

# SOME BERKHAMSTED BENEFACTORS

By "BEOR CHAM"

Local history books devote plenty of space to churches, schools, manor houses and other ancient buildings, but invariably neglect another historic, if somewhat unattractive, institution—the workhouse. Yet here we have a subject which not only sheds much light on social history, but provides reminders of days when the vestry transacted much of the business that is now the concern of county and local authorities. For instance, Poor Law administration was formerly in the hands of the churchwardens, and the rate was fixed at vestry meetings.

Before turning to the system of poor relief introduced by the first Poor Law Act of 1601, it is interesting to recall the many private benefactions which have been made from time to time. John Sayer's almshouses and Thomas Bourne's charity school at once come to mind; less well-known are the smaller charities of a number of bygone and now almost forgotten worthies.

How many parishioners of to-day know that Sir Henry Atkins presented 41 acres of land to the parish in 1636, the rent to be shared between 20 poor Berkhamsted parishioners every Christmas? Or that Richard Balshaw, in 1782, bequeathed 21 acres under somewhat similar conditions, the rent to be used to buy meat and bread for the "aged, infirm and other industrious poor"? So we could go on listing the gifts of Thomas Baldwin, John Dorrien, and many other local benefactors. They are in good company, for James I gave £100 for the benefit of poor townspeople, and Charles I arranged for 300 faggots of wood to be given to the poor once a year, the distribution being made by the Rector outside Egerton House.

Many years ago it was wisely decided that the distribution of meat, bread, fuel and money according to the founders' original conditions was unsuited to modern times, and a scheme was approved by the Charity Commissioners whereby poorer members of the community continue to benefit from these old charities.

## The First Workhouse

After the first Poor Law Act of 1601 compelled the provision of work for unemployed able-bodied adults and the maintenance of aged and incapacitated poor, Berkhamsted churchwardens dutifully appointed what was then a new official, the overseer of the poor, and provided a workhouse. In the 18th century, if not earlier, it was a straw-thatched building, situated on land known as Salter's Charity, now occupied by the Council school.

Many references to this old workhouse appear in vestry records. In 1767, we learn, George Hoar was appointed governor at £28 per calendar month. A high salary for the period, you may think, especially as he also pocketed the proceeds of the "work, labour and service" of the poor in his charge. But the governor had to clothe and feed the inmates, pay for their medicines, and undertake to

"deliver up the poor to the parish officers in good condition"—scarcely a safeguard against exploitation of the poor and abuse of public money.

The churchwardens paid the rent of the workhouse, kept it in repair, and provided all furniture. In 1777 they ordered the governor to "bring or cause to be brought twice every Sunday to church all the men, women and children that are able."

The churchwardens and overseer had responsibilities other than the care of workhouse inmates. Considerable out-relief was granted, and when unemployment was rife, the rate soared to what was then the very high amount of 8s. or 9s. in the £. Much criticised was the practice of farmers in discharging most of their labourers after the harvest; after interviewing the overseer, the men would be sent back to their masters with a request to find them employment at reduced wages, the deficiency being made up from the rates. This and other abuses aroused the indignation of Augustus Smith and his contemporaries.

## Nugent House

Meanwhile, the old workhouse was usually filled to capacity, and by the 1830's it was tumbledown, verminous and insanitary, though probably no worse than other similar institutions of the day. Fortunately, a kindly old clergyman, the Rev. George Nugent, was so moved to pity when comparing his home with the paupers' miserable hovel that he bequeathed £1,000 with the object of rescuing them from squalor. Nugent's gift made it possible to remove two of the town's worst eyesores—the old workhouse, on which the Council Schools were afterwards built, and a group of dilapidated cottages near Kitsbury Farm, known as Ragged Row, on which the new workhouse was built. Originally intended for the use of Berkhamsted's poor only, it was soon required to serve a much larger area, for groups of parishes were formed into "unions," under the control of Boards of Guardians. This arrangement caused a hot controversy at the time, the modern counterpart of which was provoked about ten years ago, when drastic alterations were made in the system of poor relief. The word workhouse was officially frowned upon, and this grey, gaunt building was named Nugent House in memory of its founder. But its days were already numbered. Administration passed from the Board of Guardians to the Dacorum Guardians Committee, covering a much wider area than the "union," and, against the wishes of many townspeople, it was decided in 1935 to close the Berkhamsted institution and transfer the inmates to Hemel Hempstead. After standing derelict for two years, Nugent House was sold for £3,700 and then pulled down, to be replaced by a row of shops and flats.

Berkhamsted, for the first time for over 300 years, no longer had a home for its "aged and incapacitated poor."