

# FROM BEORHAMSTEDE to BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

"I have often wondered why the historical articles in the *Review* appear under the pen-name of 'Beorcham,'" a parishioner recently remarked. "What does this name mean?"

The answer is simple—"Beorcham" is one of the earliest known ways of spelling the name of our town. It is almost the shortest version, too, although another ancient scribe once saved three more letters by reducing the name to "Bercam"—a most business-like alternative to such unwieldy spellings as "Great Berkehampstedde" and "Much Berchamestede." To-day we strike the happy medium with "Berkhamsted," leaving "Great Berkhamstead" to the diehards and that modern vulgarism "Berko" to the irreverent (Incidentally, "Berko" is the name of a character in the Viennese operetta "Countess Maritza").

Before delving further into the amazing variety of spellings or turning

Even in Victorian times Cobb was able to say that the railway company, Post Office, and all the parish authorities had adopted the economical spelling "Berkhamsted." The Urban Council did not fall into line until about ten years ago, and their former favourite, "Great Berkhamstead," is still used by the Gas and Water Companies. Efforts to standardise the spelling are still hampered by the fact that many non-residents, being more familiar with Hampstead than with Berkhamsted, perpetually address letters to "Berkhamstead."

The prefix "Great" was adopted centuries ago to distinguish our town from Little Berkhamstead, a small village about four miles from Hertford. The village necessarily retains the prefix "Little," and its inhabitants prefer the long spelling.

We have another namesake across the Atlantic—the town of Barkhamsted, Connecticut. Whether it was

## FIFTY DIFFERENT WAYS OF SPELLING BERKHAMSTED

|              |               |              |                 |               |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Beorhamstede | Bercamested   | Bercamstede  | Barkhamstede    | Berkemsted    |
| Berghamstye  | Bercamestede  | Berkamsted   | Barkhamstead    | Barhamsted    |
| Berghamstedt | Berchamestede | Berkhamsted  | Barkamsted      | Barkhamsteed  |
| Beorcham     | Berkamestude  | Berkhamstede | Barkhamstedde   | Barkhamsted   |
| Berchamstede | Berkamested   | Barkhemsted  | Barkehampstedde | Bercomsted    |
| Berkhamstede | Bekhemestede  | Berkhamstede | Berkehampstedde | Bercomsted    |
| Berkhamsted  | Bercam        | Barcanstede  | Berkhamstedde   | Berkamstead   |
| Berchamstede | Bercham       | Barkhamsted  | Berkhamstedde   | Berkhempsted  |
| Berkhamsted  | Berchamstede  | Barkhamsted  | Berkehampsted   | Berkhempstead |
| Berchamsted  | Berkhamsted   | Berkhamsted  | Berkehampstede  | Berkhamptead  |

to the tricky question of pronunciation, let us consider the meaning of the name.

Hampstead (or Hampstead) figures in many place-names, and means the "home-place" or homestead. "Berk" raises a problem, however. It may signify a natural hill, in which case Berkhamsted means "the town among the hills." But it is more generally supposed that "Berk" signifies an artificial tumulus or mound of the type thrown up for defence—perhaps a very early fortification on the site of the Castle. The authors of Berkhamsted Pageant left no doubt as to the theory they favoured when the following lines were written:

So both to church and castle  
The birth and growth we trace  
Of Berkhamsted, whose name is read  
The "Fortified-Home-Place."

The earliest known spelling, "Beorhamstede," heads a list of fifty versions in the "History of Berkhamsted," written some 80 years ago by a former rector, the Rev J. W. Cobb. He made no claim that the list was complete; indeed, the present writer has found several spellings not quoted by Cobb. An extra letter or two did not matter very much to the scribes of old—Shakespeare varied the spelling of his own name with lofty disdain for standardisation. Cobb's fifty varieties, given on this page in chronological order, could be greatly extended by including the various prefixes—Great, Greate, Much and Muche,—not to mention "Barkhamsted Magna," a version which appears on an 18th century tapestry map at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

founded by settlers from our neighbourhood is open to question, for sometimes early colonists haphazardly "lifted" names from old English maps. But one likes to believe that there is some definite link between Berkhamsted, Old England, and Barkhamsted, New England. It is significant that the capital of Connecticut is the busy town of Hartford. (Over the Canadian border, in Quebec, are two places named Dudswell and Tring).

The Transatlantic spellings "Barkhamsted" and "Hartford" leave little doubt as to the pronunciation in vogue in the 17th and 18th centuries. But that is not to say that the "ar" sound was used in very early times. Originally it was probably something between "aw" and "ur" ("Hurtford" is an authentic 13th century spelling; earlier it was "Heortforde.") The "ar" sound came at a much later date, and is still fashionable in Derby, Berkeley, Berkshire, Hertford, clerk, and many other similar names and words. On the other hand, few people call Berkhamsted "Barkhamsted"; it is utterly inconsistent to regard this pronunciation as affected if one says "clark," "Hartford" and "Darby."

No hard and fast rule can be given. But, just to demolish the modern view that it is "cheap and nasty" to say "clurk," "Hurtford" and "Durby," let me conclude by quoting the words of the 17th century historian Chauncy: "Doubtless it (our county) was merely called Hartford for Hertford by reason of the broad dialect and ill-speaking of the vulgar sort of people."

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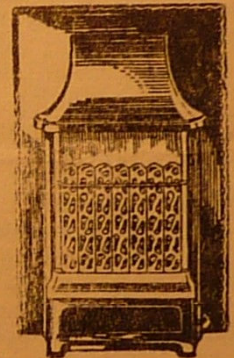
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