

QUESTION MARKS OF LOCAL HISTORY

By "BEORCHAM"

So thoroughly have historians delved into the town's annals that there is now little likelihood of additional information of great importance being brought to light. Thus we shall probably never find the answers to certain problems which have aroused doubt and curiosity for generations.

One of the most interesting questions of all concerns St. Peter's Church. Was it an entirely new building, or does it stand on the site of an even older church? The problem would not arise but for the fact that a rough arch in the north transept wall appears to be considerably older than the rest of the building. Indeed, a Norman origin has been claimed for this supposed relic. Mention in the Domesday Book of a priest at Berkhamsted has encouraged historians to conclude that there was almost certainly a place of worship here in Norman times. But even if that were so, we still have no definite proof that an earlier church stood on the site of St. Peter's.

About the time when St. Peter's Church was being built, other masons and carpenters daily journeyed across the fields beyond Shootersway to build a tiny church which puzzles antiquarians. Why was Marlin Chapel—now a ruin in the corner of a field near Rossway—built in such an out-of-the-way place? And why was it encircled by a deep moat, sections of which are still visible? One guess, a rather wild one, is that it was a minor monastery. The Rev. Cobb is probably correct in surmising that it was a domestic chapel attached to an ancient residence, but its full history will never be known.

Grims Dyke

Another relic of doubtful origin may be seen on Berkhamsted Common, between the Frithsden road and Potten End. It is a deep ditch known as Grims Dyke, an ancient earthwork which once stretched from Potten End to Bradenham, near High Wycombe, a distance of 16 miles. Several other sectors can be traced on high ground.

Theories as to the origin of "Grymesdich," as a 13th century document spells it, are legion. Centuries ago it was regarded as a superhuman structure—in other words, the work of the Devil! Later, more practical persons supposed that it was an ancient defensive earthwork. But it could never have been a formidable obstacle, and modern investigators generally consider that the ditch marked a boundary. For instance, Dr. Mortimer Wheeler's theory is that it was constructed in the fifth or sixth century as the line of demarcation between East Anglia and a British people centred in London. Other authorities suggest that it defended Roman settlements from cattle raiders in the Midlands. Grims Dyke may also have marked the limit of the conquest of Britain by Belgic tribes in the sixth century before Christ; again, it may even be of Bronze Age origin. The only certainty is that we shall now never know its true age!

A Saxon Parliament

Similarly, the early history of the town must always remain a matter for speculation rather than hard facts. The one practical certainty is that the Roman highway known as Akeman Street passed through the Berkhamsted valley, more or less following the line of the present High Street. The Romans may have found a township already existing here; indeed, the claim has been made that Berkhamsted was originally Durocbrivis, "city of the marshy stream." But an identical claim has been made on behalf of Dunstable, Redbourn, Ravensborough and Hertford!

By the time the Normans had completed their conquest, Berkhamsted was an important community with fifty burgesses, but little is known of the development of the town in Anglo-Saxon days. It is not certain, as is sometimes suggested, that a Saxon stronghold already existed on the site of the Castle. But some picturesque legends arose, and Berkhamsted was credited with being a residence of the Kings of Mercia. The oft-quoted story that King Wihthraede held a great council or parliament here in 697 does not bear investigation, for Wihthraede was King of Kent, not of Mercia, to which ancient kingdom Berkhamsted belonged. In passing, it is interesting to recall one of the laws passed at that parliament of 697: "If any stranger shall wander privately through the country, and shall neither cry aloud nor sound his horn, he shall be taken for a thief and shall be either slain or banished."

Which Berkhamsted?

Not until Norman times can one write of local history with any degree of certainty. And even then doubts arise as to a certain event which is generally supposed to be the most important in our long history. Every local schoolboy and schoolgirl learns that William the Conqueror received the offer of the English crown at Berkhamsted in 1066, but can we be sure that it was at *our* Berkhamsted? After all, there are two Berkhamsteds (parenthetically it may be mentioned that there is a third, spelt Barkhamsted, in Connecticut, U.S.A.), and a very sound claim has been made that the Saxon "Quislings" made their submission at Little Berkhamsted, near Hertford, not at Great Berkhamsted.

The following extract from an article on the history of our village namesake speaks for itself:

"It is now held it was here or nearby, and not at Great Berkhamsted, that William the Conqueror, after his encircling movement round London subsequent to the Battle of Hastings, met Edgar Atheling and the Saxon leaders from London and received their submission. This incident took place near Beorcham, just as London came in sight. It would certainly seem that the invading army passed through Little Berkhamsted, as its yearly value was reduced to 50s. when the Conqueror bestowed it on one of his followers, Harduin d'Eschalers, and this would no doubt be due to waste and pillage, as by 1086 the value was once more 100s."

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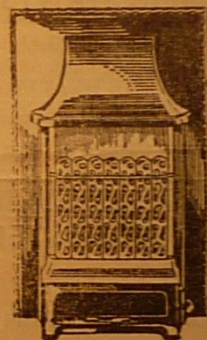
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