

SPORT IN BYGONE BERKHAMSTED—I

By "BEORCHAM"

The "human touch" is so often lacking in local history books that it is hardly surprising very few references are made to the sports and pastimes of our ancestors. Everyone knows that cricket was popular long enough ago for the players to wear top hats, that football was once played by fiercely-bewhiskered Victorians in tight-fitting breeches, that a form of tennis was enjoyed centuries ago. Wasn't Henry VIII a keen tennis player?

But how many people realise how deeply rooted is the English sporting tradition? Hundreds of years ago, when Berkhamsted was a tiny town almost cut off from the outside world, organised games were enjoyed by local men and boys. It is possible to give the names of some of Berkhamsted's football "stars" way back in 1685! And the two-day cricket match on Berkhamsted Common between married and single men of the town was so old an institution, even at the beginning of the 19th century, that no one could say when it originated. As far back as the 13th century a game with bat and balls was so popular that it interfered with archery practice and was made illegal.

Plenty of variety

The variety of sports and pastimes enjoyed by our ancestors is almost bewildering. No one is sorry that Berkhamstedians no longer indulge in bull-baiting and cockfighting, two "sports" which once had a wide following. But plenty of other recreations were available, most of them calling for considerable physical exertion and skill, and not a few for what we now call "team spirit." An admirable rhymed catalogue of bygone sports appears in a book published at Dunstable many years ago:

And they dare chalenge, for to throw the sledge,

To jumpe, or leape over ditch or hedge ;
To wrestle, play at foote-ball, or to runne,
To pitch the barre, or to shote of a gunne.
To play at loggets, nine-holes, or ten pinnes,
To try it out at foote-ball by the shinnes,
At tick, tacke, seize nobby, man and ruffe,
At hot cockles, leap frogge, or blindman's huffe ;

At drink the halper pottes, or deal at the whole canne,

To play at chesse, or pue and inke horne ;
To dance the morris, play at barley broke,
At all exploits a man can think or speak ;
At shove groat, venterpoynte or cross and pile,

At beshrew him that's last at any style ;
At leaping o'er a Christmas bonfire,
Or at the drawing dame out of the myer ;
At shoote cocke, gregory, stoole-ball, and what not ;

Pick poynte, toppe and scourge, to make him hotte.

"Drawing dame out of the myer" sounds interesting—and almost certainly less painful than "foote-ball by the shinnes." But what on earth was "drinking the halper pottes"? Was it a sport? It sounds more like refreshment for energetic sportsmen who had made themselves "hotte."

Incidentally, the "Sunday sports" controversy, so often revived, is no

new thing. Some 200 years ago William Ellis, a Little Gaddesden farmer-author, wrote: "I am sorry I have reason to say that by an ill custom of some parts of our county of Hertfordshire, we can hardly keep our servants at home on the Sabbath Day, because of the bad example of others, who go shooting of birds, or play at bandy-wicket, pitch and chuck, Hooper's-hide, pat-ball, etc."

The Bowmen of Berkhamsted

No survey of ancient sports would be complete without mention of archery, although originally it was purely a military exercise. It was by shooting at the butts that our ancestors were trained for war—and no student of history needs to be reminded that "the myghte of the realme of Englonde stode upon archeres" in the time of the Edwards and Henrys, when Berkhamsted Castle was at the height of its fame.

As Cobb tells us in his "History of Berkhamsted," every parish was compelled to erect butts for archery practice; and we know where the bowmen of Berkhamsted attained the skill that made them "picked men" when the Black Prince set off from Berkhamsted Castle for Crecy. The practice butts disappeared long ago, but we still speak of Butts Meadow, the open space left to the parish by an unknown donor and formerly known as the Buttricke, the Buttfield, or simply The Butts.

Men were compelled by law to practise archery on Sundays and holy days, and in Edward IV's reign were liable to a fine of a halfpenny if they shirked this early form of Home Guard service. In the reign of Elizabeth, when firearms were in fairly general use, there were repeated controversies as to the need for continuing archery practice. One writer was convinced that "there is no doubt but archers with their volleys of arrowes would wound, kill and hurt above an hundred men and horses for every one so to be done by the shot."

By that time, however, archery was regarded more and more as a sport. We can be sure that Berkhamstedians who still practised regularly at the butts in 1716 knew very well that they would never be called upon to defend England with bows and arrows.

Archery was revived in Victorian days, but no longer as a democratic pastime. The new devotees called themselves "toxophilites," dressed in green Robin Hood outfits, and excluded all but "county" families. An invitation to attend the annual archery meeting in the Castle grounds meant that one had been admitted to the very best circles. One of the most prominent of Berkhamsted's toxophilites was Mr. William Longman, of the famous publishing house, who resided at Ashlyns.

(To be continued)