

# In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

## When the Church was a Prison!

The temporary conversion of our Parish Church into a prison and hospital nearly 300 years ago may not be an event of major importance in the long history of Berkhamsted, but it is difficult to understand why historians either ignore this startling episode altogether or dismiss it in a couple of lines.

In the bold, bad days of 1648, when the end of the Civil War was at last in sight, the parishioners of Berkhamsted stood in hushed silence while exhausted, tattered, half-starved prisoners-of-war were shepherded into the town. Royalists captured in the long siege of Colchester, they had limped along the muddy, rutted lanes of Essex and Hertfordshire while their captors sought suitable accommodation for them. Many were hustled into temporary prisons at St. Albans and other towns nearer the scene of conflict; but Berkhamsted had to take its quota, too, and the Parish Church was promptly commandeered by the military authorities. This was no wanton act of desecration, for no other large building was available. Besides, the plight of the prisoners was desperate. Most of them were wounded, and all were hungry, footsore, ragged and verminous. And lest the term "prisoners-of-war" conjures up thoughts of men from a foreign land, let it be noted that nearly all the captives were natives of Essex and Kent. That was civil war: brothers were often fighting brothers, and fighting to kill.

It is not known how many prisoners were incarcerated in the Parish Church, but complaints of overcrowding were made. To provide better ventilation,

the church windows were taken out, eventually being restored at the expense of the parishioners. An entry in the churchwardens' accounts dated October 8, 1648, records the imposition of a twopenny rate per acre on lands within the parish of St. Peter for the replacement of windows "pulled downe by reason of the Colchester prisoners kept in the church."

## Aftermath of War

Other Hertfordshire churches, including St. Albans Abbey, were requisitioned in the same way, and it is highly probable that the parishioners of Berkhamsted, like those of St. Albans, had to raise funds to buy bread and cheese for the hungry prisoners.

This burden could not have fallen at a worse time. Not only was the nation exhausted after several years of civil war, but a summer infinitely worse than that of 1946 brought one of the most meagre harvests of all time. Almost constant rain reduced rich farmlands to swamps; grain soared to famine prices, and fever-stricken cattle and sheep fell dead in the ditches. Then, as in recent times, war had depleted the farmers' man-power. To make matters worse, Hertfordshire had to feed thousands of soldiers stationed in the county, besides continuing its rôle as London's granary.

These dismal facts help to explain why the impoverished and war-weary burgesses of Berkhamsted allowed their ancient charters of incorporation to lapse. But for the Civil War, Berkhamsted would in all probability have remained a borough to this day.

## Singing the Butler's Whiskers!

Glancing through early issues of the *Review*—it was given the everyday title of "Berkhamsted Parish Magazine" in 1873—I frequently came across a family name that may be recalled by older readers. The Keyzers, of Kingshill, played a prominent part in county and parochial life, and one of the sons of the house, Arthur Keyser, recalled several incidents of local interest in a book of reminiscences entitled "Trifles and Travels."

The story I like best concerns Edward VII in days when he was a very dashing Prince of Wales. On one occasion he was "thrown out" during a run with the local hounds, and asked his equerry whether there were any friends in the neighbourhood. The equerry at once recalled Colonel Smith-Dorrien, and the Prince cantered over to Haresfoot. The butler, a grand old family retainer named Mardle—his descendants are still living in the town—was hastily summoned and told that the Prince of Wales had arrived for luncheon. Dear old Mardle was so used

to leg-pulls that he testily retorted, "Tell it to the marines!" No one laughed more heartily at this outburst than "Teddy" himself, and old Mardle rose handsomely to the occasion when convinced that the visitor really was the Prince of Wales.

The Haresfoot butler figured in another good story often related by the late Rear Admiral Smith-Dorrien. One of the paraffin oil lamps over the billiards table crashed down and caused an alarming blaze. The butler ran for a bucket of water, but was restrained by his employer, who, realising that water would spread the flames, dashed into the garden for a shovelful of soil to smother the blaze. Before he could return Mardle had tried to blow out the flames, setting his whiskers alight in the process!

Those whiskers were the butler's pride and joy, and the insurance company was sufficiently human to appreciate their value. The company not only replaced the damaged billiards table, but handed the butler a £5 note as compensation for the singed whiskers!

## The Shah at Ashridge

Some time ago a reader kindly showed me a bundle of newspaper cuttings giving long accounts of an event that is still remembered by old parishioners—the visit of the Shah of Persia to Ashridge House in the 'eighties.

Elaborate preparations were made for the occasion. Grandstands were erected outside the railway station, and a crowd of thousands cheered the Shah when he arrived by special train. Volunteers of the 2nd Herts Rifle Battalion, in grey uniforms with red facings and spiked grey helmets, formed a guard of honour on the station platform, and men of the Herts Yeomanry, in scarlet coats and steel plumed helmets, escorted the Shah as he drove along the lanes to Ashridge. The chief object of interest was apparently a huge diamond that glittered on the Shah's fez.

Earl Brownlow knew how to give his guest a right royal welcome. At a dinner party Prince Albert was among the guests, and afterwards 400 notabilities from all parts of Herts and Bucks attended a reception. In the words of a reporter, "The decorations were truly magnificent. . . The tables of the dining rooms were resplendent with hundreds of dark red roses, and cartloads of cut flowers were disposed about the various rooms. The conservatory was especially gay and was elegantly lighted up with Japanese miniature lamps."

## No Ear for Music

"But, after all," [adds the report] "the brilliancy of the interior paled before the illuminations in the gardens, park and grounds. Thousands of fairy lamps sparkled in all the colours of the rainbow, and large Chinese lanterns marked the main paths and terraces. From the tower roofs flared forth coloured fires, lighting up the whole

scene and working indescribable witcheries of colour with the trees. The waters of the east fountain, leaping 100ft. high, sparkled and mingled with the smoke of coloured fire until one could not tell which was water and which smoke."

The Shah was impressed by the decorations but had no ear for English music, with the result that a concert by the band of the 1st Life Guards, specially engaged for the occasion, had to be cut short. (When attending a concert in London, it is said that the Shah preferred the preliminary "tuning up" noises to the orchestral works and requested an encore of the "first item"!)

The report adds that "the sleeping room of the Shah was magnificently disposed; and he slept in true Oriental fashion. The members of his suite reposed on crimson coloured beds raised an inch or two from the floor. . . The cooking had to be managed with care for Mohammedan visitors, and three experienced chefs supplemented the ordinary staff at Ashridge."

On the morrow the Shah toured Ashridge Park and, after luncheon, planted an evergreen tree in the gardens. The visit lasted but twenty-four hours, but it gave Berkhamstedians something to talk about for years. Even now an old inhabitant occasionally startles the moderns by saying, "Ah, but we had much more fun and excitement when the Shah came to Ashridge. . . !"

## St. Edmund's

A reader asks why the footpath from the top of Three Close-lane to Chesham-road, above the Cemetery, is called "St. Edmunds."

One theory is that a religious house or hospital called St. Edmund's stood in the vicinity, but the name does not appear in the town's old records.

Whatever the origin, it is a pity this picturesque name is fast becoming obsolete.

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