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By
"BEORCHAM"

One Thousand Years Old

A wordy "Battle of the Bulge" has been started by the possibility—at the moment it is nothing more than a possibility—of the county boundary being revised. A glance at the map shows that Hertfordshire's meandering border plays some curious pranks in our locality, thrusting a long finger, for no apparent reason, far into the wasp-waist of Buckinghamshire. Similarly, down Barnet way Hertfordshire digs a crooked toe into Middlesex, almost splitting its smaller but more populous neighbour in two.

But there is no need to apologise for the wavy outline of our county. The map of England is very much like a jig-saw puzzle, and we have only to look at the ungainly shapes of Bucks, Oxon and Berks to realise that Herts is a comparatively compact county. Only four English counties—Rutland, Hunts, Middlesex and Beds.—are smaller than Herts, and its 632 square miles are snugly encircled by Bucks, Middlesex, Essex, Cambs. and Beds.

How old is our county? We would not be far wrong in estimating its age at 1,000 years. Unlike certain counties, such as Kent and Sussex, it was never a kingdom on its own, and it appears to have been created as a convenient administrative district in the south of the great midland Kingdom of Mercia. The earliest known reference to the shire of "Heroteford" is in a portion of the Chronicles recording the last and worst Danish invasion of 1011, but the shire system is known to have existed during the reign of Edgar (957-75). The practice was to have each shire under the control of a sheriff, who was the king's executive officer; and here it is interesting to note that until the reign of Elizabeth,

Herts and Essex shared the same sheriff.

The curious twists and turns of county boundaries are probably due to the dividing line being drawn between Saxon manors of varying shapes and sizes, or to the grouping together of smaller administrative areas, such as the Hundreds. Herts has few natural boundaries, the only one of importance being the River Lea, which separates our county from Essex between Waltham and Bishop's Stortford. In our own district, the spasmodic Bourne Gutter divides Herts from Bucks for a mile or two, and the little Thistle Brook marks the extremity of our county's penetration into Bucks beyond Marston Gate.

Fined for Sunday Travelling

Mention of the Kingdom of Mercia recalls some interesting speculations about Berkhamsted in Saxon times. For instance, it has been claimed that the kings of Mercia frequently resided at "Berchehamstede."

The Berkhamsted Pageant book states that Offa, greatest King of Mercia, possibly held court on the site afterwards occupied by the Castle. The book continues: "Offa's Mercia was the great Midland Kingdom, of which Berchehamstede fort formed one of the chief strongholds in the south, guarding a line of approach to London from the heart of the Mercian Kingdom near Lichfield. Berchehamstede and London both seem to have changed hands more than once in the wars of the 7th and 8th centuries between Mercia and her southern neighbour Wessex, prior to the union of England under Egbert and Alfred in the 9th century."

Cobb skates on very thin ice when he quotes a theory that King Wihthraede's parliament of A.D. 697 was held at Berkhamsted. This honour is also claimed for Brasted, in Kent, and with good reason, for Wihthraede was King of Kent, not of Mercia. Anyway, the laws passed at that historic gathering make interesting reading, and no one can say that Sabbatarians failed to use their influence. If a master made a servant work on Sunday—which was defined as commencing at sunset on Saturday—he was to be fined eighty shillings. A servant who travelled by his own choice on Sunday was to be fined six shillings or be whipped. And—here's a harsh penalty for silence!—"If any stranger shall wander privately through the country, and shall neither cry aloud nor sound his horn, he shall be taken for a thief, and shall be either slain or banished."

Swallowed Up!

The temporary flooding of the "dip" in Swing Gate-lane near Long Green, caused by the overflowing of a roadside pond, recalls an "old wives' tale" often

told in Berkhamsted many years ago.

A huntsman had the misfortune to ride into a bog at this spot. He was unable to extricate himself, and his cries for assistance were heard by a postman returning from Bottom Farm. The postman went to the rescue, but soon got into difficulties himself. And so the unfortunate men were engulfed by the bog, never to be seen again.

A sad, sad, story, picturesque but terrifying enough to scare children from wandering too far into the wilds of Swing Gate-lane. Of course, the tale has no more foundation of fact than many similar stories told about bogs and quicksands in various parts of the country.

The Whistling Weathercock

I have been asked if there is any special significance in the choice of cocks as the wind indicators of many churches, including, of course, our own parish church.

Several explanations may be given, the first and most obvious that a cock is simple of design and extremely effective. The cock also signifies watchfulness, making it especially appropriate for churches. It may be symbolic, too, of the cock that crowed thrice when St. Peter denied Christ. But the cock is not confined to churches, of course; it is so common that the word "weathercock" long ago passed into general circulation to embrace wind indicators of many and varied designs. Incidentally, a church on the Isle of Sheppey has a horse as a weather-vane, and still more unusual is a church at Standish, near Wigan, where an owl clawing a rat may be seen on the tower.

Returning to the weathercock of St. Peter's, I believe it was mentioned in an earlier article that this familiar object could once be heard as well as seen. Metal tubes fitted to the wings of the "bird" emitted a piercing whistle in high winds—an eerie and monotonous dirge which brought so many protests from High-street and Castle-street residents that the weathercock was rendered speechless. The muted tubes, however, may still be seen.

An Outspoken Churchwarden

Of all the characters who flit across the pages of local history, few arouse so much interest and curiosity as Nathan Paine, a prominent 17th century townsman.

We do not know much about him other than that he was a man of substance and a churchwarden of St. Peter's. Indeed, his name would have been forgotten long ago had he not had the courage to speak his mind at a time when most of his contemporaries preferred the safety of silence.

It was in May, 1649, only a few months after the execution of Charles I, when Nathan Paine told guests at a Berkhamsted wedding feast that the late king was the victim of "the most horrid murder that ever any history made mention of." It was, he said, a plot worse than the gunpowder treason, and there was no difference save that

one was under ground and the other above ground. He regretted ever supporting the Parliamentarians; if he had known of the outcome he would never have drawn his sword for them, and he would never draw it for them again. "Careless talk," indeed!

Nathan Paine was reported to the justices, but whether he suffered for his expression of loyalty we have no record. One likes to think that the matter was allowed to drop. At any rate, he was free to serve as churchwarden in 1658, two years before the monarchy was restored.

Ends without End

Visitors are often intrigued by the large number of "Ends" in the district—Potten End, Gossoms End, Heath End, Bourne End, etc. There is no end of them. I have counted no fewer than twenty-one on the Berkhamsted Citizens' Association's footpaths map—and many more can be found by extending one's boundary.

This place-name peculiarity is not confined to our part of the country, but "Ends" are perhaps more plentiful here than anywhere else. The origin of the name has long been a subject for speculation, one theory being that "End" was a favourite suffix of a Scandinavian tribe who settled in this country in Anglo-Saxon times, migrating westward from the coast to Colechester, Felsted, Waltham, Sawbridgeworth, Wheathampstead and finally Berkhamsted. And hereabouts those stout old Nordies stayed, scattering Ends by the dozen.

The Ends shown on the footpaths map are as follows: Church (2), Ford, Valance, Roe, Barley, Gossoms, Potten, Piccotts, Lovetts, Heath, Pouchen, Bourne, Counters, Bods, Moor, Green, Bennetts, Apsley, Bury Mill, and Pednormead. All are within a few miles of Berkhamsted.

One End has lost its old name, for Kick's (or Kit's) End is now known as Kitsbury.

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