

In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

Listening-in 100 Years Ago

After three generations of compulsory education, it is difficult to realise that in early Victorian times many illiterate cottagers—and most cottagers were illiterate—paid to have the newspaper read to them.

Newspaper reading provided a comfortable living for a number of so-called "literary gents." One, a Londoner, even found it profitable to travel to Berkhamsted once a week and tour nearby villages, where the cottagers took turns in opening their doors to neighbours for the weekly news reading. Each listener paid a penny to the "broadcaster," who walked from village to village with what must have been the smallest and cheapest stock-in-trade in the world—a newspaper.

An elderly resident, whose mother could remember a "visiting reader" in her cottage at Ley Hill, says that murders and war news generally brought extra customers. The more blood-curdling passages had to be read over and over again! The reader also undertook to write letters and read correspondence for the villagers, who preferred the services of a stranger to those of a local literate who might gossip about private affairs. Sometimes the reader supplemented his income by bringing along a selection of trinkets and toys for sale to his listeners.

Those house-to-house visits must not be confused with the "Penny Readings" so beloved by Victorians. The Mechanics' Institute organised a long, successful series in the 'sixties, the weekly reading from some famous literary work attracting an audience that was seldom less than 300. It is recorded that the Town Hall was packed to overflowing when the celebrated George Grossmith gave a

reading from "David Copperfield" in 1863. He received a fee of 3½ guineas.

Ten Shillings to London

Increased railway fares have no doubt set many thinking wistfully of pre-war days, when a third-class return ticket to Euston cost but half-a-crown. Possibly the older generation can recall even cheaper fares, but it would be wrong to assume that the cost of travelling has continually increased.

In 1810, when railways were still a dream of the future, a seat in a coach from Berkhamsted to London cost 10s., unless one was content to sit beside the driver and brave the elements at the "outsiders'" rate of 6s. for the single journey.

Those fares—surprisingly high when it is remembered that 10s. was then worth perhaps three times its present value—were charged on a coach which left the King's Arms Inn at 8 a.m. and returned from another King's Arms, at Holborn Bridge, at 1.30 p.m. Apparently the journey was accomplished with only one change of horses, at Stanmore.

Ten shillings may have been the standard rate in 1810, but later on intense rivalry between the growing number of coach owners resulted in a price-cutting epidemic. Henry Nash, that delightful chronicler of early Victorian Berkhamsted, says that "passengers were conveyed to and from London at fares that were far from remunerative, the proprietors apparently taking the greatest delight in trying to ruin each other."

Those who survived the economic war were soon forced out of business when the railway came to Berkhamsted in 1838.

Old Father Thames

Do you know where the River Thames rises? In the Cotswolds? Certainly not!

I have just been shown a copy of *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* for January, 1751, and an article on Hertfordshire contains the following astounding passage: "The county is watered with many pleasant rivers and brooks. . . The chief of these is the Thames (the most famous river in England and the most frequented by navigators in the known world) which, my author says, rises at three heads, at Tring, Penley and Bulburn, and then leaves this shire."

This rich contribution to our store of knowledge is corroborated by the accompanying map, which shows three tributaries merging into an impressively wide river near Tring. It flows into Buckinghamshire and is then literally off the map.

That "my author" had exclusive sources of information is further proved by a statement that the fish found in Hertfordshire rivers include "salmons."

Hertfordshire for Health!

Here is consolation for those unable to go away for a holiday. *The Universal Magazine* mentioned above states that in Hertfordshire "the air is clear, sweet and very healthy. . . London physicians often recommend their patients to this air, in hopes of restoring a decayed constitution, or of prolonging life, when other prescriptions have proved ineffectual. Hence comes the saying, 'Those who buy a house in Hertfordshire pay two years' purchase extraordinary for the air of it.'"

Here are a few more facts that should make stay-at-homes content to breathe the pure air of Hertfordshire. Henry VIII sent his children to Ashridge for the sake of their health. Norden, in Elizabeth's reign, said of Hertfordshire that "the ayre for the most part is very salutare and in regard thereof many sweete and pleasant dwellings, healthfull by nature and profitable by arte and industrie, are planted here." Fuller, a Stuart historian, claimed that "Hertfordshire is the garden of England for delight." And a modern encyclopædia, which cannot be accused of guide-book partiality, agrees with the ancients that the climate of our county is "mild and healthy."

The Rainy Side

But even in a county of Hertfordshire's size—and only five English counties are smaller—there are marked variations in the climate. It may not be widely known that Berkhamsted receives between three and four inches more rain per annum than East Herts—most of the surplus apparently falling when one arranges an outdoor event! The heavier rainfall is due to the hills, but town-proud Berkhamstedians doubtless prefer the hills and the extra rain to the flat and less interesting scenery of the drier side of the county.

Despite our higher rainfall, really serious storms are infrequent. History, however, tells of a particularly violent storm in July, 1774, when crops were so badly spoilt as not to be worth gathering. Impoverished farmers were reduced to appealing for permission to collect alms. To quote a contemporary document: "There arose a violent wind attended with dreadful thunder and lightning. . . Many of the hailstones measured several inches round, and stripped, beat down, lay waste and destroyed all or the greatest part of the crops." Damage in the parishes of Puttenham, Northchurch and Aldbury was estimated at £2,000.

About 55 years ago another violent storm spent its fury on Potten End. "Hailstones larger than walnuts" killed birds, which were found dead

under the trees. Cottage windows were shattered and beds and furniture littered with broken glass. "Eight hundred panes of glass were broken in Potten End, not reckoning the Baptist Chapel, where about 200 panes were broken. An army of local traders are busy in repairing the damage," stated a newspaper report.

As for hard winters, it is recorded that barges on the canal were ice-bound at Berkhamsted for fourteen weeks about 100 years ago. In late Victorian times, when a three-months' frost resulted in ice 2-ft. 6-in. thick forming on the canal, bonfires were lighted on the surface without melting the ice to any appreciable extent.

A 17th Century Party

Two months ago a *Review* article entitled "Feasting in Bygone Berkhamsted" recounted some of the sumptuous repasts staged in the days when our forefathers sat down to what really deserved to be called "groaning boards."

Perhaps one should not pursue the tantalising subject of abundant food at the present time, but since the article was written some additional information has been discovered. Way back in 1615 a christening party was held at Ashridge House at a cost of £20, and some of the delicacies—notably dehydrated fruits—seem very expensive for the period. For instance, 2-lb. dried apricots cost 18s., 1-lb. dried cherries 8s., and 1½-lb. dried oranges 5s. Macaroons were 3s. a lb., "bisket cakes" 2s. for 12 ozs., and "prince biskets" 4s. 4d. for 4-lb. Comfits of various flavours were 1s. 6d. a lb., and dried suckit [sugar plums] 5s. 4d. for 2-lb.

A homely note is introduced by an item recording that two plates were smashed at the christening party, adding another shilling to the bill.

By the way, 20 sheep purchased "for provision of the house" cost 15s. each.

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