

SPORT IN BYGONE BERKHAMSTED—III

By "BEORCHAM"

In one form or another cricket has been played for centuries. Was not Oliver Cromwell a noted cricketer before he turned to politics and war? In Berkhamsted, as stated in the first article of this series, it is known that an annual two-day match between married and single men was an ancient institution even at the beginning of the 19th century. A poster of 1819 naïvely calls it "cricketing."

Those old-time matches were played on Berkhamsted Common, the players often sweltering in heavy suits and top hats. Cricket was merely part of a holiday fair with many other attractions. Boundary hits sometimes resulted in the breaking of crockery or an irate shout from an injured fortune-teller, for the pitch was surrounded by booths and sideshows. In a dull spell spectators could go for donkey rides or climb greasy poles for legs of mutton! In early Victorian times the married *versus* single match was perpetuated by the Mechanics' Institute, the venue then being the Castle grounds.

Local references to cricket are few before the 1880s, but subsequently there is an overwhelming mass of information. Many pages would be needed to do justice to notable matches of modern times and to the local sportsmen who on occasion have had the honour of entertaining the M.C.C. and famous Empire Elevens.

In passing, it is worth recalling that some of the finest cricket bats are made of willow grown at Boxmoor. The trees are sold as they stand, for the right time to cut them is known only by experts. The sale of willow trees has long been a source of revenue to the Boxmoor Trustees. Last year, when the usual bat-makers were on war work, it was reported that the willow had been acquired for Australia.

Footballers of 1685

Turning to football, we find that the game was played locally in the 17th century, for the Sessions Rolls record an unexpected association between football and the Monmouth Rebellion. In 1685 information was given by Thomas Wells that William Norman and Joseph Mills, with two other Berkhamsted men, "came over to him and asked him to play at football, but that was not the business; 'twas to goe and be 'listed for the Duke of Monmouth." The crafty footballers were bound over, some in £50, others in £100.

Football was not played in Berkhamsted as a properly organised game between recognised teams until the middle of the 19th century; by 1890 the town boasted a team worthy of being listed among Hertfordshire's best. To this scanty information may be added the recollections of an old boy of Berkhamsted School, who says that in 1880 senior boys played soccer with various Hertfordshire teams, including Watford Rovers, the amateur ancestors of the present pro-

fessional club. They played with six forwards (two centres), and only two half-backs—and the game "was rough, but not foul."

By the way, the old game known as trap-and-ball once had a big following in Berkhamsted, and so had quoits, which was still played on a pitch behind the Goat Inn until a few years ago.

Nearly 60 Years of Golf

Golf does not present so many difficulties to the local historian as cricket and football. The "royal and ancient" game was unknown in Berkhamsted until the 1880's, when Mr. G. H. Gowring, who had developed a passion for golf at Eastbourne, joined the staff of Berkhamsted School. A walk over the springy turf of Berkhamsted Common was enough to put ideas into his head, and he promptly obtained from Earl Brownlow permission to clear sufficient gorse to make a 9-hole course.

It was not a grand affair, but adequate for Gowring and his colleagues at the School. By 1890 there were sufficient members to warrant forming a club, and Earl Brownlow showed practical interest by confirming the permission he had already given and agreeing to a nominal rent of 10s. a year. He also presented members with a small piece of land on the edge of the Common as a site for the club house.

An objection to the Common course in pre-motoring days was its distance from the town. Another 9-hole course was laid out in Berkhamsted Park, between the Castle and the Common, with a hut for members in the Castle grounds. But the new course was disliked, and soon it was abandoned altogether. The hut in the Castle grounds was transferred to the Common, serving first as a club house and then as a workshop for the professional and caddy master.

Extensions and improvements to the original course on Berkhamsted Common were largely the work of the late Mr. C. J. Gilbert, whose great opportunity came some forty years ago when an extensive gorse fire paved the way for his scheme for making an 18-hole course entirely on the Common. His plans proved so successful that they were copied in many other parts of the country. Besides introducing notable innovations in golf course design, he was largely responsible for Berkhamsted Golf Club being among the first to form an artisans' section.

In its early days the Golf Club had to contend with much criticism, mainly on the score that there had been an interference with ancient but admittedly vague common rights. Particularly was this so in 1923, when the Golf Club purchased the freehold of 600 acres of Berkhamsted Common from the Ashridge Trustees; but fears then expressed concerning the possible effect of this transaction upon the public's enjoyment of the Common have proved groundless.