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BACKGROUND TO A CURRENT CONTROVERSY

An Elizabethan Market House Started It All!

Although action cannot be taken for many years, considerable interest has been aroused by the proposal that the row of buildings from the "One Bell" public house to the Church should be demolished to restore the High-street to its former spaciousness and dignity—and, incidentally, show the west front of St. Peter's in all its glory.

This, of course, is a controversial issue. Some applaud the proposal, others condemn it as a fantastic vision utterly beyond the realm of practical politics. A third school of thought prefers the "status quo," finding some rare, artistic beauty in the shadows of Back-lane and maintaining that the row of buildings in dispute adds to the old-world character of the town.

There is nothing new in this controversy. The late Mr. R. A. Norris, historian of St. Peter's Church, said it was "a town improvement which came very near accomplishment in the early sixties of the last century." He mentioned, too, that "it is not difficult to imagine what a noble prospect of the Church would be opened up if the 17th century encroachment of the buildings from the 'One Bell' eastward could be set back to the original line as indicated by the Court House."

There, in a nutshell, is the historical background to the controversy—the row of buildings is an encroachment! Even in Victorian days it was still known as "Grab-all-row," though by that time feelings of indignation at 17th century impudence had vanished

and the epithet was used humorously rather than maliciously.

The trouble started in Elizabethan days, when Berkhamsted was a village of but a few hundred inhabitants, most of whom lived in the square bounded by High-street, Water-lane,

Castle-street and the Bulbourne. The highway itself was a rough track fringed by a narrow village green or roadside waste which sloped down to a row of shops and houses in line with what we now call Back-lane. Thus the Court House originally faced the High-street—its builders obviously would not have put the borough's "civic centre" in an obscure side street—and travellers walking or riding along the highway had a view of the west front of St. Peter's, broken only by the elms and other large trees which studded the grass verge.

How, then, did part of Berkhamsted's little "village green" become a built-up area? Our Elizabethan forebears are to blame for the encroachment. They wanted a new market house, and as the possessors of what was then an unnecessarily wide High-street, perhaps

A "BEORCHAM" ARTICLE

it is not surprising that they selected a site on the roadside waste. This was at the top of Water-lane. The market house protruded into the High-street several feet beyond the frontage of the "One Bell" (which was built at a later date on the site of butchers' shambles adjoining the market house), but ample room was left for the small, slow-moving traffic of the day. It is just possible that an earlier market house occupied the same site, for long before Elizabethan days Berkhamsted was noted for its markets. At any rate, the "village green" between the church and what is now King's-road had been the home of our statute fairs and markets from time immemorial.

Built "On Stilts"

Berkhamsted's market house was built "on stilts," similar to the ancient buildings still surviving in many country towns—buildings, it may be added, which are also encroachments and often cause acute traffic congestion. Some twenty stout oak posts supported a brick and timber chamber used mainly for the storage of corn pending market transactions. The lower part of the building was open on all four sides, and here, sheltered from rain if not from wind, vendors set up their stalls. Later, when the High-street was widened and the grass verge disappeared, the footpath on the north side of the road actually passed under the market house.

A paper in the church chest states that the shambles (and, it is presumed, the market house too) were built by

subscription in the reign of Elizabeth. The following extracts from a book dated February, 1584, are of particular interest:

For timber for framing and finishing the market crosse, with all carpenters worke, 41s. To Thomas Gates, for his worke and his man's, about the Church House, Shamble House, Crosse House, Markett House, and the Church, 43s.

Also for lath nables for the Crosse House, 2,000, 3s.

Also paid to Edward Cooper for carriage of chains to make the Crosse House, 6d.

The Shambles

Cobb, in his "History of Berkhamsted," also quotes the following from "A Survey of the Markett Howse, Shambles, . . . and Markett within the Towne and Burrough of Barkhamsted St. Peters . . . parcel of the possessions of Charles Stuart late King of England," compiled by the Parliamentary Commissioners in July, 1653:

All that Markett House standing and being within the Towne . . . aforesaid, being the Corne Markett, built with Timber and covered with Tyle and lofted overhead, and now in the possession of the churchwardens . . . conteyning in length 70 foote or thereabouts, and in breadth 18 foote or thereabouts, which were value to be worth by the year, 30s.

