

# BERKHAMSTED'S WIDE OPEN SPACES

By "BEORCHAM"

Visitors to Berkhamsted are often impressed by the great variety of walks in the district and by the vast areas over which the public may wander at will. In the town itself our "lungs" are admittedly few and small, but a short walk brings us to the 1,200 acres of Berkhamsted Common, and, farther afield, the lovely stretches of parkland and woodland vested in the National Trust. On the southern side of the town we have a small but very charming "green belt" composed of Brickhill Green, Sandpit Green, and Long Green.

Berkhamsted Common is one of England's most famous open spaces. There are many larger and more popular stretches of unspoiled countryside, but so long as men pay homage to the champions of public rights there will be room in the history books for the story of the enclosure of Berkhamsted Common in 1866 and its dramatic sequel.

## Diminished in Size

Relics of the prehistoric earthwork known as Grims Dyke and the discovery of the foundations of a Roman villa on the Golf Course are interesting but not helpful in tracing the early history of Berkhamsted Common. It is the remnant of a vast expanse of waste land that was once densely studded with beech and ash and oak. Part of the primeval Chiltern forest, it extended down to the water-meadows and narrow cornfields tilled by our Saxon forebears along the Bulbourne valley. In Norman times large portions of this "waste" were enclosed to form the parks of Berkhamsted and Ashridge, leaving a horseshoe-shaped common stretching for about four miles, from Little Heath to Northchurch Farm. This tract still included the farmland of Coldharbour and that portion of Potten End between the Common and Little Heath. (Little Heath was formerly part of Berkhamsted Common, not a separate open space.) The 300

acres of Coldharbour were incorporated in Berkhamsted Park in 1618, and became available for purposes of agriculture nine years later, when the Park was reduced from 1,132 to 376 acres.

The Coldharbour enclosure did not arouse strong opposition, and as one success often leads to another, a fresh attempt was made to enclose a portion of the Common. Some 400 acres were fenced in, from what is now the Ringshall road to Frithsden Beeches and the Targets. This literally took the middle out of the Common, and it is a point of interest that the area was almost identical with that enclosed under Lord Brownlow's orders 226 years afterwards. The similarity does not end there: a party of angry Northchurch commoners, led by William Edlyn and his son John, removed the "hedges, rayles and fences" at dead of night and so regained access to the 400 acres. That was in August, 1640, and history repeated itself in 1866, when Mr. Augustus Smith hired a train-load of London navvies to level Lord Brownlow's fences to the ground.

## Fuel—and Grazing

Whether the Common meant more to our ancestors than it does to the present generation is an open question. To-day we regard it as a beauty spot where one may enjoy fresh air and some of the pleasantest walks in the district. But in years gone by it is doubtful whether many townspeople visited the Common for pleasure, unless it was to attend the two-day Whitsuntide Fair held annually until 1867. Berkhamstedians then appreciated the Common more for its utilitarian value; it provided furze for fuel and extra pasturage for cattle and sheep. The older generation may recall seeing flocks of sheep on the Common, but furze has not been cut on a large scale since coal became reasonably cheap and plentiful. Until the early part of the 19th century most of the cottages had fireplaces built expressly for the burning of furze and wood, and it is known that at the King's Arms furze was used not only for cooking but for beer-brewing.

The question of "common rights" is a complex one, but it is ably dealt with by the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow in his "History of Berkhamsted Common," the most valuable contribution to works of local interest since Cobb wrote his "History of Berkhamsted." Since Mr. Whybrow's book was written, some 12 years ago, history has been made. Large tracts of Berkhamsted Common have been used for agricultural purposes, and hundreds of acres of gorse-covered land were ploughed for the first time as an emergency measure. Good crops of cereals and potatoes have been yielded. New areas are still being brought under cultivation, and during the present winter the land between Coldharbour Farm, Frithsden Beeches and Ashridge Park has been ploughed.

A little known feature of the attempted enclosure of 1866 is the offer

made by Lord Brownlow to the townspeople of Berkhamsted of a 43 acre recreation ground "as a just and liberal compensation" for the loss of common rights.

## A Lost Recreation Ground

A large number of townspeople were attracted by the idea. At a vestry meeting it was decided that the most eligible site was the land between the railway and the Bulbourne, from Billet-lane to Castle-street. Supporters assured Lord Brownlow the proposed recreation ground would be a source of health and enjoyment to "present and future inhabitants." No fewer than 186 signatures accompanied the letter of acceptance, and Lord Brownlow signed an indenture of conveyance of the 43 acres to trustees acting on behalf of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted. The conveyance was to become operative when the commoners had waived their rights, but Augustus Smith torpedoed the "bargain" by smashing the fences, and the proposed recreation ground remained part of the Ashridge property for another 50 years. Ten of the 43 acres were purchased for the Sports Ground shortly after the 1914-18 war.

## Round the District

The Sports Ground is not a public space, but it is vested in a limited liability association which liberally and efficiently administers the property in the interests of local sport.

The nearby Moor, a small but popular recreation ground, is described as a document of 1616 as "one wast plott or moore lying by the river neare the Upper Mill." In Victorian days it was used as a timber yard and was thus described in a map of 1870. Formerly it was a recognised place for fairs and open-air theatrical shows by "strolling players."

The survey of 1616—which even mentions the tiny roadside waste at "Shuter's Way"—refers to a "little wast plott or moore" at Bank Mill. "The tennants of ye sayd Borough and Hallimote" had time out of memory enjoyed common rights there, but the Bank Mill "moore" is no more.

Butts Meadow—the name recalls the days when archers practised at the butts—is stated in Cobb's "History" to have been left to the parish by an unknown donor, but it did not really become public property until it was presented to the town by Mrs. Lionel Lucas, of Kingshill, sister of Sir Julian Goldsmid, a famous Jewish M.P. of Victorian days.

Brickhill Green was originally known as Brick Kiln Green, and clay pits and mounds survive as relics of the days when bricks were made on the green. No doubt the kilns were fired by the furze. An old vestry book mentions that when Prince Charles (afterwards Charles I) came to Berkhamsted from Windsor, he was met at "the hithermost or nearest corner of Brickline Green" by a deputation of townsmen.

Nearby, bordering a pleasant walk along the ridge to Broadway, are Sandpit Green and Long Green, two well-wooded "wastes" of which the history books tell us—nothing!

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