

Berkhamsted Place

A House with a History ★ By "BEORCHAM"

The recent departure of Sir Granville and Lady Ram from Berkhamsted Place provides a reminder of the long, interesting history of the Elizabethan mansion, which has been a local landmark for more than 350 years.

Statesmen have resided there, and royal visitors have included Charles I and George V. It was Lady Sarah Spencer who had the honour of entertaining the late King when he was Duke of York, and on several occasions she was visited by Mr. Gladstone. A few old parishioners may still recall seeing the great Victorian prime minister walking down the lime avenue on his way to Sunday morning service at the Parish Church. Incidentally, the lime avenue is considerably more than two centuries old; it figures prominently on a print dated 1724.

The very appearance of the mansion suggests associations with celebrities of the past. It is well worth the climb up Castle Hill to peer through the massive gates and admire the grey, austere beauty of a mansion described by Camden, in 1607, as "a noble and exceeding pleasant seat." It was built to last, and whatever changes have been made to the interior, the successive squires of Berkhamsted have left the imposing façade untouched since John Sayer, of almshouse fame, effected repairs after a disastrous fire in the 1660's. But one curious feature was demolished about a century ago: it was a flint and stone porter's lodge at the entrance to the drive, with living rooms either side and above an ornate gateway. This lodge was "topped" by a tiny turret and a large clock.

Fact and Fiction

Everyone has heard the story that Berkhamsted Place was built from the ruins of Berkhamsted Castle. There

is certainly no reason to suppose that liberal use was not made of the masonry lying derelict at the bottom of the hill, though much new material was, of course, used as well.

For generations townsmen have perpetuated a legend that there is a secret tunnel from Berkhamsted Castle to Berkhamsted Place. What purpose this tunnel was supposed to serve is one of the town's unsolved mysteries; it probably arose from the discovery of an old drain which served a perfectly normal and necessary function. Suffice it to say that Berkhamsted Place did not exist when the Castle was inhabited, and that when the mansion was built the Castle was in ruin.

It was towards the end of the 15th century when Berkhamsted Castle was abandoned. Decay set in rapidly, and in antiquary Leland's words, it was "much in ruine" by the time Queen Elizabeth leased the Castle to Sir Edward Cary, Master of the Royal Jewel House. The nominal rent was a red rose per annum!

Sir Edward was the builder of Berkhamsted Place, the original plan suggesting the letter E as a compliment to the Queen. But Sir Edward saw little of his new mansion; he lived principally at Aldenham, where he died in 1618.

"A Loving Benefactor"

Sir Adolphus Cary, brother of the builder, was the first tenant of Berkhamsted Place. Little of local interest is known of him other than that he was buried in the Parish Church in 1609, his helmet in the north transept surviving the banners that fell into tatters many years ago. A parchment in the Church chest describes him as "a most loving benefactor of ye poor of this towne."

Berkhamsted Place was next the home of another Cary, Sir Henry, afterwards Lord Falkland. He was noted more for his friendship with Ben Jonson than for his work as Lord Deputy for Ireland; his tactless bungling earned for him the dubious epithet of "well-meaning." At Berkhamsted he brought up his more illustrious son, Lucius Cary, "a nobleman of the most prodigious learning." But the son died too young to achieve lasting fame. In the Civil War the sympathies of the second Lord Falkland were with the King, and when the Royalists sustained a particularly discouraging defeat, he placed himself at the head of his regiment, riding out to meet his death at a gap in the hedge where the bullets rained thickest.

In 1610, Berkhamsted Place was sold by Sir Henry Cary to Henry, Prince of Wales, for £4,000. The boy prince died two years later, and in 1615 the house passed to his younger brother Charles — afterwards Charles I. But it was never intended that the royal owner should live at Berkhamsted Place, and

the mansion and estate were granted on lease to an old Scottish family, the Murrays.

