

# THE DIALECT OF OLD BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

"Oi most'n gen'ly alwis goo ter markit on Saradee."

No, that is not a new language, neither is it a small child's uncorrected spelling exercise. It is a fair sample of the most un-Basic English an old countryman on the Herts-Bucks border would have used many years ago. His great-grandson has not only dropped the accent but discarded such phrases as "I mostly generally always." To-day he would say, "I usually go to market on Saturday."

A rustic dialect "as broad as a wagon wheel," to quote an old local saying, is undoubtedly a social and business handicap nowadays, and few are sorry that it is rapidly dying out. Better education, wider travel and the radio are among influences that are ironing out the differences in speech that once made it possible to distinguish a Hertfordshire farmer from his Surrey contemporary. To-day there is little variety in the Home Counties, and it is only in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Somerset and other more distant counties where accents are still distinctive. They, too, may disappear in time.

But we are not only losing a quaint dialect. Already many homely local sayings have passed out of circulation, and, unfortunately, been replaced in some instances by Hollywood and Services slang. With the help of correspondents in many parts of West Herts, I have for some years collected old local words and sayings, and whilst no claim is made that their use was limited to our district—some were common to many parts of Herts, Bucks and Essex—all deserve a place in a local glossary.

## Birdies, Nesties, Beasties

*Beaver*, sometimes pronounced "bayver," is perhaps the best-known example. It means a mid-morning snack—"elevenses," we now call it. A few years ago the word was used by a witness at a local police court, and had to be explained.

*Hummock* meant a clumsy, incompetent fellow. For instance, an old gardener was complimented on his hedge-cutting and retorted, "Yes, 'tain't so bad. Squire won't let no 'ummock cut 'is 'edges." A similar word, *hommock*, denoted heavy boots—"Keep your 'ommocks off the onion bed."

Old people spoke of *birdies*, *nesties* and *beasties*, and even gave proper names the same improper termination. I can recollect an old townsman saying, "He used to work at Easties saw-mill." Like Queen Elizabeth, our rustics seldom sounded the aspirate. 'Ousen was a popular version of houses. "Housen be better than land to-night" was a saying when the weather was bad. "Himsel" was rendered 'issen.

Anything from a shop was *boughten*; anyone feigning illness had "a touch

of the lurk"; an unreliable person was "not much of a mucher." "Don't yorp so!" was an admonition for the talkative, and boasters were told to stop "craking on." *Stummocks* were untidy persons, and anything unpleasant was *unkid*. Strange, indescribable articles were *whin-whans*. *Tiggling along* meant playing about, and a *slocker* was a quiet walk—"We'm goin' for a slocker." "I'm in a 'otchall" meant that the speaker was in a hurry. A tramp was a *piker*—a name that may have originated in the turnpike days. Autumn was always referred to as "The Fall," an expression taken across the Atlantic by early settlers from the Home Counties and still used in the United States.

Here are some more local words:

*Clar*, grasp; *blizzy*, a fire; *pickid*, pointed; *tiggle*, tickle; *ockard*, awkward; *trou*, trough; *dagging*, thinning out; *twiethern* or *twitchell*, a narrow lane; *thumb-bit*, a sandwich; *elum*, elm; *frim*, succulent; *barn-taskers*, threshing men; *mizzled*, gone away quickly; *lither*, supple; *swab*, shake; *snook*, stolen; *frone*, frozen; *diddering*, shivering; *twipper*, tremble; *wilkt*, wilted; *bonser*, large; *mivvies*, marbles; *muggin*, fat; *runnups*, apples; *sauny*, fool; *sauning*, sauntering; *chimblling*, nibbling; *shuff*, shy; *jinks* or *dabbers*, pebbles; *godstones*, semi-transparent pebbles—probably so-called because they were formerly carried as charms.

## The Cowman's Monologue

A sovereign was a "thick 'un." " 'Arf a thick 'un " needs no explaining.

*Fuzz* and *fuzzen* are two variants of *furze* (or *gorse*) that have survived longer than most other local dialect words.

"Ask" was often rendered *ak*, *ax*, or *ast*, as in this remark, passed on by a Watford resident: "How-some-ever we must bide by it till sich time as we can ax your gaffer what it be."—meaning that nothing could be done until the gov'nor had been consulted.

Incidentally, just as Wiltshire men are still nicknamed "moonrakers," men of our own county were once known as "'Ertfordshire 'edge'ogs." Not a nice label, so we'll say no more about it!

The Dowager Lady Carbery, who spent her girlhood in Herts, records in her book, "Happy World," the following remarks of a cowman at milking time:

"Now, Prim-e-rose, stan' still an' let me flack (comb) yer tangles, yer 'air be all drabbled (messed) wi' shud (mud) an' as yaller as a kite's foot! I'll larn yer ter goo stolchin' (trampling about) in jack-pond . . . Ther' y'are, Prim-e-rose, Be off wi' yer! D'isy! . . . I'm blowed if she ain't bam-mocked (hurried) off be'ind me back! Coop, coop, liddle Cowslip, nip away a'ter mother. . . . W'let wot? She've bin an' took french leave, ev she? Darn 'er fer a snully-'orned noddy (crooked-horned fool). 'Ere, Jim boy, wher's yer wits a-dandering (wandering), drat yer? Clip th' gate tew a'ter them cows an' see it's kep' shut, or yer'll get a flea in yer y'ear!"

After the war it is hoped to publish a glossary of Hertfordshire dialect words and sayings. Further contributions or suggestions are invited.

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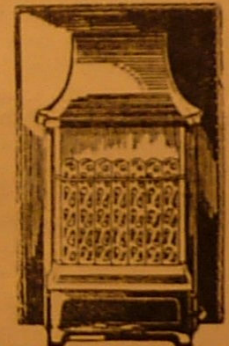
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