All that Markett House called the Butter Markett . . . conteyning 18 foote square, 10s' . . . All those Shambles called the Butchers' Shambles, divided into several stalles, near ye Markett Howses . . . conteyning in length 50 foote, and in breadth 12 foote, 15s.

The shambles, built on the roadside waste beside the market house, started the row of buildings responsible for the present controversy. Private enterprise stepped in and supplanted the shambles by permanent buildings, commencing with an inn and continuing with houses and shops to within a few feet of the parish church railings. Buildings which previously faced the High-street were completely obscured by "Grab-all-row," and it is remarkable that no word of protest at such a barefaced encroachment appears in parish documents. Similar liberties were taken in many towns—as, for instance, at Thame in Oxfordshire. Happily, Berkhamsted's "grabbers" did not dare to build their houses and shops in line with the market house, otherwise they would have created a road "bottleneck" as serious as that at Gossoms End.

Accident—or Arson?

Even in early Victorian days, cries were heard that the market house caused traffic congestion. True, it still provided welcome shelter for stall-holders and their customers, and in wet weather old cronies loved to loiter and gossip beneath the rat-infested upper chamber. But there was growing feeling that the market house had outlived its usefulness and was an eyesore as well as an obstruction. One man was daring enough to attempt to bring it to the ground, and no one apparently had the slightest inclination to intervene. Henry Nash, in his "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted," tells us that the man "was accustomed to the use of the saw, and this he vigorously applied to some of the posts that supported the fabric. But eventually he had to abandon the task; he had not carefully considered the labour

involved in cutting through some twenty oak posts filled with nails—the accumulation of ages."

But there was another and easier way of getting rid of the building—by fire! No one knows how the market house came to be reduced to ashes, but tongues wagged knowingly long after that hectic night of August 23, 1854, when the town was lit up by flames as the building crashed among the stout oak posts that had supported it for nearly three centuries. Having expressed strong views on the "eyesore," at least one townsman was glad to have a perfect alibi on the night of the fire—business had detained him many miles from Berkhamsted! Many other residents were suspected, but the culprit, if there was one, was never found.

No one alive can possibly recollect the old market house, but some years before the war the writer interviewed the late Mrs. Charles Osborn on her 94th birthday and heard her describe the market house as "a crazy old building" under which she had bought cakes, sweets and fruit from the stalls of two Chesham traders, Mrs. Dormer and Mr. Stone. Mrs. Osborn recalled that at the western end of the building were steps leading to the upper chamber, where sacks of grain were stored before being sold in the market. Market days, she added, were great occasions, stall-holders and buyers flocking in from all parts of the district, lining the High-street with their wagons and gigs.

Stocks and Stares

In front of the market house stood the "village stocks," relic of an ancient mode of punishment that had already fallen into disuse. But Nash states that it was customary for boys entering or leaving the Bourne School to be placed in the stocks, giving them "a taste of this wholesome discipline without the fee of one shilling, that being the legal charge of the parish

(Concluded on page 8)

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"BEORCHAM" *(Concluded from page 5)*

constable for placing a drunken man in a place of conspicuous safety."

With the old market house burnt to ashes, opinion was unanimous against rebuilding on the same site. A committee, with General Finch as chairman and strongly supported by the rector (Rev. J. Hutchinson) solved three problems by drawing up a scheme for the provision of a market house, town hall and rooms for the rapidly growing Mechanics' Institute under one roof. Mr. William Hazell obtained the present site at a cost of £825, voluntary subscriptions provided £2,610 of the building cost of £3,291, and a further £575 was raised by a bazaar in the Castle grounds. By the time the Town Hall was opened in August, 1860, Berkhamsted had almost forgotten its old market house—but its legacy, "Grab-all-row," is still with us!