

TWO OTHER BERKHAMSTEDS

By "BEORCHAM"

"East is East and West is West"—and in Hertfordshire, owing to poor cross-county communications, the twain very seldom meet. For instance, probably not one Berkhamstedian in twenty has ever been to the county town; similarly, very few Hertford residents have visited Berkhamsted.

How few of us, then, are acquainted with Little Berkhamsted, our out-of-the-way namesake in East Herts? This hilltop village off the Hertford-Hatfield road is two miles from the nearest railway station, and when I was there some time ago it had only two buses a day.

Little Berkhamsted certainly lives up to its prefix. Yet the 400 or so inhabitants have all the amenities of a good English village—church, parish hall, school, inn, smithy, general store, garage. And history? Little Berkhamstedians will tell you with pride that their village is mentioned in Domesday Book, and that it was there where William the Conqueror was offered the crown, not at Great Berkhamsted.

There is at least one good argument to support their claim, but the villagers are content to leave the dispute to historians. They are far more concerned about the misunderstandings which occur when their village is mistaken for its West Herts namesake. A year or so ago they had to endure gibes about a much-publicised water shortage that existed not in their village, but in a town 17 miles away. And they have lost count of the erring travellers who stop at the village crossroads and blandly ask to be directed to the Town Hall or, perhaps, to Ashridge and Potten End.

Motorists are usually in such a huff on learning that they are miles off their course that they hurry away without giving Little Berkhamsted a second glance. But it is well worth a visit, and I spent an interesting hour trudging the lanes and viewing the church.

Famous Hymn Writer

St. Andrew's Church, with a homely-looking wooden belfry and spire, is a fairly modern building on the site of a much older church. A list of rectors dates back to 1237—only a few years after Robert de Tuardo was instituted rector of St. Peter's. Almost in the shadow of St. Andrew's Church was born that great churchman of the 17th century, Bishop Ken, author of such fine hymns as "Awake, my soul, and with the sun" and "Glory to thee my God, this night."

Opposite the church is a smithy old in years but young enough in ideas to advertise horse-shoes as presents!

No visitor to "Little Berks," as it is nicknamed, is likely to miss what looks like a highly ornamental factory chimney. Derelict for many years, it has been a landmark ever since John Stratton built it as an observatory in 1789. Legend has it that a pirate used the building to spy on shipping in the

Thames Estuary! Whether the Estuary is visible from the summit I cannot say; there are certainly wide views from ground level.

Little Berkhamsted is not our only namesake. Across the Atlantic, only a few miles from the Connecticut state capital of Hartford, is a little township named Barkhamsted—a spelling which perpetuates the 18th century pronunciation. Much as one would like to claim a direct link between the English and American Berkhamsteds, there is no evidence that Barkhamsted, New England, was founded by settlers from Berkhamsted, Old England.

The founders' names tell us that they were of English origin, however. In 1779, Pelatiah Allyn and Stephen Chub built their shacks in a beautiful country of hills, lakes and forests—a region previously known only to the Red Indians, who held their war councils under an oak tree with a further claim to fame. In the 19th century it was known as "John Brown's tree," in memory of the famous Abolitionist whose "soul goes marching on." John Brown was a son of early Connecticut settlers, and he attended a school almost in the shade of the Red Indians' oak at Barkhamsted.

The "Sabbath Day House"

Shipbuilders from New Haven went to this richly-timbered district for masts and other ship timber. At one time forty saw-mills were operating in the valleys of Barkhamsted. And in those early days life was not without thrills and dangers: wolves, bears, panthers and catamounts were unwelcome intruders in hard winters.

Barkhamsted's founders were of old Puritan stock, and within five years of carving a settlement out of the forest they built a church, later adding a "Sabbath Day House" to which members of the congregation who had walked or ridden long distances could retire between morning and afternoon services. Hot coals were supplied to refuel the foot stoves carried by the womenfolk in winter.

According to the last information received (not, unfortunately, very recent) a large part of the main valley has been inundated to form a reservoir for the Hartford Water Board. But Barkhamsted is still "on the map," and its forests are eagerly visited by campers and other holiday-makers. New Yorkers know Barkhamsted well, and love to follow ancient Indian trails up a rocky ravine, past steep cliffs and through dense laurel and timber to Ragged Mountain, a famous local viewpoint. With thorough-going American efficiency, open fireplaces have been provided and special clearings made for camp sites.

After the war, when Transatlantic flights figure in week-end excursions, perhaps the Urban Council will sponsor goodwill visits to our "opposite numbers" in Connecticut!