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# John Sayer's "Guift"

DEAN INCENT, Thomas Bourne, George Nugent, Augustus Smith—it is not difficult to start a list of bygone local worthies whose "good works" deserve honourable mention in our history books.

But of Berkhamsted's many benefactors, it is probably safe to say that no name is more familiar than that of the founder of the almshouses at Cowper-road corner. Every Berkhamstedian must have seen the tablet which records "The Guift of John Sayer, Esqre, 1684." Generations of schoolboys have pestered parents with questions about the spelling of the name John with a capital I!

For over 250 years Sayer's charity has benefited elderly widows of the district, and his almshouses, so simply designed that it would be difficult to estimate their age if the date were not shown, are among the few old High-street properties which retain their original frontages. Quaint and almost toy-like, for two centuries they were Berkhamsted's only bungalows, and they looked quaint still when an ancient hostelry named "The Royal Onk" stood on the adjacent site now occupied by the Gas Company's offices.

### An Unpopular Squire

All honour to John Sayer for his public-spirited generosity—but did you know that contemporaries regarded him as an arch-enemy of the people of Berkhamsted?

He came to the town towards the end of 1662, making his home at Berkhamsted Place shortly after two wings of the mansion had been destroyed by fire. Incidentally, he was a near neighbour of his brother, the Rev. Joseph Sayer, who was Rector of Northchurch.

Within a few years John Sayer was the most unpopular squire Berkhamsted had ever known. Naturally, he interested himself in local affairs—that was expected of the town's "first citizen"—but parishioners were shocked when he started behaving in a most high-handed manner and interfering with ancient rights. He diverted revenues from the Church, the "Free Schoole" and the poor; and in desperation the rector, churchwardens and

schoolmasters petitioned Charles II, pointing out how Sayer "doth much trouble your petitioners with suites in your Majesties name, under pretence of a grant from your Majesty." The case was tried and Sayer won the day—but only at the expense of a further slump in his reputation locally.

### Charles II's Head Cook

Tradespeople and yokels continued to touch deferential forelocks as Squire Sayer cantered by on his mare, but behind his back he was contemptuously spoken of as "the head cook and bottle-washer"—a name degrading for a squire, but not quite so inappropriate as it sounds.

For Sayer was Master of the Household, or Head Cook, to Charles II, and was described as "your Majesties Servant and Cooke" in the petition quoted above. During the time when Parliamentarians held sway and the King's health was toasted behind locked doors, Sayer was loyally sharing his master's exile.

However unpopular John Sayer may have been during his 20 years at Berkhamsted—he died in 1682 and his ugly, massive tomb is in St. Peter's Church—townspeople revised their opinion of the old squire when he bequeathed £1,000 for founding and maintaining six almshouses. His widow, Mary Sayer, at once interested herself in the charity, supplementing the bequest by a gift of several hundred pounds and drawing up elaborate instructions for administering the charity.

### Piety, Humility, Amity

The building of the six almshouses cost £269, and the large balance was used to purchase land at Chilton, Bucks, and a small property adjoining the almshouses, known as "Wood's Close." The annual income of these investments was used for the benefit of the almshouses and the poor of Berkhamsted and Northchurch.

The almshouses, stated the trust deed, "shall be for no other use but for the habitation of six poor widows," and the trustees had powers to "put out any of the said poor widows for any misdemeanour . . . and to put some other more deserving widow in her room."

This clause suggests that it was originally intended to build a high wall round the almshouses, entrance being gained through a single gateway. But there is no evidence that a wall was built in front of the houses, and certainly there would not have been much

themselves with piety towards God and humility towards their neighbours, and with peace, amity and kindness one towards another, being in all things sober and temperate; and if any of them shall commit any notorious offence against any of the forementioned duties, they shall be mulcted, according to the nature of the offence . . . which mulct shall be deducted out of the monthly stipend of the said offender."

