

# THE STORY OF NORTHCHURCH

By "BEORCHAM"

Ever since the turn of the century, Northchurch has been fighting a losing battle to save its individuality. Berkhamsted, growing lustily, has more than once encroached upon the admittedly large territory of its neighbour, and the last boundary revision, some ten years ago, incorporated the village itself in the urban district of Berkhamsted. This was not the first time amalgamation of the two places had been suggested; a similar proposal was made 300 years ago, when Berkhamsted was a borough. But on that occasion the good folk of Northchurch preferred independence to civic dignity—and had their own way.

If Northchurch is still regarded as a separate village, not as a mere "suburb" of Berkhamsted, it is because parochial life remains virile and intimate—as indeed it should in a village with 1,000 years of authentic history. As a recent article pointed out, there are good reasons for supposing that it was at Northchurch where the first settlement was founded bearing the name of Berkhamsted—a name subsequently usurped by a newer community established near the Castle in Norman times. In this case the daughter evidently outgrew the mother at a very early age, but as late as the 17th century a document referred to the "towns" of Berkhamsted and Northchurch. And little more than 100 years ago Northchurch was considered almost, but not quite, important enough to have its own railway station—an amenity that may yet be provided if the railway is electrified.

## Older than St. Peter's?

Unlike Berkhamsted, Northchurch does not mix the new with the old. The village has doubled its size since the last war, but the High-street has scarcely changed since the last Michaelmas fair was held on the narrow path and road way back in 1883. One can still pass through the village unaware of the existence of the large new housing estate which sprawls over the hillside towards Shootersway. A partiality for high-walled privacy gives some parts of Northchurch an austere, unfriendly appearance, but between Bell-lane and New-road we have as picturesque a scene as many a more widely praised village can offer—a beautiful church and churchyard, a few old cottages with pretty front gardens, and a row of timbered almshouses that escaped the fire which destroyed a large part of the village in the 17th century.

It was around the old church of St. Mary's that Northchurch grew up. The church, or an earlier building on the same site, may once have served a vast parish which included Berkhamsted before St. Peter's was built. But alterations and additions at various periods make it difficult to assess the age of St. Mary's. There is no evidence to support an old statement

that pre-Norman work can be traced; the plan of the church suggests the first quarter of the 13th century (the same as St. Peter's), and the tower is about 400 years old.

Much could be written about St. Mary's church—its beautiful stained glass, its memorials, its 300 years-old bells, its 15th century Flemish chest in the vestry. But the greatest interest is almost invariably aroused by the memorial tablet to Peter the Wild Boy, an 18th century oddity, who, the inscription relates, was found in a German forest in 1725, brought to England by order of Queen Caroline, and provided with "the ablest masters." But Peter, it is added, proved incapable of speaking or of receiving any instruction, and "a comfortable provision was made for him by her Majesty at a farmhouse in this Parish, where he continued to the end of his inoffensive life."

Peter died in 1785, aged about 72; his grave may still be seen near the porch of the church.

## Some Village Worthies

It is hardly fair that Peter the Wild Boy should be remembered when many a sturdy yeoman of Northchurch has been forgotten. Few to-day have so much as heard of William Edlyn, of Norcott Hill, who, nearly 300 years ago, rallied a "disciplined force of a hundred men" to pull down fences that had been erected on Northchurch Common, depriving the villagers of ancient common rights. (History repeated itself in 1866 when Augustus Smith organised a similar raid to defeat Earl Brownlow's attempted enclosure of Berkhamsted Common.) Edlyn and two fellow ringleaders were arrested, brought before the House of Lords—and released with a caution!

Some of Edlyn's contemporaries figured in the religious troubles of the period, for 20 Northchurch men and women were heavily fined and imprisoned for holding "secret" meetings in a barn just off the High-street.

Turning to more modern times, mention must be made of another Northchurch worthy—Sir John Hobart Culme Seymour, rector from 1830-80, who met the needs of worshippers in more distant parts of his parish by building St. John's, Broadway, as a chapel of ease. During his long ministry, in the 1860's, the village school was built on a site conveyed by Earl Brownlow. Northchurch incidentally was one of the first villages in the country to provide technical and continuation classes. A start was made in 1892 with carpentry classes in a barn at Durrants Farm and art classes in the village school: a dozen years or so later sufficient funds were available for the technical school to have its own building.

A fine undertaking for a village—but that's the Northchurch spirit!

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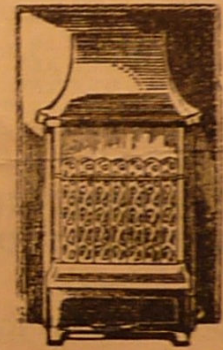
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