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In and Around Berkhamsted

By "BEORCHAM"

May Day Revels

Long before it achieved political significance, the First of May was an important day in the calendar. In this district, as everywhere else in "Merrie England," maypoles were set up in market places or on village greens, May Queens were elected in the traditional way, and "Jacks-in-the-Green" added to the gaiety of the day.

Here and there the festivities linger on, perhaps rather self-consciously nowadays. But gone are the times when it was customary for citizens young and old to make for the woods at midnight or in the early hours of May Day, gathering hawthorn branches and wild flowers with which to decorate their houses. Even the barns and cowbyres were festooned. This custom, said to be of pagan origin, was doubtless a form of tribute to the goddess of fertility. It was criticised and condemned many times in our rough island story, particularly by the Puritans.

In more modern times May Day celebrations have often had the taint of commercialism. Most of the information I have collected about local festivities tells of excursions into the woods and meadows for flowers, and subsequent parades with garlands from door to door for the less romantic purpose of soliciting alms. These parades varied from the picturesque to the comic. At Watford, for instance, small girls carried garlands through the streets, singing a May Day carol which included the verse :

We've been rambling all this night,
And some time of this day;
And now, returning back again,
We bring a garland gay.

Until fairly recent times the children of Aldbury decorated small chairs and seated dolls in them, carrying their

enthroned "May Queens" round the village as they sang their carol and collected pennies. Instead of chairs, some of the children carried sticks decorated with leaves and flowers.

Children were not alone in making May Day a pretext for collecting alms. In Berkhamsted and many neighbouring villages "Jacks-in-the-Green" made annual appearances. "Jack" was usually the local chimney-sweep; he donned an elaborate hooped framework decorated with evergreens and flowers, blackened his face, and danced in and out of the crowds, singing lustily and ringing bells to supplement his vocal efforts. This was part of the song of Berkhamsted's "Jacks" :

The May, the May, the very first of May,
The springtime of the year,
We come round to your door to-day
To taste of your strong beer;
And if you haven't got any strong beer,
We'll be content with small.

So give us a cup, and we'll drink it all up,
And thank the Lord for all.

The doggerel varied from district to district, and so did the music. Little Gaddesden had a particularly tuneful May song, and Miss Dorothy Erhart has saved it from oblivion by having it published.

Ancient and Modern

I wonder how many townspeople are aware of an interesting link between St. Michael's, Sunnyside, and Berkhamsted Parish Church?

When St. Peter's was restored in 1870, considerable structural alterations included the removal of the old south porch and an overhead chamber. Flints from demolished dividing walls were not thrown away but carefully stored in Messrs. Matthews' yard, there to remain for many years until the building of a new church at Sunnyside gave someone a bright idea. Why not incorporate the surplus flints in the wall of the new church? The suggestion found immediate favour, and thus the district's most modern church (it was built in 1909, three years after All Saints') can claim that its walls contain material from the town's oldest church.

This information was supplied to me some years ago by that grand old Berkhamsted veteran, the late Councillor W. G. Gilbert. He was one of the craftsmen engaged on the restoration of St. Peter's, and it was due to his vigilance that one of the 14th century tiles formerly in the floor of the chancel was preserved. When a new pavement was installed, the old tiles, admittedly cracked and badly worn, were thrown on a scrap heap, but Mr. Gilbert rescued the best specimen and gave it to the late Mr. C. H. B. Quennell, the historian, who had the tile mounted on wood and restored it to the church. This 600 years old relic, manufactured locally and with its fleur-de-lys design still visible, hangs on a pillar facing the south door.

The Bourne Gutter

When, a month ago, I mentioned that the Bourne Gutter marks the Herts-Bucks border for a mile or two, I was unaware that this spasmodic stream had started flowing for the first time since before the war.

"Gutter" is not, perhaps, the best of names for a Bulbourne tributary which lends distinction to one of the loveliest valleys in the Home Counties. That is not an exaggerated claim, as anyone may discover on climbing the bride path beyond Bottom Farm and gazing down upon the lovely, lonely water-meadows between the wooded slopes. This is a completely unspoilt region, deserted save for picturesque Bottom Farm, which, by the way, stands near the site of an important settlement in prehistoric times. Fortunately, a late Victorian scheme for building a steam tramway along the valley, thus linking Hemel Hempstead and Chesham, failed to mature!

For generations the Bourne Gutter was superstitiously supposed to flow only at times of great distress. But the "woe-water" failed to come out in sympathy with the recent war, and its emergence soon after the February crisis was purely coincidental. No one to-day needs to be told that the natural causes which have refilled the Castle moats have also given the Bourne Gutter a new lease of life.

Bourne End, of course, derives its name from this little stream, and it is amusing to recall that a Victorian historian, noting that the village was called "Bone End" by some of the rustics, deduced that the phrase, "as dry as a bone," originated from the customary state of the river bed.

St. John's Well

For the first time since before the war, incidentally, St. John's Well (it's really a spring) started flowing again on April 22. Named after the hospital or monastery formerly on the site of the allotments (previously Lane's Nurseries), it was the town's chief source of drinking water in mediaeval times. Many old residents can recall when the water of St. John's Well was reputed to have curative properties, especially for the treatment of sore eyes.

The Cup That Cheers

When tea was expensive and wages were low, many Berkhamsted cottagers found a substitute by gathering and drying the leaves of sloe trees, using the broken fragments in the same way as the imported product.

I haven't tried this infusion, but the information comes to me from an old reader, whose mother could recall Londoners visiting the Berkhamsted district—then, as now, well supplied with sloe trees—for the express purpose of gathering the leaves. It is doubtful whether they made the journey merely to satisfy their own household needs; in all probability they were participating in a notorious racket of early Victorian days, when unscrupulous dealers were known to adulterate tea

by adding a high proportion of sloe leaves.

(Incidentally, traders' standards of honesty were shockingly low in what is sometimes considered a virtuous era. Many articles of food, notably tea and sugar, were adulterated by worthless and even dangerous ingredients, and we owe a great debt to legislators for the stringent regulations that now protect the public from such mean, despicable forms of exploitation.)

Mention of sloe tea recalls William Cobbett's remarks (in "Rural Rides") on the subject of ersatz coffee. In June, 1822, he rode from Hemel Hempstead to Chesham and reported: "In all the houses where I have been, they use the roasted rye instead of coffee or tea, and I saw one gentleman who had sown a piece of rye (a grain not common in this part of the country) for the express purpose. It costs about 1d. a pound, roasted and ground into powder."

Cobbett adds that the pay of labourers in this district varied from eight to twelve shillings. And it is doubtful whether they drank much rye coffee or sloe tea, for Cobbett says: "Grass mowers get two shillings a day, two quarts of what they call strong beer, and as much small beer as they can drink."

Bellringing at St. Peter's

A peal of Bob Major, 5,056 changes, was rung in three hours twelve minutes on the Berkhamsted Parish Church bells on Thursday evening, April 24.

Among the ringers were two who were taking part for the first time in a peal—these were Elsie Savory (No. 2) and Olive Martin (treble), both of whom have learned their ringing in the Parish Church belfry. The other members of the team came from Apsley and were Walter Ayre (No. 3), Edwin Upton (No. 4), Herbert Gates (No. 5), Augustin V. Good (No. 6), William C. Puddifoot (No. 7) and William C. Hughes (tenor).

The ringers wish to tender apologies to nearby residents for their lateness in finishing—it was not intentional but was due to the unavoidable late arrival of two of the band.

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