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BERKHAMSTED'S WORST ENCROACHMENT

The Cottage in the Churchyard

By 'BEORCHAM'

Illustration (after L. Hassell)
by E. H. WILLIAMS

THE "mystery" of the cottage which formerly stood in the churchyard of Berkhamsted St. Peter has been partially solved. A rare and extraordinarily interesting picture has been found which corroborates all that has been written on the subject and shows that the cottage not only occupied a site of impudent prominence but was built against the church itself.

Only brief details could be given when the churchyard cottage was first mentioned in the *Review* two months ago. In 1703, it was stated, the cottage was given to the parish for use as the "habitation" of a poor family. For more than a century it continued to provide a rent-free home; then, in 1826, Vestry ordered the cottage to be pulled down "to open up the west entrance to the church."

Pictorial Evidence

This information, gleaned from a Charity Commissioners' report published about 115 years ago, aroused surprise, curiosity and not a little scepticism. Why was there no mention of such an interesting subject in local history books? Why should anyone wish to build a cottage in the churchyard when ample space was available elsewhere in the town? Why should the churchwardens have tolerated such flagrant sacrilege? One reader, convinced that there was no room for a cottage at the west end of the churchyard, accused the writer of day-dreaming!

But another reader came to the rescue with pictorial evidence. For many years Mr. A. Williams, of Queen's-road, has made a hobby of collecting pictures of bygone Berkhamsted, and our article reminded him

that he possessed a copy of an aquatint of the parish church dated 1817. The work of L. Hassell, it distinctly shows a quaint little cottage standing on that corner of the churchyard now known once a year as "The Field of Remembrance."

The picture, we thought, was one all parishioners would like to see, but a faded aquatint is not easily reproduced on the paper normally used for the *Review*. Happily, Mr. Williams' schoolmaster son, Mr. E. H. Williams, is an artist of considerable ability, and he kindly made a pen and ink copy of the original. His work is reproduced on the opposite page, and we hasten to add that some very obvious errors of perspective are Mr. Hassell's, not Mr. Williams'. The tower has not been moved or reduced in size since 1817!

Not "On the Doorstep"

The picture tells an interesting story and is especially valuable in showing exactly where the cottage stood. The statement that it was demolished "to open up the west entrance to the church" created the impression that it was literally "on the doorstep," but we now see that the cottage did not obstruct the way to the church. All the same it was an eyesore and undoubtedly it protruded into the High-street, perhaps to the edge of the present footpath.

The origin of the cottage has yet to be ascertained. An obvious suggestion is that it was the home of the parish clerk, and the building certainly has the appearance of a "church house." But if that were so it would have been church property from the start, whereas we know that it was not made over to the parish until 1703, when the cottage was presumably already old, and since it was granted to a poor family, in a dilapidated condition.

An Encroachment

We are on safer ground in assuming that the cottage was the most brazen of the many encroachments made in Berkhamsted during Elizabethan and early Stuart times. It was then that the town lost part of its wide High-street; as described in an earlier article, a market house was built on the village green at the top of Water-lane, and adjacent butchers' shambles and market stalls were artfully con-



verted into permanent buildings, creating the line of shops from the "One Bell" to the church, and relegating the Court House and other buildings which formerly faced the High-street to the shadows of Back-lane.

Having seen fellow townsmen succeed with those encroachments, a particularly impudent believer in private enterprise probably decided to build in the churchyard itself, and save money into the bargain by making use of the church walls. Our picture shows plainly that the cottage was "semi-detached."

Opportunism of this sort was widespread three or four centuries ago and was apparently accepted as inevitable, if not exactly right and proper. In many other parishes tenements were built against churches—for instance, those at St. Bartholomew's, Smith-field, were not removed until about 30 years ago. Stow, in his "Survey," mentioned other examples. Of St. Michael's, Cornhill, he wrote: "This hath been a fair and beautiful church, but . . . greatly blemished by the building of lower tenements . . . in place of a green churchyard, whereby the church is darkened, and in other ways annoyed." Most of these encroachments (for which the churches duly received rentals) were cleared away when a more enlightened age considered the practice a scandal.

Other Days, Other Ways

Here it is interesting to recall that in some parishes it was also the custom for market stalls and fair booths to be set up on "God's Acre," rentals and tolls again being paid to the church. Archery, too, was regularly practised in churchyards, arrow heads being sharpened on the stones and the yew trees providing the bows. In Berkhamsted, however, ample space for markets and fairs was available without intruding upon the churchyard, and Butts Meadow was the recognised training ground for archers.

On the other hand, our illustration provides a reminder that Berkhamsted Church was used for purposes which now seem strange, if not sacrilegious. Literally next door to the cottage may be seen the high archway which was the entrance to a chamber of the parish church in which the old manual fire engine was housed. This chamber (incorporated in the south aisle in 1870) was used in the Civil War as a prison for Royalists captured in the siege of Colchester. By the way, the present ringing loft in the tower is thought to have been an armoury where, centuries ago, pikes and swords belonging to the parish were stored.

A Change of Face

In our illustration the cottage unavoidably obscures an interesting feature which survived until about 80 years ago—the ancient south porch which now forms part of St. John's Chantry. This porch, of 14th century origin, was used as a baptistry, and above it was a small chamber of which the narrow window high up in the west wall of the chantry is the sole survivor. Perhaps it is not generally realised how greatly the church has been altered even in comparatively modern times; for instance, until 1870 the whole of the exterior was faced with stucco.

Finally, let us return to our illustration and note how the section of "Grab-all Row" shown in the foreground has changed since 1817. The most picturesque feature disappeared many years ago—the tiny shops with the conspicuous verandah. In their place stand the offices of Messrs. W. Brown & Co. and the local branch of the Central Meat Co. Neighbouring buildings have acquired shop windows but are otherwise unchanged—the attic windows of White's and Pooock's shops are easily recognised. By the way, the artist has not been unjust to the surface of the High-street—it really was a rough, rutted carriage-way which, in wet weather, provided a mud-bath for the citizens!

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