

# LOCAL LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS — I

By "BEORCHAM"

Many historians would as soon destroy a mediæval manuscript as pay anything more than the most casual, condescending attention to the legends, traditions and customs of a more superstitious age. Unrecorded, many picturesque stories are eventually bound to be forgotten altogether, and it is with the object of rescuing them from oblivion that the "old wives' tales" of the district have been brought together in this and two succeeding articles.

Local legends concerning ghosts and buried treasure will raise nothing more than a smile in this matter-of-fact age. But some of the "cures" prescribed for our gullible forebears were rather more than a joke, whilst the widespread belief in witchcraft evokes a sense of horror and shame: many a harmless old woman was hounded to death by ignorant, frenzied mobs. Unimportant and trifling though many of these stories may seem, they are as valuable as authentic history in shedding light upon the mentality of the populace of only a few generations ago.

## St. Paul and St. John

One of the most curious, and possibly the oldest, of local legends is that St. Paul included Berkhamsted in his travels, banishing serpents and thunderstorms from the neighbourhood for all time. Even so staid an authority as the Rev. W. J. Cobb admitted the prevalence of this belief in his "History of Berkhamsted." As he remarks, "this tradition is utterly falsified by experience" so far as thunderstorms are concerned.

Equally quaint was a legend that St. John visited Berkhamsted and baptised the district's first Christians in the spring known to this day as St. John's Well. As a matter of fact, this well received its name in the Middle Ages, when a hospice dedicated to St. John was built on land afterwards occupied by Lane's nursery, now converted into allotments. Until fifty or so years ago, it was fondly believed that St. John's Well had curative properties, and persons afflicted with defective vision were advised to bathe their eyes at the well. Many took bottles of the water away with them for home treatment.

## A "Woe-water"

An altogether different legend is associated with the Bourne Gutter, the spasmodic stream which rises near Whelpley Hill and joins the Bulbourne at Bourne End, thereby giving that village its name. When in full spate, this "woe-water" was supposed to portend war, but events have proved it a most unreliable prophet. Suffice it to say that the river bed has been completely dry in recent years, whereas the Gutter overflowed its banks and inundated a field and lane on many occasions during the days of peace. The Bourne Gutter may not

have heard of Hitler and Mussolini, but it provides a useful boundary between Herts and Bucks throughout almost the whole of its length.

## The Original "Cross Oak"

Besides possessing a well which relieved sore eyes, Berkhamsted had a tree reputed to cure the ague, a common ailment in years gone by. Two massive horizontal boughs made this gnarled old oak resemble a cross; in fact, it was known as "Cross Oak." Although blown down many years ago, the name of the tree is still perpetuated in Cross Oak Road. Sufferers from the ague were advised to bore a hole in the trunk, peg a lock of hair in the hole, and then spring away, leaving the hair behind. A more painful treatment can scarcely be imagined, for "patients" ran the risk of being partially scalped! Possibly the shock effected a cure. At all events, peg-holes in the trunk proved that many Berkhamstedians were brave enough to face the ordeal.

My authority for the "Cross Oak" story is Henry Nash, who, in his "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" (1890) also records a popular local cure for fits. "The first thing necessary," he says, "was to obtain from a clergyman a piece of silver that had been presented as a sacramental offering, and to have it made into a ring to be worn on a certain finger; this was to effect the cure."

## Ghosts!

Cross Oak Road, by the way, is not the only local name with quaint associations. Nearby is Gallows Lane, said to have received its name from a gruesome Civil War incident, when a traitor was interred there with the proverbial stake through his heart. In the adjacent lane known as Soldiers Bottom the ghosts of Cromwell's army were once believed to appear shortly before nightfall, their pikes glittering blood-red in the rays of the setting sun. Cromwell, too, is traditionally blamed for the destruction of Berkhamsted Castle. His artillery is supposed to have fired from Wigginton Common and demolished the castle—a legend disproved by the knowledge that 17th century cannon had a very limited range. The castle was already in ruin, anyway.

Mention of ghosts a moment ago recalls that Egerton House, the Elizabethan mansion pulled down to make room for the Rex Cinema, was alleged to be haunted. No one knew whether the ghost was a knight of old or a fair lady who walked with her head tucked underneath her arm, but the story had so firm a hold that at one time scores of people regularly gathered in the High Street to watch for the ghost, sometimes keeping vigil night after night.

More local traditions, legends and customs will be related in the next article of this series.