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'BEORCHAM' records some little-known local history . . .

## Taverns in the Town

NEARLY one hundred articles have appeared in this series, and topics have ranged from the Castle and the schools to the workhouse and even the old Berkhamsted prison. Yet so far little has been said about the town's ancient hostelries, mainly because it was feared that the subject might be thought unsuitable for a church magazine.

But why make excuses? Old parish documents contain many references to inns and beer; for instance, the churchwardens frequently ordered ale by the gallon for bellringers and others whose work for the parish merited reward in liquid form, and trustees of a church charity always held their meetings in a nearby tavern. Moreover, in years gone by ale-tasters were among the officials appointed at the half-yearly courts held in the Court House.

### The "Sarson's Head"

Berkhamsted probably possessed an inn even before the parish church was built, but the earliest authentic information takes us back no farther than the first half of the 16th century. In the reign of Henry VIII, we learn, the *Sarson's Head* changed its name to the *George* and then to the *Prince's Arms*. This thrice-named inn closed its doors generations ago, as did the *Cock* (spelt "Cokke"), which gave King's-road its old name of Cock-lane, later corrupted to Cox's-lane.

At the top of Highfield-road stood the *Chaffcutters Arms*, where, in 1824, Joseph Howard catered for the thirsts of farm labourers. At that time a favourite resort of business-men was the *Five Bells*, now the shop of Mr. Norman Clarke, who hangs an electric clock from the gallows-like projection which formerly supported the inn sign. A few doors away stood the *Red Lion*,

which ceased to be an inn in 1870 and was pulled down about twelve years ago to make way for the Midland Bank. Adjoining the Sayer almshouses was a tiny alehouse, the *Royal Oak*, which was demolished when new offices for the Gas Company were built; and Blindell's shoe shop, on the opposite side of the street, was once the *Star and Garter*. Shortly after the first World War Berkhamsted lost three more licensed houses—the *Stag* (at Gossoms End), the 17th century *Boat* (now a shop in Castle-street), and the *Edward VI* (originally the *Henry VIII*) in Mill-street. Northchurch also lost its old *Pheasant Inn*.

### Six Alehouses Only

In 1659 the Corporation of Berkhamsted decided that there should be not more than six alehouses in the borough, and as late as 1830 the total number was but seven. Then came the notorious Beer Bill, and soon there were seven public-houses and off-licences in Castle-street alone! Between 1830 and 1890 the population doubled while the number of public-houses increased four-fold. Drunkenness declined, however, and in 1890 an ardent local temperance reformer admitted that conditions had greatly improved since early Victorian times, when, on Sunday mornings, "many of the shops and all the public-houses were open until the bells began tolling for church," and worshippers on the way to matins often had to step out of the way of drunken citizens.

### Three Breweries in the Town

Formerly all the inns and public-houses in Berkhamsted were supplied by the town's three breweries—Foster's, in Chesham-road; Locke and Smith's, in Water-lane; and Lane's, adjoining Monk's House, which always supplied the *King's Arms*.

The local brewing industry, which employed 60 men in 1892, had a long ancestry, for way back in 1698 John Norden declared that malt-making was our main local industry. The maltings in Chapel-street, now the Boy Scout headquarters, belonged to rosters, whose brewing interests apparently started early in the 19th century, when Charles Foster was landlord of the *Swan*. At that time a cooper was kept busy producing barrels and casks in a workshop on the site of the Town Hall.

### Famous Posting House

Few old inns have a more interesting tale to tell than the *King's Arms*, which was at the height of its fame in the coaching days. Here the tired traveller was always sure of a warm welcome, whether he stayed for the night or merely called for a few minutes while the horses were changed. There were other popular inns in the town, it is true, but the *King's Arms*, as the

recognised port of call of the Royal Mail coaches, was supreme. In the early part of the 19th century the landlord, John Page, was High Constable and postmaster, and his daughter, Mary (Polly) Page, was one of England's most celebrated hostesses. A contemporary writer says that she had charming manners, great conversational powers, and "held the peerage at her tongue's end." Polly Page certainly had many opportunities of meeting the notabilities of her day, and among her friends and admirers was Louis XVIII, who, when journeying between London and the home of his exiled Court at Aylesbury, always stopped at the *King's Arms* to chat with the fair Polly. When Louis regained the throne, Polly spent a holiday at his Royal Palace.

At the *King's Arms* was held one of the strangest gatherings in the history of our town—a mass meeting organised by influential landowners to protest against the building of the railway! The landlord, perhaps more than anyone else, had good reason to dread the coming of the railway; the coaching days ended abruptly, and few posting inns escaped the subsequent slump.

### At the "Five Bells"

The *Five Bells*, to which a brief reference has already been made, was in early Victorian days the headquarters of the local band. The weekly practices formed the basis of a social club, and Henry Nash, in "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" (1890), tells us that "all the most respectable portions of society made a point of attending. . . For a stranger to have missed the opportunity of an introduction to this select gathering was considered a misfortune." He added that each public house had one night in the week for special social meetings. "If any important business was pending, it could only be successfully brought to an issue at some of those meetings. Most of the parish business was there discussed and matured ready for final approval at vestry."

It may be mentioned that the *Swan*, where trustees of a church charity regularly held their meetings, is traditionally said to be linked to the parish church by a secret tunnel!

### Beside the Old Market House

When the *Five Bells* closed its doors, many of the patrons transferred their custom to the *Red Lion*, which for many years was the unofficial headquarters of the Volunteers. Circuses were often held on the long strip of land which, before Clarence-road was made, stretched from the back of the *Red Lion* to Butts Meadow. Incidentally, at the back of the *Five Bells* were staged many bouts between bare-fisted fighters, and it has been suggested that the long-forgotten *Cock Inn*, near King's-road corner, had a cock-fighting main.

The *One Bell*, built on the village green next door to the long-vanished market house, was a popular resort of stall-holders and their customers; and the *Fish*, in Mill-street, was well patronised by waggoners in days when

grain was taken to the old water-mill.

The central taverns were not necessarily the busiest. In 1824 John Siret, landlord of the *Goat*, made a speciality of catering for drovers, who regularly called for a night's lodging while on the way to and from London markets. Their cattle and sheep were safely penned for the night in neighbouring paddocks or "closes"—hence the name Three Close-lane. The *Cow Rest* (the name is thought to be a corruption of "Cow Rest") also catered for drovers.

### The "Crooked Billet"

The origin of the name of the ancient *Crooked Billet* is a favourite correspondence column topic, but no one can give a completely satisfactory answer. A reference to this inn appears in the Session Rolls for 1753, when a shovel-maker and a spoon-maker were involved in a dispute concerning the sale of an empty sack for sixpence and a pint of beer!

Happily, Berkhamsted inn-keepers and their patrons were well behaved and rarely fell foul of the law. Not so a Bovingdon alehouse keeper, who, in the 17th century, had his licence withdrawn for entertaining his cronies during the time of divine service.

In Elizabethan days the county justices found it necessary to warn inn-keepers that there was to be no eating or drinking during the time of divine service, and that no meat was to be served during Lent. In no circumstances was an innkeeper to allow a household servant to "tarry within his house to th' extente of typple and drinke," and stern warnings were issued against the playing of unlawful games.

### Beer—Twopence a Gallon!

Closing time was remarkably early—9 p.m. from Easter to Michaelmas, and 8 p.m. during the rest of the year.

And how much did beer cost in those far-off days? The "best" was to be not more than 4d. a gallon, and every innkeeper was required to provide a "second sorte" at 2d. a gallon for sale to poor neighbours!

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