

# In and Around Berkhamsted

By  
"BEORCHAM"

## It was Colder Then!

When the temperature falls and stocks in the coal cellar are depressingly low, it is cold comfort to hear old inhabitants boast of the time when Christmas was always white and every winter brought joy to skaters.

Of course, the winters of yesteryear were not always hard. But history tells of long spells of exceptionally severe weather, and to this day one occasionally reads about a phenomenally cold winter some 100 years ago. Barges on the canal were ice-bound for fourteen weeks!

In the 'nineties another great "freeze-up" brought canal traffic to a standstill for twelve weeks. The ice was 2ft. 6in. thick, and gigantic icicles curtained the lock-gates.

Skaters had the time of their lives. Galas were held on the canal night after night, with fairy lamps twinkling and many a bonfire on the towpath to warm bystanders. There was even skating to music, St. Peter's Band playing the Victorian equivalent of "hot" music on those sparkling, frosty nights.

Berkhamsted's skating galas were never complete without refreshments supplied by the late Mr. William Fisher. Greatly daring, he set up a brazier on the middle of the canal and found a ready sale for baked potatoes and hot coffee. Collections were taken for unemployed men, who maintained good skating conditions by sweeping the ice at regular intervals.

Unemployment and poverty were rife in those hard, dole-less winters. Free soup kitchens were installed at Foster's Brewery and in the Castle grounds, the latter being provided by Lord and Lady Brownlow. The soup

was of first-rate quality—there was no shortage of meat then—and unrated helpings were available for the hundreds of grown-ups and children who daily queued for soup, often pressing into service jugs of all shapes and sizes, jam-jars, ordinary household pails, and even decorated flower vases. Many cottagers from Potten End called for free soup, which, of course, needed warming again when they arrived home.

## A Bull to the Rescue

Many stories could be told about the hard winters of years gone by. For instance, on at least one occasion Tring and Northchurch railway cuttings were blocked by snowdrifts. Mr. Albert Pocock, the Dudswell blacksmith, once told me that on having to go to Boxmoor for a supply of nails, he walked the whole way on the canal ice. He also told me that his grandfather, when driving a heavy wagon of flour to Chesham, was held up by deep snowdrifts near Rossway. The situation seemed desperate until a farmer persuaded him to remove the two horses and install his ferocious bull in their place! The bull was harnessed with difficulty and not a little danger, but in a minute or two he had the wagon on the move. Snowdrifts or no snowdrifts, Chesham received the flour.

Brrrr! Let's turn to a warmer topic!

## Roasting an Ox

Many townspeople have heard of an ox being roasted whole in Berkhamsted Park, but few know the full story.

We have to go back many years, long before the famous one-and-tuppence worth of meat was so much as dreamed of. In fact, we have to go back to Queen Victoria's jubilee of 1887, when the local newspaper reported:

"The ox-roasting took place in Mr. Ginger's park, to the right of the road to Berkhamsted House. The ox was about 90 stone weight, fed by Mr. J. Clarke, of Park Hill, Tring, and killed by Mr. Tom Tompkins, junior. An apparatus was fixed on Saturday, and at about 4 a.m. on Tuesday the fire was lighted, and the ox was slowly turned on a spit, until cooked, by machinery worked by an attendant. Mr. Savage, from Stratford-on-Avon, a man used to ox-roasting, attended to the cooking, and Mr. Rogers, Ashridge House, assisted, also men in Mr. Ginger's employ. A fence had been erected to form an enclosure round the ox, and some 3,000 tickets of admission had been issued. Great numbers of people went to witness the roasting, and at about 5 o'clock the cutting up commenced, people having tickets getting slices of the well-cooked, delicious meat, which, in paper or on plates, was taken home."

An old parishioner who attended the ceremony assures me that the ox was roasted on the left, not the right, side of the road to Berkhamsted House. His slices of meat were not well-cooked—in fact, he had to put them in the oven on arriving home—but he conceded that the helpings were generous and entirely "off the ration."

By the way, the name of the "Cow Roast" inn, between Northchurch and Tring, is not derived from an ox-roasting ceremony. The name is more probably a corruption of "Cow Rest" or "Cow Roost," as it was customary in years gone by for drovers to stay the night at the inn while their cattle grazed and rested in a nearby paddock. Similarly, Victoria-road was once the site of a close or paddock attached to the Goat Inn, where, at certain times of the year, large herds of Welsh cattle on the way to Barnet fair were grazed and rested. This was undoubtedly one of the closes which gave Three Close-lane its name.

## The Party Spirit

Discussing Christmas and New Year parties, an elderly friend of mine maintained that the younger generation of to-day had largely lost the art of providing their own amusement.

That may be so, but it is important to remember that nowadays a party is one of many incidents in fairly full lives, whereas in years gone by a party was something to look forward to weeks and even months in advance.

For the well-to-do Christmas and the New Year certainly brought a fine round of entertainment. In turn every large house held a lavish party, and the balls at Ashridge, Haresfoot, Rossway and other mansions were often dazzling affairs. They meant hard work for the servants, whose reward came with that once famous and now very rare annual event, the servants' ball. Those were glorious romps which kept everyone gay until the small hours. In fact, the servants' ball at Rossway often continued until 6 o'clock in the morning—and even then some of the tireless lads and lassies were "game" for a few more dances!

## An Early Band

On the other hand, for ordinary cottagers, and especially for the womenfolk, the winter was dull in the extreme. It was hardly surprising that most men spent their evenings at the inns, which, in Victorian times, were more numerous than they are to-day.

It was customary, so Henry Nash tells us in "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted," for each inn, in turn, to hold a social evening, at which amateur vocalists and instrumentalists exercised their talents. The "Five Bells" (now Mr. Norman Clarke's shop) was an especially popular rendezvous, for once a week it was the headquarters of the town's first musical band, founded many years before St. Peter's Band. Most of the members were tradesmen, and their rehearsals and concerts had the atmosphere of a social club—especially at Christmas! Nash says that it was considered a misfortune

for a stranger to miss the "select gathering" at the "Five Bells," where, let it be whispered, most of the town's business was discussed and matured ready for approval at vestry!

But that was a long, long time ago. It would be easy to paint attractive pictures of life in a Dickensian Berkhamsted of cobbled streets, good cheer, and—for the few—high living. But were those "good old days" so very good, after all?

## THE MINISTRY OF DIVINE HEALING

(Contributed)

Christ came and lived our human life as God means all human lives to be lived, and showed how our human life could express God. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." He showed us how the human results of sin could be healed. By His Life, by His Works of Healing, and by His Teaching, He showed us how life should be lived if it is to fulfil God's purpose. He called men into fellowship with Himself in this whole work of redemption and restoration, of which the Healing Ministry of the Church is a most vital part. One of the first things we have to learn, if we are to have real faith, is that there never can be the slightest doubt that it is God's Will to heal. If "God is Love" and if it is true that "In Him is no darkness at all," if He is "the Lord and Giver of Life," then He cannot contradict His own Nature by willing disease. We see Christ healing all who came to Him, and we have no record of His ever refusing to heal anyone.

—"Healing Through the Power of Christ," by the Rev. J. Wilson, Vicar of St. Mary's, Somers Town.

The proceeds of the Horticultural Show, held on August 31, have been distributed as follows: West Herts Hospital, £22 19s. 7d.; British Legion Benevolent Fund, £10.

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