THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOLS—II

By "BEORCHAM"

It may have been thought that less than justice was done to Berkhamsted School in the first article of this series, for it dealt mainly with the long period of mismanagement which made the School a mockery of Dean Incent's good intentions.

As previously explained, most of the trouble arose from the fact that the masters and ushers were sole trustees of the School property. Their word was law, and for generations the townspeople's protests failed to make neglectful or absentee masters mend their ways.

Sooner or later someone was bound to overstep the mark. Thomas Dupré, appointed headmaster in 1803, was not merely content to reside in Lincolnshire the whole time : he had the effrontery to appoint as usher an old friend who was too infirm even to set foot in the town ! Incredible as it seems, the absentee "head" could not be compelled to come to Berkhamsted until 1832, and then he complained that he was a victim of "party spirit." For a further eight years he evaded his duties, but in the meantime Mr. Augustus Smith campaigned for a complete overhaul of the School's affairs, and in 1841 the management of the estates was vested in a board of governors. Even then Dupré could only be removed from office by granting him a pension of £250 a year for life.

A Century Old School Report

The first headmaster appointed under the new scheme was the Rev. E. J. Wilcocks, and some time ago the writer was shown a faded school report in his elegant handwriting. The report was written on a card about the size of a railway season ticket, and this is what Mr. Wilcocks said about a boy in the "second class" :

Proficiency : By no means commensurate with abilities.

General conduct : Usually very satisfactory, but incautious lately.

Attendance : Regular.

Familiar words ! A footnote states : "The pupils will reassemble on August 2"—a curious date to start the winter term, judging from current practice. Incidentally, there were but ten boys in the "second class."

The number of scholars gradually increased, but not until Dr. Bartrum's energetic administration (1864-87) was Dean Incent's dream of 144 boys realised. Numbers increased from 166 to 350 during Dr. Fry's 23 years as headmaster, a period marked by many additions to the School buildings. More recent history is too well-known to call for comment, but in passing it may be recorded that Mr. C. M. Cox, whose interest in the subject is matched by his unique opportunity for research, intends on his retirement to prepare for publication a complete history of the School.

Second in seniority to the Grammar School is Thomas Bourne's Charity School, no longer a separate entity, it is true, but still benefiting the young people of Berkhamsted in a manner that would assuredly have been approved by the founder, who died 218 years ago. Thomas Bourne's will, dated 1728, made provision for a charity school for 20 boys and 10 girls. Clothing for the scholars was to be provided : parents were to receive an allowance of 1*s.* or 1*s.* 6*d.* a week (doubtless as compensation for the loss of wages at a time when children were sent out to work at a very early age) ; sums were to be set aside for apprenticing boys on leaving school. In addition, a small amount was earmarked for distribution among the poor on December 16, the donor's birthday.

The Three R's

Several years elapsed between the death of Thomas Bourne (whose links with Berkhamsted appear to have been slender indeed) and the fulfilment of his plans ; but eventually a school was built in High-street—the quaint old building now converted into a branch of the National Provincial Bank.

In early times great pains were taken to observe the letter as well as the spirit of the trust. The founder had not stipulated the teaching of subjects other than reading, writing and arithmetic, and the trustees were perturbed when it was suggested that the children should be taught to sing psalms. Thomas Bourne had not made provision for that ! After much head-shaking the trustees decided that the schoolmaster was not bound to keep to the "three R's." "We do think it very decent and proper for him to instruct the children in singing psalms, as is usually taught in other charity schools," the trustees commented.

Not until 1761 were arrangements made for teaching the girls to write, and then only in their last year at school. Much attention was paid to domestic subjects, however, and old records mention the purchase of a spinning wheel and flax to teach the girls spinning.

Starting School at 7 a.m.

Until 1871 the Bourne School was administered in fairly strict conformity with the founder's directions, and the scholars still wore uniforms of early 18th century design—blue coats, corduroy breeches, coloured stockings, low shoes and blue caps with red tassels for the boys ; and blue cloth dresses and cloaks, white aprons and straw bonnets for the girls. They started school at 7 a.m. in summer and an hour later in winter.

As with many other charity schools, the Bourne School was reorganised soon after the Education Act of 1871. Nine years later a new scheme for administering the charity came into operation, and the school ceased to have a separate existence. The most important departure was the creation of scholarships, worth £5 per annum, for a limited number of boys and girls attending Berkhamsted and Potten End Church Schools.

(To be continued).