In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

Found—in the Auction Room

By an unpardonable lapse on the part of some person unknown, a valuable book containing the churchwardens' accounts for the years 1584–1748 was removed from the Parish Church chest a century or so ago and never returned.

It is thought that the book was "borrowed" at a time when inquiries were being made regarding the parishioners' rights under the ancient charters of incorporation. At all events, the book passed out of the hands of the rector and churchwardens. Instead of being kept in the church chest under triple lock and key, it eventually found its way to an auction room.

The fly-leaf states that the book was "purchased at Puttick's in 1851," and for nearly a century it has been in the safe keeping of the British Museum. The earliest of the 366 folios are fragmentary and the writing is often difficult to decipher, but there are hundreds of items of local interest, and the various methods of recording accounts show how the modern balance sheet evolved.

Half a Day's Work—Ninepence !

I cannot claim to have inspected the churchwardens' accounts at the British Museum, but some years ago a friend examined the book and gave me copies of a few typical extracts.

In 1647, for instance, payment of £1 2*s*. was made to John Hill "for Quarteridge, and for keeping ye boys off ye leads on ye faire day." The "leads" may or may not have been the roof of the Parish Church. Boys of any generation may be depended upon to find the best vantage points!

The following year's expenses included one shilling for opening the church chest and oiling the lock, and 5*s*. 4*d*. "for beer for the men that brought back the engine from Leatherland fire." Many entries concern the fire engine and accessories, which were kept in the church at that period. In 1749, 24 leather buckets were bought, and twelve years later a guinea was spent on new leather pipes.

Labour was cheap. For half a day's work, John Patrick received ninepence, and Thomas Finch and his labourer received 5*s*. for two days' work. Two men who watched a building throughout the night after a fire were awarded half-a-crown, and in 1763 William Cooper was given 1*s*. 6*d*. for summoning parishioners to a "mooting" concerning the rent of the workhouse.

There are many more homely items of that sort in the churchwardens' accounts. One particularly interesting entry concerns the celebrations when George III was proclaimed king. Beer costing 7*s*. 6*d*. was given to the bell-ringers of St. Peter's, but the persons who provided "musick" were paid in cash—the princely sum of 1*s*. 6*d*. !

Over to Ivinghoe

Is there any connection between the village of Ivinghoe and the "Ivanhoe" of Sir Walter Scott's novel ? This question is frequently asked, and the answer is—Yes, but only a very slight connection. Scott chose the name for the simple reason that he liked its homely, English sound ; possibly he made its acquaintance through an old friend, James Adam Gordon, who lived at Aldbury.

Ivinghoe has long been a popular centre for motorists and walkers, many of whom are attracted to the district by the Beacon and the glorious views over the Vale of Aylesbury. But the village itself is well worth exploring, for there are many quaint corners that have scarcely changed since the days when Ivinghoe was a market town. It has even been claimed that Ivinghoe was once an assize town ; certainly it had a town hall, and as the centre of some of the richest agricultural land in the country its trade was considerable. Lace-making and straw-plaiting were flourishing subsidiary industries.

The parish church of Ivinghoe, with its slightly tilted spire, attracts a constant stream of visitors, as is proved by the large number of entries in the visitors' book. The carvings are of especial interest—not only the roof and the wonderful old pulpit, said to have been damaged by Puritans, but also the old pew ends, each bearing some quaint, if not grotesque, figure.

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In the churchyard may be seen a long implement formerly used for dragging thatch off cottage roofs in the event of fire.

The Old Yew Tree

An engraving of St. Peter's Church presumably about 100 years old, is interesting in that it does not show the yew tree at Castle-street corner.

This omission must be attributed to artists' licence, for there can scarcely be any doubt that the tree was a sturdy veteran even before Victoria came to the throne. The late Mr. R. A. Norris, in his " History of St. Peter's," tells us that the tree is of uncertain age, and that it bears evidence of having been cut back at some period. For more than 175 years the churchwardens' accounts contain occasional entries of payments for " cutting the yew," the amount usually being half-a-crown.

A generation ago Mr. Norris remarked that the tree "has of late years lost a great deal of its one-time robust appearance." That is true, but the venerable old yew looks as if it will survive the 20th century !

This tree is, of course, a traditional meeting place at the start of a new year. In Victorian times, if not earlier, it was customary for worshippers at the Watchnight Service to gather under the yew in the first few minutes of the new year to sing "Auld Lang Syne"—a tradition which is still kept up, however bad the weather may be.

Coldharbour

How did Coldharbour Farm get its name ? This question is often asked, and the answers are just as often conflicting. One likely explanation is that it denotes a "cold harbourage" or place where cattle or livestock could be accommodated, presumably without forage. The name crops up in many parts of the country ; there is a Coldharbour-lane in Brixton, and the name doubtless dates from the time when that part of London was "truly rural."

Another theory is that the name Coldharbour is of Roman origin, and there is no need to point out that Berkhamsted Common is in the vicinity of several Roman villas. A book entitled " Our Roman Highways " says that "the appearance of such names as Cold Harbour is believed to be a sure indication of the use, in comparatively modern times, of Roman buildings for purposes of temporary shelter. Occasional discovery of tesselated pavements evidently injured by fires lighted in the corners of rooms, suggests the utilisation by wayfarers and peasants at periods far removed from the original abandonment of these dwellings."

The Furze Cutters

Many years ago, September 1 was a very important date for the inhabitants of Berkhamsted. On and after that day, and not before, it was permissible to cut fern and furze on Berkhamsted Common, and there was such a scramble for the best tracts that a system was evolved whereby commoners staked their claims, rather in the manner of gold prospectors.

In the last few days of August, men would search for the best areas and stand on guard on the evening of August 31. At midnight—it was truly said that they "strained" their ears to hear the Parish Church clock chimes over a mile away !—they would cut circles round their selected patches, and then cut the vegetation at their leisure, safe in the knowledge that no one would break an unwritten law by intruding upon a "protected area."

Times have changed, and few people have any use for furze and fern to-day. But until the beginning of the 20th century, tons were removed from Berkhamsted Common every autumn, the furze for use as fuel and the fern for various purposes of husbandry—litter for cattle, to make the foundations of ricks, etc.

Furze for Fuel

In nearly every cottage, furze was the chief means of heating the ovens ; indeed, even if the cottagers had been able to afford coal, their ovens were not constructed for burning it. The late Mr. G. H. Whybrow, in his " History of Berkhamsted Common," records that even well-to-do people used it sometimes for baking bread, and at the King's Arms the landlord, Mr. Page, used it not only for that purpose but also for brewing. Careful watch was maintained so that carters did not sell the furze and fern to "outsiders"; the privilege was limited to the commoners of Berkhamsted.

An interesting point is that an order was made in 1725 limiting the size of the "weapon or working tool" used for cutting furze, an exception afterwards being made in the case of disabled persons and those over 60 or under 14 years of age. Incidentally, when furze was used for firing brick-kilns, the Common was almost completely denuded.

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