one period it is possible that a small trade was carried on in locally-woven woollen goods, and in Queen Elizabeth's reign malt-making came to the fore. Later the old cottage craft of pillow lace manufacture possibly attracted buyers; then, in Victorian times, the straw-plaiting trade assumed such importance that a special weekly market was set up for the sale of straw and the purchase of the finished plait.

A Market on Sundays!

The plait-market was held on Thursdays, according to Loosley's Directory for 1882, which also mentions a cattle market on alternate Wednesdays. At the turn of the present century the plait-market had disappeared, but it is interesting to find that the "Victoria" History of Hertfordshire, published about 40 years ago, credits Berkhamsted with three market days in those comparatively recent times. There was a market for vegetables on Tuesdays, another for meat and flowers on Saturdays, and a cattle market on alternate Fridays—all "so small as to be scarcely noticeable," as the historian cautiously adds. By the way, Lipscombe, in his "Journal" of 1799, refers to Berkhamsted as possessing "a shabby, decayed market, but genteel inhabitants"!

Earlier still, in 1619, James I granted Berkhamsted the right to "keep one market on Thursday in every weeke, beside ye ancient market kept on Munday." "Ancient"

it certainly was, for the Monday market was inaugurated on May 7, 1217. Previously it had been held on Sunday, of all days! No doubt the change was made in deference to a new respect for the Sabbath engendered by the building of St. Peter's Church about that period.

A Market Monopoly

Berkhamsted's mediæval market had royal favours bestowed upon it. In 1156, Henry II directed that the men and merchants of Berkhamsted were to be "free of all tolls and duties whithersoever they go," and when Edward IV confirmed this privilege he further decreed that no market was to be set up within eleven miles of the town. Whether advantage was ever taken of that monopoly I cannot say, but it is significant that when the Castle was left to fall in ruin, complaints were made that new markets in three neighbouring towns had taken most of the trade away from Berkhamsted. Prevalence of small-pox in Berkhamsted was blamed for a further decline of the market in the 17th century.

The Old Market Place

An interesting fact, little realised by the present generation, is that the original market place was a strip of greensward between the Parish Church and the top of Water Lane. The line of shops from the Church to the One Bell Inn was then non-existent, the north side of the High Street being in line with Back Lane and permitting an unobstructed view of the west end of the Church. Encroachments were made in Elizabeth's reign, when a market house (described in an earlier article) was built at the top of Water Lane, to be followed by a row of shambles and stalls nearby. These temporary buildings were afterwards replaced by brick structures, and our "village green" disappeared completely, leaving the Court House and a row of houses which formerly fronted the highway tucked away in what is now known as Back Lane. The line of shops between the Church and the One Bell was formerly known as "Grab-all-row"—a pointed comment on the stealthy manner in which the land was appropriated 300 years ago!

When Berkhamsted was a borough, market and fair tolls were devoted to the relief of the poor and repair of the Parish Church. These revenues were snatched from the townspeople in 1674 by John Sayer, who is remembered in happier circumstances as donor of the almshouses at Cowper Road corner. Later the market rights were vested in the owners of Ashridge until the death of Earl Brownlow in 1922, when, principally through the foresight of the late Mr. E. H. Sedgwick, the Town Hall Committee purchased the rights for a nominal sum. A fine stroke of business, as the annual accounts always remind us!