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Those Were The Days!

★ Mr. F. W. CHAPPELL (70 years a chorister) ★
chats to 'BEORCHAM' about Bygone Berkhamsted

IT is doubtful whether any resident has livelier recollections of bygone Berkhamsted than Mr. Frederick William Chappell, of Queen's-road. Eighty-three years of age—he looks 20 years younger!—he is by no means our oldest inhabitant, but he is almost certainly the Bourne School's oldest "old boy." More remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that he has been a Berkhamsted chorister for more than 70 years. He was a choirboy of St. Peter's Church when the Rev. J. W. Cobb was rector, and he was the first man to respond to the Rev. J. Knatchbull's appeal for choristers when Kitsbury "Iron Church" was opened in 1890. Sixteen years later Mr. Chappell was the first choirman to enter All Saints' Church—and he still occupies his original stall and attends choir practices.

Mr. Chappell remembers "as if it were yesterday" the day when he wore the Bourne School uniform for the first time: dark blue tailcoat with bright buttons, grey corduroy trousers, white stockings, heavy nailed boots, and blue tam o' shanter with a red tassel and red band. He became a "Bourne boy" shortly after the original school-house (now the National Provincial Bank) was closed and the scholars were transferred to the Court House to join the Church School children. Mr. Samuel Timson, the former master, commenced business as a tailor at the old school-house, and every Saturday two scholars were detailed to scrub floors and sweep the yard, in return receiving hunks of bread and cheese and glasses of milk. One boy regularly asked for beer—and got it!

A Feast for the Scholars

Bourne's birthday (December 16) was a great occasion, Mr. Chappell recalled. The children met at the old school-house and, headed by the senior boy bearing the school banner, marched to the parish church for the annual commemoration service. Afterwards the scholars were taken to the King's Arms for a dinner of roast and boiled beef, mince pies, and lemonade. Then,

clutching more mince-pies and oranges, they ascended the parish church tower for a bird's eye view of Berkhamsted.

Mr. Chappell said that as a boy he was puzzled and rather worried by a remark made at a school dinner by the rector, who expressed the hope that every Bourne boy would marry a Bourne girl. As there were 20 boys to 10 girls, keen competition was feared!

All for a Shilling a Week

In 1879, Mr. Chappell left school and climbed the hill to the Rectory to receive the traditional Bourne parting gifts—a Bible and prayer book. In addition he received an allowance of £6 on being apprenticed to Mr. Edward Hill, a tailor, whose shop stood on the site now occupied by the Westminster Bank.

For more than 70 hours a week Mr. Chappell worked, and worked hard, in an attic workroom. His hours were 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. in summer and 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. in winter—and after leaving the shop he often had to deliver parcels to customers in the outlying villages. There was no early closing day, and hours were longer on Saturday than on any other day; the shutters were never put up until 10 p.m., and often much later if customers were still in the shop. The only whole day's holiday was Christmas Day; contrary to custom, Mr. Hill expected his men to put in a full morning's work on Good Friday. Mr. Chappell was paid 1s. a week at the age of 14, and each year there was a shilling increase until, at the age of 20, he received 6s. a week. Fourpence an hour (£1 for a 60-hour week) was the standard rate of pay for a craftsman.

Disobedience!

Mr. Chappell recalled with a chuckle an incident which, at the time, was anything but amusing. On a wet January afternoon he was told to take a parcel to a customer at Kings Langley and was given 2d. to buy a child's ticket from Boxmoor to Berkhamsted after walking three-quarters of the way. The lad rebelled and went home to report this scandalous request to his parents. In the meantime Mr. Hill had notified the police of his apprentice's "disobedience," but as the result of family intervention someone else was detailed to take the parcel. Two months later, on a frosty March afternoon, Mr. Chappell politely obeyed when he was told to take a parcel to the butler at Abbots Hill, near Nash Mills. This time the tailor offered him no fare

money at all but told him to take the dog for company on the 13-miles walk! The dog was so exhausted that he had to be carried most of the way home.

