

SPORT IN BYGONE BERKHAMSTED—II

By "BEORCHAM"

Hunting—oldest of all sports—is also the most controversial. But these articles deal with the subject from an historical standpoint only, and the writer hopes to be spared the heated correspondence which usually ensues whenever blood sports are mentioned.

No one can say when hunting became a sport instead of a larder necessity. Often it was both. But men hunted with hounds before the Norman Conquest, and the dense forest land of the Chilterns was indeed a "happy hunting ground."

When Berkhamsted Castle was in its prime, hunting was a favourite pastime of its royal residents. Venison and wild boar figured regularly on the Castle menu! And the Royal Family enjoyed the chase at Berkhamsted long after the Castle was in ruin. An item in the Privy Purse Expenses of 1530 suggests that Henry VIII hunted deer during his visit to Ashridge Monastery, for payment of 7s. 6d. was made to "the keeper of Berkhamstede parke," and a similar amount to a servant "for bringing of a bucke to the Kinge at Ashridge."

Another royal hunter in Berkhamsted Park was Prince Charles (afterwards Charles I), who spent a day with the Murray family at Berkhamsted Place in 1616. In the afternoon, states a vestry document, "his highness hunted and killed a fat buck, which he gave to . . . townsmen that attended him."

Out with the Staghounds

Charles II granted a special warrant to the Earl of Bridgewater to preserve the game in Ashridge Park:

Whereas we are informed that our game of hare, pheasant, partridge, heron, and other wilde fowle about Ashridge . . . is much destroyed by divers disorderly persons with greyhounds, mongrells, setting dogges, guns, trammells, tunnells, netts, and other engines, contrary to the statutes of this our realme. For the better preservation hereof, and that our game may be the better preserved for our sport and recreation, at such times as we shall resort unto those parts: We do hereby will and command . . . that no person doe hereafter use any of the said unlawfull meanes . . . to hurt, or kill, our said game . . . within ten miles compasse of the said Ashridge . . .

Later, when it was customary for landowners to keep a few hounds for hunting deer, fox and hare, Lord Brownlow established a pack of six couples of beagles at Ashridge. That was in 1852. Two years later he bought harriers from the Rev. Jack Russell, and with the new pack came huntsman Richard Rawle, who had whipped in with his father to the famous sporting parson who hunted his own hounds in Devonshire. When ill health caused Lord Brownlow to give up his pack, the hounds were removed to kennels on Berkhamsted Common, and grand sport was provided for visitors to Ashridge and for farmers and hard-riding sportsmen in the Vale of Aylesbury. In 1867 Richard Rawle purchased Sir Clifford Constable's staghounds, and his pack rivalled in fame the only other staghound pack in Hertfordshire, the Enfield Chase. Some famous runs were made under the expert huntsman-

ship of Richard Rawle and his son and successor, Jack Rawle. The Berkhamsted Staghounds (or Buckhounds) survived until the 1914-18 war.

The Cockfighting Age

Hertfordshire—particularly our corner of the county—was once notorious for cockfighting. The district around Marsworth remained a stronghold of this "sport" long after it was made illegal, and tradition has it that this "No Man's Land" was chosen because the promoters of cockfights could easily dodge from Herts to Bucks, or *vice versa*, if pursued by the police. Whether the police were powerless to continue the chase beyond the confines of their own county is highly questionable!

However, in the bad old days almost every common was the scene of cockfights on Sundays, and many an old inn had its main. Perhaps the long-forgotten 16th century "Cokke Inn" at Berkhamsted derived its name from the "sport". At St. Albans—a city once notorious for bull-baiting as well as cockfighting—there is still an historic inn with the tell-tale name "The Fighting Cocks".

Sport that Started an Industry

Towards the end of the 18th century, a new sport began to rival hunting in the affections of well-to-do folk—game shooting. Good results were gained with quaint sporting guns that are now museum pieces. In January, 1822, a royal party at Ashridge bagged 1,200 head in three days, the guns including the Duke of York, Duke of Wellington, Marquis of Londonderry, and Lord Verulam, with their host, the Earl of Bridgewater. The Duke of Wellington "brought down everything" (to quote a contemporary report) with one of the first double-barrelled guns ever made. Incidentally, game shooting paved the way for the local industry of pheasant-rearing.

Bulbourne Trout

What of angling? When Cicely, Duchess of York, ordered "two dishes of fresh fishe" on "fastinge dayes" at Berkhamsted Castle, the fish was almost certainly carp or some other coarse fish from the well-stocked moats. Or the Duchess may have enjoyed tasty trout from the Bulbourne. Fifty years ago there were still a few trout in that now dried-up stream; a fine specimen caught at Bourne End in the 'eighties is preserved at Berkhamsted School Museum. But even in its heyday the Bulbourne was a poor rival to the Gade, Hertfordshire's finest trout stream. Cardinal Wolsey, whose country seat was Moor Park, Rickmansworth, often fished in the Gade; 400 years afterwards the late Mr. Neville Chamberlain enjoyed an occasional day's fly-fishing at Water End.

Angling probably has as many devotees in this district as ever before. The canal still provides good sport, and Tring reservoirs have yielded some of Britain's largest freshwater fish.

(To be continued).