

# THE STORY OF OUR STREETS

By "BEORCHAM"

Some time ago, in a Charing Cross Road bookshop, I bought a beautifully coloured county map which, to judge from its style and such spellings as Barkhamsted, Boxmore, Gadsden, Ivingo and Fresden, must be nearly 200 years old. Almost every place-name that would appear on a modern map of similar scale is included, but surprisingly few roads are shown—in fact, only five in the whole of West Herts! There is no indication of a road from Berkhamsted to Chesham; and Wigginton, Aldbury and many other villages stand in splendid isolation, literally off the beaten track.

But it would be wrong to imagine that those villages had no links with the towns. The deep-cut lanes that criss-cross our countryside have not been worn down to their present level in a couple of centuries. They existed as green lanes or rough tracks, and were important enough to the villagers, if neglected by 18th century map-makers. Here it may be pointed out that the best roads of the period were probably no wider, and certainly in far worse condition, than fourth-rate roads of the present day.

The main road through Berkhamsted (more or less following the Roman Akeman Street) was for centuries a quagmire in winter and a corridor of dust in dry weather. No substantial improvements were made until the relatively short-lived coaching days which preceded the railway boom. Yet along this highway passed much of the traffic between London and the North-West—packhorses, wagons, coaches, and droves of cattle and sheep. Royalty found Berkhamsted Castle a convenient stopping place when journeying across the Kingdom. Pilgrims, merchants, soldiers—all have followed in the footsteps of the Romans.

## A "Two Street" Town

And it was beside this ancient highway that Berkhamsted developed from a primitive settlement into a royal borough. Many tracks led away from the road to neighbouring farms and villages, but for hundreds of years we had only one side street of any importance—Castle Lane, or, as we now call it, Castle Street. Starting as a grass-grown drive to the Castle, it must have witnessed many a colourful procession in mediæval times. By the time Dean Incent founded his School 400 years ago, Castle Street was lined with rows of cottages, the first of which probably housed servants of the Castle. Leland, the antiquary, was able to report that Berkhamsted "hath a large strete metely well builded from the north to the south, and another, but sumwhat lesser, from the west to the east, where the ryver rennith." Leland's sense of direction may have been faulty, but he started the "two street" description which found its way into scores of later books.

Even in Tudor and Stuart days, however, Berkhamsted had a number of little lanes and districts with names

of their own. The following, only a few of which can now be identified, appear in old documents: le Corour-strete, Strickelane, le Shopperowe (probably between the Parish Church and One Bell Inn), Northmulane, Jacobsbern, Hulfred, Benethenstrete, Ravenyngeslane (Ravens Lane), the Pightle (Highfield Road), Gereweylane (Green Lane, now Charles Street), Elvenweye (Chesham Road), Sugarsway (Shootersway), Tiptoes Lane (near "Banckes" Mill), Hunger Hill, Oxlade, Philip's Lane, Myddell Hill, Harefote End (Haresfoot), and Rotten Row (near the Upper Mill).

## High Street Farmyards

But we must not assume that these lanes and "stretes" were built-up in the same way as Castle Street and High Street. Nash's "Reminiscences" (published 1890) tell us that in the days of his youth, over 100 years ago, Berkhamsted was "an almost endless village" with "none of the side streets now teeming with life." Ravens Lane was overshadowed by large trees. Highfield Road was the site of a farmyard, and so was Egerton Terrace. Victoria Road was a close or paddock belonging to the Goat Inn (here we see how Three Close Lane received its name). At Rectory Lane corner a large barn for storing corn stood opposite the Pilkington Manor House, with its walled estate enclosing what is now Chapel Street and adjacent roads.

The town was almost entirely bounded by High Street, Mill Street and Castle Street, with the exception of rows of houses, shops and inns stretching along both sides of High Street towards Northchurch. Fields and orchards swept down to the south side of the main road, broken by a few cottages in Chesham Road (then called either Elvey Lane or Grubb's Lane), King's Road (Bridewell Lane or Cox's Lane), and Cross Oak Road (Gillam's Lane). Incidentally, Lower Kings Road did not exist until after the new railway station had been built in 1874; part of the cost of this road was borne by Chesham residents, who, having no railway of their own until 50 or so years ago, had to travel and send their goods via Berkhamsted.

It was the railway and industrial development which started a building boom in the 1840's. Soon Castle Street had a dozen rival side streets, the earliest being Highfield Road, Holliday Street, Provident Place, Chapel Street, Bridge Street, Victoria Road, and, at the opposite end of the town, Cross Oak Road, Park Street, and the little turnings off Gossoms End. Big developments in Sunnyside and then in Kitsbury (formerly called Kicks End) followed. More recent developments do not call for comment, but it may be mentioned that Berkhamsted, often considered a slow-growing town, has in fact developed at a faster pace than Tring, Rickmansworth and many other towns in Herts and Bucks.