

In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

The Gleaners

An old custom has been revived on a small scale in recent years—gleaning. Now that feeding stuffs are scarce, many poultry keepers will watch the cornfields and, with the farmers' permission, gather the grain that remains after the crop has been carted away.

This, however, is not gleaning as it was known in years gone by. There must be many of the older generation who can recall spending a large part of their school holidays in the fields, gathering sufficient wheat to ensure many months' supply of flour.

One old townsman tells me that in Dell Field alone he and his brothers and sisters gleaned enough wheat to last the family all through the winter. "We took the gleanings to Mr. Cook, at the old watermill in Mill-street," he said, "and from the flour my mother made the finest bread I have ever tasted. Farmers encouraged gleaning by sending word when we could start, and sometimes invited us to undertake odd jobs, such as stone-picking, for which we were paid a few welcome coppers. Of course, in those days gleaning was well worth while; now, I am afraid, mechanical reapers do not leave very much behind."

My informant lived in Cox's-lane, the narrow lane which was widened in late Victorian days and renamed King's-road. In a row of eight cottages there was but one drinking water tap and one rainwater tank. The cottagers also shared a big old-fashioned brick oven, taking turns to cook their dinners.

From Rail to Road

A reader has sent me a note asking if I was aware that the large stone slabs

in St. John's Well-lane were originally railway sleepers. Yes! In one of the stones the groove and holes through which the chair was fastened can still be seen. Other stone railway sleepers may be seen beside the road at Brick-hill Green and on the verge of Gallows-lane. At least one local rockery is partly composed of old railway sleepers.

The stone sleepers laid down when the London and Birmingham Railway was constructed in the late 1830's were soon proved unsatisfactory, and after a few years wooden sleepers were substituted. Of late years, however, there has been a tendency to use concrete sleepers, possibly because of the timber shortage.

The Burgesses' Cushions

Many references have been made in these articles to the Corporation of Berkhamsted, but I do not believe I have mentioned the varied possessions of the borough, which ranged from "one green carpet" and twelve cushions for the "capital Burgesses" to such standards of measurement as a brass half-peck, a brass pint pot, various weights, and a standard ell to which the townspeople could refer to ascertain whether their purchases of cloth had been cut to honest measurements. If they had not—well, the borough also possessed two pairs of handcuffs, a shackle, and a whipping post.

Where are those possessions now? No one expects the carpet and cushions to have survived 300 years of wear and tear, but it is just possible that the brass pots and weights may be in existence somewhere. What a marvellous "find" it would be if someone came across the relics of the borough—including the handcuffs and the shackle!

The Great Plague

That Hertfordshire is reputed to have a healthy, invigorating climate was shown by an article in last month's *Review*. But, as a reader gently points out, Berkhamsted has not always had a clean bill of health. Like all ancient towns, it was periodically visited by "plagues and pestilential fevers", the worst occurring 22 years before the Great Plague of London. So many Berkhamsted families were decimated by plague in 1643 that trade was at a standstill and the parish authorities had to beg for help from neighbouring towns.

By that time one of the worst scourges—leprosy—was dying out, and the lepers' hospital which had existed in Berkhamsted for centuries was disused. Smallpox, however, frequently swept through the town, and epidemics are mentioned in several old parish

documents. When a serious outbreak of smallpox occurred in August, 1779, the churchwardens decided to take legal proceedings against John Fowler, an apothecary, for causing several victims of the disease to be brought into this parish from Aldbury. A vestry minute states that "the lives of the inhabitants may be greatly endangered, and may also be considerable sufferers by losing their trade."

Victims of smallpox and other diseases had to remain in their own homes unless they had the greater misfortune of being transferred to the "Poor House," a wretched, insanitary hovel on the site of the Council School. Later, in the 1770's, an early form of isolation hospital known as the "Pest House" was built on Berkhamsted Common, near Potten End. Though converted into a private dwelling house many years ago, it is still a source of revenue to the parish. For Northchurch there was a combined workhouse and hospital "erected on the King's waste called Shootersway . . . to lodge and succour impotent persons of Northchurch in the time of common sickness, and other great necessities."

The canal, incidentally, did much to improve the health of Berkhamsted, for previously the Bulbourne valley was a fly-infested swamp. But not until mid-Victorian days was there anything other than the most primitive methods of sanitation in the town, and anyone acquainted with the atrocious conditions formerly existing must wonder why epidemics were not more frequent.

A Link with William Penn

A recent visit to William Penn's grave at Jordans, near Beaconsfield, reminded me that the founder of Pennsylvania was a frequent visitor to Berkhamsted. He was a close friend—and possibly a patient—of Dr. Christopher Woodhouse, and often rode over the hills to call at the surgeon's house opposite the Sayer almshouses. William Penn is said to have urged the doctor's daughter, Gulielma Woodhouse, to join his band of pioneers in America, but no one appears to know whether she left her comfortable home in Berkhamsted for an adventurous new life in what was still a remote and undeveloped British colony.

The fact remains that several families from this district went to America in the 17th century, including members of the Axtell family, of Berkhamsted Place. Perhaps they wished to live down the sad fate of Daniel Axtell, the Parliamentarian soldier who was hanged at Tyburn for the part he played in bringing about the death of Charles I.

Another Hertfordshire emigrant—the Rev. William Gordon, of Hitchin—was for several years private secretary to George Washington.

Reverting to Dr. Christopher Woodhouse, it is interesting to recall that he was an outspoken critic of the Grammar School during its long period of mismanagement. He was one of the last burgesses of the borough of Berk-

hamsted—at one period he held the office of bailiff—and his son, John Woodhouse, was a churchwarden of St. Peter's in 1689. But it was as a surgeon that Christopher Woodhouse was known far beyond his home town of Berkhamsted, his reputation apparently depending largely upon his alleged success in curing bewitched persons by the use of "stinking fumigations"! This Berkhamsted worthy was buried in St. Peter's Church in 1682, but the gravestone was unfortunately "lost" during the restoration of 1870.

MARRIAGES

- July 6.—John Elliot Pearson and Alison Howieson King.
- July 13.—David Statham White and Jean Hellen Willmore.
- July 13.—John Elliott Crooke and Lucy Mary Pagden.
- July 20.—Charles Henry Franklin and Winifred Janet Russell.

BAPTISMS

- July 6.—Anne Prentice Forsyth, 2 Boxwell-road.
- July 7.—Veronica Jane Whitmore Humphreys, 2 Rex Flats, High-st.
- July 9.—Alexander Timothy Trousdell, Braeside, Chesham-road.
- July 14.—Deirdra May Palmer, 105 High-street.
- July 14.—Pauline Ann Palmer (received), 105 High-street.
- July 14.—Angela Mary Bellis, 54 Ellesmere-road.
- July 14.—Peter Derick Badrick, 63 Cross Oak-road.
- July 21.—Brian Leath Robinson, 99 Cross Oak-road.
- July 28.—Brian Lawrence Rumph, 11 Curtis-way.
- July 28.—Anthony John Rumph, 11 Curtis-way.
- July 28.—Peter Douglas Scott, 24 Ravens-lane.

BURIALS

- July 6.—Annie Brown, aged 68 years, 7 High-street.
- July 22.—Henrietta Louisa Nutcombe, aged 81 years, Hempstead House.

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