

# THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOLS—IV

By "BEORCHAM"

Although best remembered as "the man who saved Berkhamsted Common," Augustus Smith has other and no less important claims to local fame.

An earlier article told how this great Victorian led the campaign which rescued the Grammar School from neglect and mismanagement more than a century ago. Less well known is the fact that he was the first Berkhamstedian to champion the cause of elementary education at a time when hundreds of poor children had no opportunity of attending school. The Bourne Charity School, the only elementary school in Berkhamsted until 1834, had places for but 20 boys and 10 girls.

## Quick Work

It was at a vestry meeting on March 25, 1833, when Augustus Smith secured unanimous support for a resolution that "a good parish school be established for teaching boys and girls reading, writing and arithmetic, and useful work." Prompt action was taken, for within fifteen months the school was built and formally opened. It stands to this day at the corner of Park View-road, on land known as "Salter's Charity" and formerly occupied by a tumbledown straw-thatched workhouse.

Fired with enthusiasm by the success of this venture, the Rector, churchwardens and parishioners lost no time in introducing Church of England Schools to Berkhamsted. Schools for boys and girls were opened behind the Court House; later, infants' schools were built at Gossoms End and Chapel-street; and Potten End—then in the parish of St. Peter's—was given a "mixed" school. All of these ventures, as well as the Church school at Northchurch, benefited substantially from the generosity of the Countess of Bridgewater, who not only gave land for the erection of suitable buildings but provided a handsome endowment.

## Half-Timers!

It is important to remember that both Church and Board schools were started many years before compulsory education was introduced. (Incidentally the famous Education Act of 1870 did not make education compulsory, but only gave local authorities the right to make it compulsory if they so pleased.)

In the circumstances it was not surprising that attendance figures were unsatisfactory. We have it on the authority of Henry Nash, that at one time not more than one-third of the children on the Board School registers attended regularly, and that many never went to school at all.

Conditions were no better at the Church schools. In one of the earliest issues of the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine (1874) the Rector complained that "the teachers have no greater difficulty to contend with than that of irregular attendance, and especially bad is the very common practice of sending the children for half a day only."

The report of a prizegiving ceremony in 1875 shows that boys attended school more regularly than girls, the

latter doubtless being required to stay at home and look after younger brothers and sisters in an age that was noted for large families. Prizes were awarded for good attendance, and in the boys' department the fifteen prizewinners put in between 413 and 383 attendances—a most satisfactory record. But whereas the "top" girl attended school 417 times, the fifteenth girl on the list could claim but 204 attendances. Nevertheless, she won a prize!

Another Parish Magazine article emphasized that the Government grant depended upon local subscriptions, as "it is one of the rules that the grant shall not exceed the aggregate amount of voluntary subscriptions and the school pence." The "school pence" is a reference to the nominal fee parents had to pay for their children's education. The Magazine continues, "children are receiving for 1d., 2d. or 3d. a week an education which costs the school about 9d. a week. Unless they attend often enough to receive the Government grant—250 times a year—they are a dead loss to the school." Parents unable to pay the pennies were advised to apply to the Board of Guardians.

## Fines for "Habitually Idling"

In 1875, 453 children attended the Church schools and 292 the Board schools, the annual cost of educating each child being £1 4s. 1d. and £1 9s. 5d. respectively. Annual expenses of the Church schools totalled about £500; £100, or nearly one half, of the parish contribution was provided by Lady Bridgewater's endowment.

The Parish Magazine, in 1876, published a warning that employers were liable to a fine of £2 for allowing any child under nine years of age to work for them, or any child under eleven who had not passed the second standard or attended school 250 times a year for two years. This law did not forbid the employment of children out of school hours, in the holidays, or at special times, such as the harvest. Parents were liable to a fine of 5s. every fortnight for any child over five who was found "habitually idling in the roads, or in bad company."

In this short article it is not possible to make more than a passing reference to a landmark in the history of Church schools in Berkhamsted—the building of the Victoria Schools in commemoration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Directly this ambitious scheme was completed, the inadequate and out of date rooms behind the Court House were no longer used for day schools.

In conclusion, let us return to Augustus Smith, whose great work for education in Berkhamsted was suitably marked on his death by a memorial fund to which men and women in all walks of life contributed. They raised a total of over £267, and to this day the dividend is applied to the purchase of prizes for scholars of the Church and Council schools—schools which, but for his timely intervention, might not have been established until a much later date.

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