

THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOLS—III

By "BEORCHAM"

It is surprising how many people regard small private schools, usually conducted in the teachers' own homes, as fairly modern innovations. The idea is hundreds of years old, and when the town's "established" educational facilities were both meagre and mis-managed, parents had good reason to welcome private enterprise.

A complaint made in 1660 to the effect that parents had to bring "strangers" to the town to teach their children suggests that even then there was some sort of "opposition" to the Grammar School, but we have to wait until the 1730's for authentic information concerning a private school in Berkhamsted. The information is supplied by no less a person than William Cowper, the poet, and one concludes that the little school he attended was of a very high standing to receive the support of such a discerning educationalist as his father, Dr. John Cowper.

Five "Academies"

By 1824 there were no fewer than five "academies" in Berkhamsted, three for boys and two for girls. A contemporary writer tells us that one of the private schools, conducted by Mr. George Atkins, "conferred a great blessing upon the children of mechanics and the better class of labourers." About the same time, a highly successful school for girls was started by Mrs. Cutforth, a widow, who had the misfortune to marry the notorious John Tawell. To the amazement and disgust of fellow Berkhamstedians, he was found guilty of murder and hanged at Aylesbury almost exactly 100 years ago.

Proprietors of private schools were no doubt apprehensive when the Grammar School was reorganised and the parochial elementary schools established, but there is no evidence that a dearth of scholars forced anyone out of business. At least one private school, it is interesting to learn, charged higher fees than the Grammar School.

Plaiting Schools

Unfortunately, another type of private school, peculiar to this part of the country, came into prominence about a century ago. Straw-plaiting was a profitable cottage industry, and so-called "plaiting schools" were set up in Berkhamsted and neighbouring towns and villages. They must have been among the earliest technical schools in the country! No subject other than straw-plaiting was taught; the teacher herself was usually illiterate.

Henry Nash, who presents a fascinating word picture of early Victorian Berkhamsted in his "Reminiscences" (published in 1890), tells us that "as soon as a child was able to walk, he or she was sent to one of the schools (of which there were many) for the purpose of learning the art of straw-plaiting. It was not an uncommon thing to see 20 or 30 children packed into a small room which, on sanitary principles, was not equal to half the number; and in this foul atmosphere they were kept for six hours per day, and as a rule were required to perform a fixed amount of

work. From the older children this was rigidly exacted by the mistress who presided over them. These children were often like sickly hothouse plants, and in some instances imbibed the seeds of permanent disease. The parents, however, were unconscious of the injury they were inflicting upon their offspring. . . With such a training of the rising generation, some idea may be formed of the general standard of intelligence among the poorer classes."

In another passage, Henry Nash says: "Education was of secondary importance; there was a great dread in some minds lest the poor should be taught too much and thereby become too independent. So far as Berkhamsted was concerned, there was not much fear of this, Bourne's School being the only available one for the poor, and this was limited to 30 children. Some parents who availed themselves of its advantages had a keener eye to the clothes and the weekly allowance than to the book learning."

Henry Nash was well qualified to write on this subject, for, with the exception of Augustus Smith, he did more than anyone else to improve Berkhamsted's educational facilities in the 19th century. He played an outstanding part in the foundation of the School for Girls in 1888, and this year we have another cause for remembering him as one of the founders of the Berkhamsted Institute, which has lately celebrated its centenary.

The First Evening Classes

By 1845 the Grammar School had been successfully reorganised, elementary schools were soundly established, the Bourne School was still a separate foundation, and Sunday Schools had been started. But for adults there was precious little food for thought. Indeed, the very idea of adult education was ridiculed by a large section of the community, and it needed courage and great enterprise to embark upon a scheme that would provide serious-minded men and women with evening classes, lectures, a library and reading room. Happily, those qualities were not lacking in Henry Nash and some of his contemporaries. Fired with enthusiasm by the success of Mechanics' Institutes in other towns—the name "Mechanics" was already a misnomer, as the Institutes catered for everybody—the founders of the Berkhamsted Institute overcame prejudice and organised evening classes as early as 1847. In due course the subjects ranged from woodwork and chemistry to elocution, English and shorthand. Incidentally, the shorthand class was conducted by Mr. David Osborn, a personal friend of Sir Isaac Pitman. Thanks to the Institute, Berkhamsted had evening classes long before most country towns.

In turning to evening classes, the years have been bridged too quickly to deal with the early days of the Church and Council Schools; but these foundations, now well over 100 years old, will be the subject of the next article in this series.