

AS OTHERS SEE BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

One of the hardest things in the world is "to see ourselves as others see us." And that is true not only of individuals but of communities. Civic pride instinctively leads one to expect visitors to say kind things about the scenic beauty of the district and, perhaps, the inhabitants' hospitality.

But sometimes there are rude awakenings. An evacuee tells fellow passengers in the train that Berkhamsted is "a poky little place"; someone else finds the people "standoffish"; a third critic describes the town in jaundiced terms that would find no place in an official guide book!

Well, there's a lot to be said for candour. We are not so intolerant as an earlier generation of Berkhamstedians, who, in 1662, issued this stern warning from the Court House: "Let none deride or evil do or speak against the Corporation, the Bailiff, or any of the Capital Burgesses." And so, because it is always valuable to know what visitors really think of Berkhamsted, here is a symposium of comments made by writers from the 18th century to the present day.

A Scotsman in Exile

Praise from a Scotsman is praise indeed. Let us start with the opinion of Francis Farquharson, brother of Rachael Farquharson, the subject of a mural tablet in St. Catherine's Chapel. Francis was a most unfortunate fellow; he was captured at Culloden in 1746, tried for high treason, and sentenced to death. But, when on the way to the gallows, he was reprieved on condition that he lived in England and did not travel more than ten miles from his place of residence. Farquharson made his home at Berkhamsted, and this is what he said about the town and its people in a letter dated 1750: "After I came into this cuntry I may say I had some enjoyment of life. The cuntry is itself pleasant, and I met some very hospitable and civil people in it." This exiled Scotsman certainly had good friends in Berkhamsted; leading residents, petitioned the king to secure his complete liberty.

Earlier in the 18th century, Leland, the antiquary, visited Berkhamsted and found it "one of the best markette townes in Hertfordshire" with "a large strete metely well builded" and "very faire meadowes" in the valley. Stukeley was less complimentary when he wrote his "Itinerary" (1776) and described Berkhamsted as a town "stretching along the south side of the swamp." Twenty-three years later Lipscombe found "a shabby, decayed market," but he admitted that there were "genteel inhabitants, and splendid assemblies."

Similar comments were made by the writer of "The Circuit of London," published 140 years ago. "Berkhamsted," it is stated, "is inhabited by many respectable families, and has some good inns . . . The buildings are irregular, some handsomely constructed with brick, others with thatch,

etc." Crosby's "Gazetteer," published in 1807, conceded that Berkhamsted was "a large market town with a handsome street of considerable breadth and length."

In the early part of the 19th century a celebrated writer on political and agricultural topics was in the neighbourhood. He was William Cobbett, who, in "Rural Rides" asks, "What that man ever invented, under the name of pleasure grounds, can equal these fields in Hertfordshire? The labourers' dwellings are good . . . I never saw the country children better clad, or look cleaner and fatter than they look here."

Cruikshank's Complaint

So far, so good. But in more modern times visitors have been less complimentary. A long defunct London evening newspaper, *The Echo*, tells us that George Cruikshank, the Victorian black and white artist, was a frequent visitor to Berkhamsted. A resident once asked him what he thought of the town. The reply was Johnsonian in manner, if not in matter. "Sir, there are far too many public-houses here!" Cruikshank expostulated. The resident gently pointed out that Berkhamsted, being on a main highway, was bound to provide refreshment for travellers; but Cruikshank was not appeased. It should be added that at that time Berkhamsted, although only half its present size, had many more inns and public houses than it possesses to-day.

A more recent critic was the late Mr. C. H. B. Quennell, who, in "The History of Everyday Things in England," says "Berkhamsted was vulgarised in the 19th century; there have been hideous suburban developments, and multiple shops spoil the High Street." Mr. H. J. Massingham, one of our best contemporary writers on country topics, is even more outspoken. Describing a tour through West Herts, he says, "I should hardly have known that each of these towns had a name at all." He found "an almost continuous blotch . . . partly suburban, partly Victorian, without a single redeeming feature among the lot."

So there! Finally, let us put ourselves at the tender mercies of Professor Abercrombie, whose Greater London Plan was published recently. He describes Berkhamsted as "an old established valley town of some character . . . Shopping facilities are reasonably good . . . In the valley there is a core of rather congested old building surrounded by a fairly extensive area of open development . . . The town's surroundings are most attractive—woods, parks, and commons, and a general setting of unspoiled countryside . . . Its development [for industry] would completely destroy the character of a countryside which is one of London's recreational lungs."

No sentiment from the professor—but he has some good words for us!

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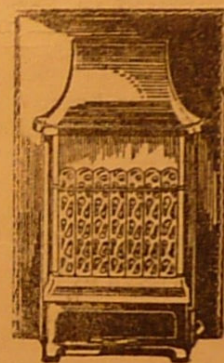
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