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This is Jubilee Year for the Berkhamsted Urban District Council, which was formed in April, 1898. In this article BEORCHAM recalls the ancient charters of the long defunct

Borough of Berkhamsted

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS Berkhamsted has enjoyed some measure of local self-government. Thanks to privileges granted by Edward the Confessor, the town's civic status was high even before the Norman Conquest, and Domesday Book described Berkhamsted as a borough with 52 burgesses. Then, between the years 1156 and 1618, no fewer than six charters were granted to the town, and for a short period Berkhamsted even sent its own representatives to Parliament.

* A long and proud tradition—and now nothing more than a tradition. Nearly 300 years have passed since the Corporation of Berkhamsted was allowed to lapse, a victim of civil war, poverty, apathy, and perhaps petty spite on the part of Charles II's advisers. That is why our chief citizen of to-day is not His Worship the Mayor but chairman of an urban district council.

UNTIL little more than a century ago Berkhamsted would have had little difficulty in reviving its old charters, but that opportunity was taken away by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. A new charter, not a revival of an old one, would be necessary to make Berkhamsted a borough to-day, but charters are no longer granted to small towns and Berkhamsted would have to be perhaps ten times its present size to merit higher municipal status. Many boroughs are smaller than Berkhamsted, it is true, but they survive because their old charters were never allowed to lapse or because they secured charters at a more opportune time. With the approach of the Berkhamsted Urban District Council's jubilee, however, this is an appropriate

time to delve into the history of local government and recall some of the privileges enjoyed by Berkhamstedians in years gone by.

Handsome Privilege

Our first known charter was granted in 1156 by Henry II. The "men and merchants" of Berkhamsted were to enjoy their privileges as well and as honourably, and better and more honourably, than in the days of King Edward (the Confessor), King William, and King Henry I, and they were to be free of all tolls and duties in England,

WARNING!

"Let none deride or evil do or speak against the Corporation, the Bailiff, or any of the Capital Burgesses."—From the Berkhamsted Borough Council's Orders, November 13, 1620.

Normandy and Spain. Anyone disquieting them was to forfeit £10. That this handsome privilege was exercised is shown by Cobb in his "History of Berkhamsted." In the Black Prince's time the Bailiff of Aylesbury demanded toll of some of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted, and in retaliation his goods were distrained when passing through our town!

HENRY II's charter was confirmed by Henry II and again by Edward IV, who granted Berkhamsted new privileges. The borough market was to enjoy complete monopoly of a wide area, for the new charter declared that no other market was to be set up within eleven miles of the town. Moreover, the inhabitants were to be exempt from jury service—a privilege cited successfully as late as 1840, but withdrawn by Act of Parliament in 1870.

The Rector to the Fore

Richard III, in 1584, and Queen Elizabeth, in 1598, renewed the ancient charter, and benefits were considerably extended by a new charter granted by James I. This was secured largely through the efforts of the Rev. Thomas Newman, rector of Berkhamsted, who

viewed with anxiety certain encroachments on Berkhamsted Common and hoped to safeguard ancient rights by having the town's old privileges confirmed and extended.

AN attested copy of James I's charter, on five skins of parchment, is preserved in the parish chest. Berkhamsted was made a "free borough town," and government was vested in a bailiff and a common council of 12 chief burgesses, who were elected annually. They were empowered to have a council house or guildhall and hold a court of record once a month. This monthly council meeting replaced the "postnote" court which had been held fortnightly since 1301, if not earlier, to deal with legal and administrative matters, including the appointment of constables, vice-constables, flesh tasters, leather-sealers, tasters of bread and beer, and water-bailiffs. Fines levied in this court,



Heraldic description: In a shield, Or, a triple towered castle azure, within a border of Cornwall, viz., sables besanted.

ONLY RELIC of the Berkhamsted Corporation is the coat of arms, designed for the common seal in James I's reign.

which previously had gone to the lord of the manor, were granted to the bailiff and burgesses. Incidentally, the borough was authorised to have its own prison or "goale" [sic]. Other privileges granted by James I included the holding of a market on Thursday each week, in addition to the ancient market held on Monday, and two additional annual fairs, on Shrove Monday and Whit Monday. A coat of arms for the seal of the borough was granted, the design being selected after "deliberate consideration that the glory of that place hath proceeded from the ancient castle there."

Cushions—and Handcuffs

An inventory dated 1642 tells us that the borough's possessions included "one green carpet and twelve cushions" for the comfort of the council, and shackles and two pairs of handcuffs for the discomfort of wrong-doers. The borough also possessed standard weights and measures, among them a brass half peck, a brass pint pot, and a brazen ell (for measuring cloth).

SOME of the bye-laws make curious reading. For instance, no one was allowed to let a house to a stranger, and no stranger was "permitted to be an inhabitant until he had compounded for his freedom and paid £5 to practise any trade." The Corporation directed that "there shall be not more than six alehouses licensed to draw or sell beer or ale within the borough, without the consent of the major part of the whole

company." Of particular interest was a recommendation that Northchurch should be incorporated in the borough of Berkhamsted. Three hundred years elapsed before town and village were amalgamated—in 1935, to be precise.

Familiar Names

The twelve original burgesses included Thomas Newman, rector, and Thomas Hunt, master of the Grammar School. Lists of bailiffs, recorders, chief burgesses, town clerks and sergeants at mace include such familiar names as Pitkin, Halsey, Duncombe, Wethered, Blunt, Heme, and Geary.

ROBERT NEWMAN, perhaps a son of the rector, appears to have been the last bailiff. He was elected in 1663, and during his term of office Berkhamsted lost interest in its civic responsibilities. Chauncy, the historian, states that the town "let the government fall, having grown very poor in the late [civil] war." Attempts were made, in 1664, to revive the Corporation, and an appeal was made to Charles II for a new charter, but the townspeople were apparently too apathetic to press their request. One historian has suggested that the King's advisers may have deliberately ignored the appeal for a new charter, in retaliation for Berkhamsted's refusal to pay Charles I's Ship Money tax of £25 levied on the borough in 1636. However, for many years Berkhamsted possessed the necessary powers to revive the Corporation without seeking a new charter. At the beginning of the 18th century four of the chief burgesses of 1663 were still living in the town, and they missed a great opportunity by not exercising their right to choose a bailiff and fill up the number of burgesses.

"BEORCHAM" will be very pleased to hear from readers who may possess documents, newspaper cuttings, etc., relating to the Berkhamsted Local Authority prior to 1898. Personal reminiscences will also be greatly appreciated.

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