

# In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

## "Watchman, What of the Night?"

Since the death of our old friend Mr. W. Elliott, Berkhamsted has been without a town crier.

In days when a young man can broadcast "Water off!" and other cries of old Berkhamsted in a tenth of the time required by the "Oyez" system, there is not much point in reviving the ancient office of town crier. But we have lost a link with the picturesque past—a past when the churchwardens constituted the town's Finance Committee, when Berkhamsted had its own prison and whipping post, and when the town regularly appointed its own constables, vice-constables, flesh-tasters, beer-tasters, leather-sealers and water-bailiffs.

Just as the present generation has seen and heard the last town crier, Berkhamstedians of a century ago saw and heard the last nightwatchman. By all accounts he was a genial old fellow who, true to tradition, wore a heavy cloak and carried a horn lantern, rattle and stout bludgeon.

The nightwatchman's rounds started at 8 o'clock in winter and 10 o'clock in summer. Until dawn he was virtually in charge of the town. Besides calling out the hour and state of the weather, he fetched the doctor in case of need, watched for outbreaks of fire (a constant danger when most of Berkhamsted's cottages were straw-thatched), called the ostler and postmaster when Royal Mail coaches arrived in the town, and generally preserved law and order. Inebriates depended upon the nightwatchman to see them safely home, and ne'er-do-wells found it discreet to keep out of his path. He had a rattle with which to summon assistance in case of

need, and he knew how to use the bludgeon most effectively! Those were days when Berkhamsted's street lighting was limited to a solitary lamp outside the King's Arms, and that was intended more as a guide for coach drivers than for the convenience of the public. Blood-curdling stories were told of ghosts at Egerton House, secret tunnels under the town, and body-snatchers in the Wilderness. Altogether it must have been comforting to lie abed with the doors and windows barred and hear that sturdy old nightwatchman calling out "Two o'clock and all's well."

## On the Map

One of my treasured possessions is a beautifully coloured map of Hertfordshire produced nearly 200 years ago. It is a work of art and none the worse for a few glaring inaccuracies, among which may be mentioned the placing of Wigginton somewhere in the vicinity of Dell Field!

As for place-name spellings, the map-maker was obviously a sturdy individualist who, like most of his contemporaries, wrote English as it was spoken. No fault can be found with "Barkhamfted," but "Astridg" for Ashridge shows some originality, and "Fresden" for Frithsden proves that those who persist in saying "Freezedden" are perpetuating a pronunciation that has been used, with slight modifications, for centuries. "Gadsden Par" (short for "Parva") may be recognised as Little Gaddesden, and "Picketts End" is not far removed from Piccotts End. Just over the Hertfordshire border, the map shows Ivingo, Meersworth and Whipsnite; less easy to identify is "Edgborow" as Edlesborough.

This map is of further interest in that it shows Ashridge and Nettleden in the county of Bucks. This was not an accident; in fact, this narrow and almost completely encircled strip of Bucks did not become part of Herts until about 50 years ago. Our county's gain was Buckinghamshire's loss, but in the reign of William IV the position was reversed. For some curious reason the village of Coleshill, between Amersham and Beaconsfield, previously belonged to Herts, despite the fact that it was several miles from the Herts boundary and completely surrounded by Bucks. I believe there is still a house at Coleshill called "Hertfordshire House."

## Seventy Years Ago

Maps do not have to be centuries old before they are interesting. At the Berkhamsted Institute is a series of maps of the Berkhamsted district compiled in the 1870's. The scale is large

enough to show every house individually, and one realises what a compact little place Berkhamsted must have been 70 years ago.

Four saw-mills—two in Holliday-street—are indicated, and both the Moor and a strip of land off Swing Gate-lane are described as woodyards. In Manor-street was an "Emery Mill" where broken glass was ground to powder and sprinkled on gummed strips of material for sale as emery cloth. (The building is now part of Cooper's upper works.)

In Water-lane, in the heart of the town, were the gas works, flanked on two sides by burial grounds. Only a stone's throw away was one of Berkhamsted's two breweries; the other adjoined the Swan Inn. Brewing interests had a further outpost in the malthouse at Bridge-street corner, now the Boy Scouts' headquarters.

A few doors from the King's Arms Hotel were the post office and a bank; the old Council Chamber was a Wesleyan Chapel, and farther along the High-street was "Bourne's School for Boys and Girls," still functioning as a separate institution.

The map is interesting not only for what it shows, but for what it doesn't show. A score or more side streets now regarded as old were fields, and large areas were marked "Nurseries." There were few houses between King's-road and Kittsbury (yes, spelt with two t's), and George-street and Ellesmere-road were only half their present length. Only the lower parts of Gilham's-lane (Cross Oak-road), Grubb's-lane (Chesham-road) and Cox's-lane (King's-road) were built-up areas.

On the other hand, the map shows houses which have been demolished and never replaced. Two houses in the High-street had to go when Lower King's-road was made, and further property was pulled down to provide an entrance for Prince Edward-street, the map showing an unbroken line of buildings at this spot. It is also interesting to find that Angle-place, instead of starting at Doctors Commons-road, began its diagonal course from the King's-road—Charles-street corner.

## "Keeping Kattern"

The approach of November reminds me that the old custom of "Keeping Kattern" is no longer observed in this district. Let me explain. On St. Catharine's Day (November 25), many families in Berkhamsted, Tring, Chesham and neighbouring villages held parties that were almost in the Christmas tradition. "Kattern" cakes were baked for the occasion, and sometimes the new season's home-made wines were broached for a pre-Christmas taste.

"Kattern" was celebrated mainly in the homes of pillow-lace makers, perhaps because St. Catharine is the patron saint of spinners. So many years have passed since pillow-lace making was a popular domestic industry in this district that it is doubtful whether even our oldest residents can recollect "Kattern" parties, but in some areas

the day is still celebrated in various ways. At Peterborough, once an important lace-making centre, girls elected their "queen" every year and went in procession, singing a traditional ballad, to receive "Kattern" money.

## A Nearby Windmill

Recently I was asked if anything is known of the windmill which formerly stood on Whitehill. Nothing—absolutely nothing! The windmill figures conspicuously on a print dated 1724, and it must have had a short life compared with the two watermills on the river Bulbourne, which were grinding corn from Norman times, if not earlier, until a generation or two ago.

But we have not far to go to see a very fine windmill. Just over the Bucks border, at Cholesbury, is a handsome specimen that is a landmark for miles around. Though disused, the long vanes are still spread-eagled to the sky, and outwardly there has been little change since farmers of Hawridge, Cholesbury and St. Leonard's regularly sent their grain to the mill. But if the miller were to return to-day he would hardly recognise the interior; he would clamber up five ladders to find the huge wheel and gearing apparatus at the top of the mill securely locked.

Cholesbury windmill is not ancient, but it has a long ancestry, for a wooden mill occupied the site before the present one was built about the year 1880. The miller was not content to rely upon the wind alone; he had a steam engine installed, and for years the tall chimney stack marred the graceful appearance of the windmill. Eventually the stack was felled, and the bricks were used to make a garden path in which two huge millstones are embedded.

For forty years Cholesbury windmill has been used as an annexe to the neighbouring house. Gilbert Cannon wrote some of his best-selling novels in the mill, and afterwards it became the country retreat of Doris Keane, West End actress of a generation ago, who now lives in the United States.

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