

LOCAL LEGENDS AND TRADITIONS—II

By "BEORCHAM"

Here, to resume this survey of local legends and traditions, are some amusing stories concerning Dropshort, the name given to an old building beside the main road near Dudswell. One version is that a load of bricks fell off the back of a cart and were straightaway used for building a cottage in this once outlandish spot! Another version is that the builders, who hailed from Northchurch, were too lazy to go to the specified site farther along the road, and "dropped short" by building the cottage much nearer their homes.

But there is a more plausible story. In coaching days Dropshort is said to have been built for the convenience of the residents of a large house some distance from the main road. Irrked by long waits in all weathers for the stage coach, they had a waiting room built at the point nearest their home, and, to ensure that the room would be kept warm and tidy, they installed a caretaker and incorporated his cottage in the building.

A Chest of Gold

Another amusing legend concerns buried treasure—nothing less than a large chest of gold!—in a Frithsden gravel pit known as Rose's Hole. This account was given by the late Mr. W. B. Gerish in a pamphlet he published many years ago on Hertfordshire folk-lore.

"An old man of Frithsden, named Rose, dreamed that there was a large chest of gold buried at the bottom of the pit, and that it should be his if he could get it up without speaking a word to break the spell. He took into his confidence a younger neighbour, and in the evening they shouldered their spades and proceeded to the pit. After some hours of arduous labour, and having dug to a considerable depth, their spades struck upon something metallic.

"Upon clearing away the gravel, there, plainly enough, was the top of a large iron chest. The sight of this evidence of the correctness of the dream so overcame the younger man that he exclaimed, '——— it, Jack, here it is.' Scarcely had these words been uttered when the sides of the excavation caved in and they had barely time to escape premature burial. It was too late then to renew the task, but early next morning they commenced to remove the loose soil. Although they laboured for many hours, no sign of it could be discovered. Later attempts were made, it is said, to locate the treasure, but in vain."

If this story has a moral, it underlines the folly of careless talk!

Frithsden's "Roman" Walls

The hamlet of Frithsden has another interesting tradition. It concerns the so-called "Roman" walls and bridge across the lane between Frithsden and Nettleden—a most extraordinary sight, for the massive stone and brick walls tower up to a height of nearly 20 ft. in some places, and are crossed by a wide bridge, complete with handsome stone balustrades.

What was the point of lavishing so much money and labour on a country lane few people have occasion to use? Legend has it that one of the Dukes of Bridgewater, when living at nearby Ashridge, was moved to pity by the sad state of the villagers during an exceptionally hard winter. He was not a believer in direct charity, but decided to build the seemingly unnecessary walls and bridge to employ the scores of workless in neighbouring villages.

That is how the story goes. But it is far more likely that the undertaking was a normal part of the Duke's programme for improving his estate. The walls may not have been absolutely essential, but the bridge was required to carry the main carriage-way from Ashridge to Water End over the deep-cut lane. Since other roads have been built across the Ashridge Estate, the bridge has virtually fallen into disuse.

A Fern-cutting Ceremony

As we make our way homeward to Berkhamsted, an interesting tradition associated with the Common may be recalled. In days when fern and gorse were used for fuel and litter, there was a law—written or unwritten—that no vegetation should be removed from Berkhamsted Common until September 1st. Days ahead men would search for the best stretches of fern and gorse and stand on guard on the evening of August 31st. Then they cut circles round their selected patches, rather in the manner of staking claims when gold prospecting, and woe betide anyone who intruded upon the territory of another! Gorse was once the staple fuel for household purposes and for firing brick-kilns; fern was used for thatching roofs of pig-stys and barns, and to provide litter for pigs, etc.

Another old local custom was "Keeping Kattern," a festival celebrated by lace-makers on St. Katherine's Day with big family parties at which the "Kattern cake" was cut.

Jacks-in-the-Green

Like every other town and village, Berkhamsted celebrated May Day in the traditional way, with the town paraded by Jacks-in-the-green, who covered themselves with foliage and flowers, blackened their faces, and rang bells to supplement vocal efforts. This was part of the song of Berkhamsted's "Jacks":

The May, the May, the very first of May,
The springtime of the year;
We come round to your door to-day
To taste of your strong beer.

And if you haven't got any strong beer,
We'll be content with small,
So give us a cup, and we'll drink it up,
And thank the Lord for all.

No survey of local traditions, customs and superstitions would be complete without references to the once widespread belief in witchcraft. The next article will deal with this subject.