"Plum Pudding Joe"

From his weekly wage of one shilling Mr. Chappell received one penny pocket money, and this he usually spent on sweets bought in Berkhamsted market from "Plum Pudding Joe," a quaint old Boxmoor character who sold two varieties of home-made sweets (red ones and white ones!) and penny slices of "spotted dick"—hence his nickname. Another stallholder was a butcher who introduced frozen meat to Berkhamsted at a time when the shopkeepers would not deign to sell anything but home-killed meat.

On the death of Mr. Hill, Mr. Chappell continued his apprenticeship under Mr. W. H. Newell. Later he was employed by Mr. E. W. Gibbs, who had a little tailor's shop at Victoria-road corner. When earning £1 a week, Mr. Chappell married and "lived very well" on what now seems an impossible wage. He was certainly better off than his father, who, when employed as a gardener by General Finch at Berkhamsted Place, brought up a family on 16s. a week.

Fairs in the High Street

For men in regular work, Mr. Chappell said, the old days were good old days. One worked hard, fed well, lived simply and contentedly, made one's own amusements, and looked forward for days and weeks to events which to-day would arouse little enthusiasm. Twice a year, for instance, there were statute fairs in the High-street. At Whitsuntide and again at Michaelmas stalls and sideshows were set up on the road and footpaths between King's-road and Prince Edward-street. There were coco-nut shies, swings, spinning jennies, and a boxing booth. One paid 2d. to see the fat lady and 3d. to see a six-legged horse! The Michaelmas Fair was popularly known as the "Onion Fair," for every year a firm of Leighton Buzzard market-gardeners had a remarkable stall outside the Crown Hotel devoted mainly to onions. At other times of the year circuses would be held on the Red Lion Meadow, on the Moor, or on the narrow strip of land now occupied by the houses in Station-road. Occasionally a travelling theatrical company hired the Town Hall for a week to present such old favourites as "East Lynne," "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and "Black-Eyed Susan." Victorians loved a good cry!

The Castle Fêtes

But the most exciting event of the year was the Oddfellows' August Bank Holiday fête in the Castle grounds. This was one of the biggest and best fêtes in the Home Counties; special trains were run and hundreds of Londoners, travelling at excursion rates, attended every year. The programme opened with a procession and ended with a magnificent fireworks display. Fried fish, winkle, oyster,

cockle and whelk stalls made the approach to the fête "smell like Brighton fish market"! The fish, heat, dust, and lusty singing ensured lively—sometimes rather too lively—business at the beer tents, where strong ale was sold at twopence a pint. The present entrance to the Castle grounds was never used; every year a massive wooden bridge was built over the moat opposite Castle-street, almost exactly on the site of the original drawbridge.

Scarcely less popular than the August Monday fête was the Whit-Monday sports meeting, also held in the Castle grounds. The sports were organised by the Berkhamsted Working Men's Club, whose headquarters were in "Snob's Alley." This little alley was the humble predecessor of Prince Edward-street; John Batchelor's greengrocery and second-hand furniture shop had to be pulled down as part of the widening scheme. Similar demolitions were made when Lower King's-road was built.

All in a Lifetime

But Mr. Chappell has witnessed other and greater developments; indeed, he has lived to see Berkhamsted double its size. One of his earliest memories is the building of the railway station and the laying of the fourth set of rails. That involved the making of an extra tunnel at Northchurch, and the excavated soil was brought to the station to build the embankment for new sidings. Before Lower King's-road was made, Castle-street was almost as busy as the High-street, and several times a day one would see the wagonettes which regularly plied between Chesham and Berkhamsted before Chesham had a railway of its own. A sensation was created when an old London "knife-board" horse bus was introduced; this led to bitter competition and harsh words between the rival drivers!

Yes, it was a quaint, leisurely, but at times most progressive town Mr. Chappell remembers. Thank you for a most interesting story!

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