

THE STRAW-PLAITERS' CRAFT

By "BEORCHAM"

Younger readers were probably puzzled when an earlier article on the town's old markets and fairs referred to a fortnightly market for straw-plait in Berkhamsted High Street. An unusual commodity, to be sure, but it did not seem at all strange two or three generations ago, for straw-plaiting was then a popular local domestic industry. It provided profitable part-time employment for women and children not only in Berkhamsted, but in almost every town and village in West and North Herts, Beds, and a corner of Bucks. The plait was mainly bought by Luton and Dunstable manufacturers of hats and baskets, millions of which were produced annually until other materials sent the humble straw variety out of fashion. Luton still retains its reputation as Britain's premier hat town—an interesting legacy of straw-plaiting days.

In Berkhamsted alone, plaiting enabled hundreds of housewives and children to supplement meagre family incomes in Victorian days. It was a craft which resembled knitting in some respects, and could be carried on almost anywhere—usually beside kitchen fires in the winter, and out of doors in the summer.

Plaiting School

Once this cottage industry was so important that every town and village in the district had its plaiting school. Plaiting, in fact, was the only subject many children ever studied at school before the days of compulsory education. At an early age they became wage-earners, for plait made at school could be taken home and sold. A Potten End octogenarian tells me that she attended Frithsden plaiting school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.—and then, after tea, she had to go to an evening plaiting school in her own village. At Bovingdon, where there was a similar school, children were taught in the dark, to accustom them to working without looking at the plait.

To this day many old residents have kept their straw splitters and mangles as relics of a bygone craft, and here and there it is still possible to see niches cut in cottage mantel-pieces for measuring the plait. "Old hands", however, preferred to estimate the day's output by winding the plait over their arms. Usually it was made up in lengths of 20 yards, known in the trade as "scores." Several varieties of plait were made; those most generally produced in Berkhamsted were called China Pearl, Rock, Coburg, and Moss Edge.

The End of the Industry

In the first half of the 19th century, many women and children received more money for plaiting straw at home than their menfolk earned as labourers. A "good hand" at Berkhamsted could earn about 15s. a week, and a 13 years-old girl at St. Albans is said to have received as much as a guinea for a week's work. Farmers

complained that straw-plaiting "did mischief, making the poor saucy, rendering the women averse to husbandry, and causing a dearth of indoor servants and field labourers."

Foreign competition and changing fashions eventually ruined this cottage craft. It was obviously impossible to compete with Continental and coolie labour when plait could be imported at a third of the cost of the home product. At one time a hat of Chinese plait could be bought for 2½d.

Review readers will be interested to know that one of the first issues of the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine, as it was then called, published this warning to parents in 1871: "Children now acquiring the art of plaiting will, by the time they are grown up, find the bread taken out of their mouths—and that because parents look upon the earning of a few pence at present as of more consequence than their future welfare. . . . The cry for good servants is heard on all sides, and children now brought up to straw-plaiting, with good home training, and good home example, could supply the deficiency. In respectable service they would enjoy comforts, not to say luxuries, which are now entirely beyond their reach."

So there's nothing new in the servant problem!

PAROCHIAL PARAGRAPHS

At the annual parochial meeting the Rev. E. K. Mules expressed his thanks to all those who gave their services to All Saints' Church. It was extraordinary the amount of work done by voluntary labour, he said, and paid a special tribute to Mr. G. F. Player who had undertaken the blowing of the organ at morning and evening services—that was real hard work. He was also a Server and they would like him to be a Sidesman, but he could not blow the organ and take the collection at the same time.

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"Thanks very much for the snappy headline" said one of the Press representatives to Mr. S. H. Smith at the close of the annual parochial meeting.

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Somewhat nonplussed the Rector's Warden enquired "what headline?", to which came the retort "Didn't you say 'More spouting is required at All Saints' Church?'"

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He did; but he was reporting on the fabric of the church—not on the sermons.

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The Rotary Club of Berkhamsted heard, a short time ago, that the crew of its adopted minesweeper, H.M.S. "Fintray," was in need of a wireless set. Despite present day difficulties, the members procured a battery set, much to the surprise and delight of the Commanding Officer and men.