We have a reminder of this family in the Parish Church, for on the north wall of the chancel is a beautiful monument to the memory of John and James Murray, "youths of the most winning disposition," who lived and died at Berkhamsted Place.

The Visit of Charles I

There was no more loyal family than the Murrays, and the youngest member, Anne, was the talk of London in 1648, when she aided the Duke of York's escape to Holland by dressing him as a girl. She spent part of her youth at Berkhamsted Place when the mansion was tenanted by her father, Thomas Murray, Provost of Eton and a former tutor and secretary of Prince Charles. Mrs. Murray had also served in the Royal Household, nursing the young prince at Dunfermline. This fact has led to a common but erroneous belief that Charles I was nursed at Berkhamsted Place.

It is, however, known for certain that the Prince visited his old tutor and nurse at Berkhamsted only two months after they had installed themselves in their new home. To quote an old vestry book, "The noble Prince Charles came the 14th August, 1616, from Windsore, by Beaconsfield, to this towne. A number of twenty or thereabouts of the townsmen mett him at the hithermost or nearest corner of Brickilne Greene, and rode before his highnesse two and two into the towne; then they uncovered their heads, and so rode on till they came at the church stile in the Castle Street, where his highnesse made a stand to hear an oration pronounced by one of the schollers of the free schole. Now, which being ended, the same townsmen rode on as before up unto the hill before the gate [the old gateway to Berkhamsted Place], where partyng themselves one from another to the righte and to the left, a lane was made for his highnesse to pass up to the gate; and in the afternoon his highnesse hunted and killed a fat buck, which he gave to those the townsmen that attended him."

Daniel Axtell, Regicide

During the Murray's time, Berkhamsted Park was reduced in size from 1,252 to 376 acres, and Mrs. Murray, sole lessee after the death of her husband, was authorised to use the disparked land for purposes of agriculture. Mrs. Murray's refusal to pay tithe led to litigation, but that was a minor matter compared with the troubles that befell the family during the Civil War. Mrs. Murray's sons and daughters were in the thick of Royalist intrigues, and one childish act of revenge on the part of the Parliamentarians was to cut the water pipes at Berkhamsted Place and destroy a water-mill which "standeth afarre" and "conveyeth water to the house."

In Cromwell's time the Murray lease terminated, and for a short period Colonel Daniel Axtell was an under-tenant. This remarkable Ironside, born in Berkhamsted in 1622, returned to

his native town after a remarkable career in Cromwell's army. He was in charge of the guard at Westminster Hall during the trial of Charles I, and made himself a marked man by clamouring for the execution of the King and quelling Royalist expressions of sympathy. He did not enjoy residence at Berkhamsted Place for long; at the Restoration he was tried and hanged as a regicide.

Two-Thirds Destroyed by Fire

In 1660, Berkhamsted Place was leased to the Lord Treasurer, the Earl of Portland, and it was during his occupancy that two-thirds of the mansion were destroyed by fire. The central portion (the present house) escaped serious damage, and the necessary repairs were made; but two wings were never rebuilt. The house was almost certainly restored by John Sayer, to whom Lord Portland assigned the remainder of his lease on December 11, 1662. Needless to say, this was the John Sayer who gave Berkhamsted its almshouses. At one time head cook to Charles II, whose exile he shared, he soon made himself unpopular in Berkhamsted by appropriating market and other revenues intended for the maintenance of the church and "free schoole" and for the relief of the poor. He was repeatedly in conflict with the rector, churchwardens and parishioners of Berkhamsted, who did not recognise him as a "local worthy" until he left funds to provide almshouses!

Space does not permit a detailed account of the later history of Berkhamsted Place; the house had many new owners and tenants, whose influence on the town was sometimes more marked and beneficial than that of the characters mentioned in this article. For the present we will have to be content to follow the story of Berkhamsted Place until the end of the 17th century — only a third of its long history. But what a hectic period that was, and what remarkable townfolk those Carys, Murrays, Axtells and Sayers must have been!

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