### Two by Two to Church

Except in case of sickness they had to "repair to the parish church every Sunday morning and afternoon, going orderly two by two according to their several ages, the oldest going last, and there abiding shall behave themselves devoutly during the whole time of divine service and sermon . . . and for every neglect or miscarriage in these particulars they shall have 3d. deducted out of their monthly allowance; and

*The Old Almshouses (the six cost £269 to build!) are the subject of this month's "Beorcham" article*

for every neglect to receive the Holy Sacrament of Christ's Supper, at what time soever it is there administered . . . they shall forfeit out of their said allowance 2s.; and if any one, which God forbid, shall neglect to receive the Sacrament for the space of a whole year, she shall be utterly excluded and expelled the said house for ever."

Lodgers were forbidden, and almshouses were not permitted to sleep in any other house in the parishes of Berkhamsted and Northchurch. If they wished to go away from the town to visit friends, they had to obtain the trustees' permission, and that permission was never granted to more than one almswoman at a time or for a longer period than one month a year. Any widow absent for more than one month, "unless surprised by sickness and so burdened from returning within the space of two months," was to be expelled from the almshouse for ever.

### Open the Door—!

One clause is of especial interest: "The youngest widow . . . shall every night shut the outer gate and bolt it at the hour of eight in the winter and ten in the summer, and shall open it every morning, at five in the summer and seven in the winter . . . and shall keep the court clean between the wall and the house." The youngest widow also had to assist other almshouses in case of sickness. If these duties were neglected deductions were made from her allowance; "if she shall not mend after admonition twice given her by any one of the governors, then to be utterly removed and expelled the said house for ever."

This clause suggests that it was originally intended to build a high wall round the almshouses, entrance being gained through a single gateway. But there is no evidence that a wall was built in front of the houses, and certainly there would not have been much

room for a front yard without encroaching upon the High-street at one of its narrowest points. Perhaps the trustees turned a blind eye to this clause, as was the case when Mary Sayer stipulated that each almswoman "shall have 8s. by the month, reckoning 28 days only to the month, paid her . . . on the monument lately erected for the said John Sayer, Esq., on the Sunday after evening service." The trustees claimed that this clause was ambiguous, and almswomen were not required to go to church to receive their allowances. Incidentally, allowances unpaid during periods when almshouses stood vacant, as well as fines for misconduct, were to be spent on keeping the almshouses in good repair—but there are no records of money having been withheld from erring almswomen!

The widows were entitled to receive new cloth gowns once every three years. Mary Sayer stated that each gown was

to be "of 20s. value at least," and a Charity Report dated 1832 says that the previous issue of gowns was in 1828, at a total cost of £8 12s. 6d., or £1 8s. 9d. per gown. The report added that the cost "is greater than the sum allowed by Sayer's regulations; but by these regulations the gowns were to be provided once in three years, and the women do not now receive them quite so often." It was further stated that each widow received 10s. 6d. at Christmas as an allowance for fuel.

On several occasions the Sayer bequest has been supplemented. Martha Dere, in 1784, gave £500 to provide an extra 1s. 6d. weekly to each almswoman, and George and Elizabeth Nugent, who also provided funds for building a new workhouse, further increased the widows' allowances in 1822. In 1887 the strip of land near the

(Concluded on page 9)

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**JOHN SAYER** (*Concluded from p. 5*)

almshouses was sold and the proceeds used for the benefit of the almswomen. Other beneficent changes have been made from time to time, but it has not been possible to keep pace with the constantly increasing costs of maintaining the property in good repair. Some twenty years ago the Berkhamsted Citizens' Association showed fine public spirit by raising a large fund for modernising the almshouses, and last year the Rotary Club donated £10 for urgent repairs. But further renovations are now required, and shortly it may be necessary to issue a fresh appeal for funds. Meanwhile, the Charity Commissioners are being asked to agree to an amalgamation of the now inadequate upkeep fund with another local fund upon which few calls are made at the present day.