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HOUSES with a HISTORY

ASKED to name the historic buildings of Berkhamsted, most townspeople would immediately think of St. Peter's Church, the ruined Castle, Berkhamsted School, and Berkhamsted Place. But what next? The Court House and the old Bourne School might be called to mind, but there, in all probability, the list of names would end.

Yet Berkhamsted possesses many buildings with interesting histories. For example, the home of the last mayor of Berkhamsted, in which he often entertained William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, is still standing in the High-street; so is the residence of Sir Joseph Paxton, the designer of the Crystal Palace. We have chapels which have been converted into cottages; ancient inns which are now shops; a café in what was once the home of a famous Dean of St. Paul's; a police station on a site formerly shared by a prison and a sheep-dip factory; and a drapery stores in place of a tiny confectionery shop started by Mr. Huntley before he met Mr. Palmer and established the famous Reading biscuit firm.

The Manor House

Here, then, is ample scope for enquiry and research in a little-explored field of local history. We may not be rewarded with "sermons in stones," but we shall certainly find interesting anecdotes in bricks and mortar.

Let us start our "voyage of discovery" at a building which is much in the public eye at the moment—the Manor House. Now "in splints," it was formerly the home of some of Berkhamsted's richest families. The house was presumably built by a man named Pilkington, for it has always borne that name. A survey of 1616 tells us that it was one of "divers

ancient capitall messuages which are conceived by some of the owners thereof to be manors and to have divers quit rents belonging to them." If Pilkington's was "ancient" at that time, the present Manor House must have replaced a much older building.

Originally the estate stretched from the High-street to Whitehill and from Castle-street to Raven's-lane. In early Victorian times the house and garden were still enclosed by high walls and,

*A New Tour of
Berkhamsted
by "Beorcham"*

to quote a contemporary writer, had the appearance of a nunnery. The view through the massive iron gates was certainly forbidding; then, as now, the house presented a very plain, austere façade to the High-street. The view from the large garden and trim lawns below the terrace was much more attractive, but the most interesting feature, a remarkably fine roof, could be seen only from the parish church tower.

Sold Before Breakfast!

Parish records contain but few references to the Manor House. Early in the 19th century the ownership passed from a London brewer named Joseph Kirkman to Charles Gordon, who made a fortune in Jamaica at the height of the black slave traffic. After Gordon had joined his predecessors in the Pilkington Manor vault under St. Catherine's Chapel, Frederick Miller bought the estate. Not the least of his acquisitions was a pass to travel on the railway at any time without payment, a concession granted because the line, like the canal, ran through the estate.

About the year 1852, Mr. Miller decided to sell a large part of the property; after a sleepless night, he signed the conveyances before breakfast! He could not have sold out at a better time; the town's industries were expanding, and Chapel-street, Bridge-street, Manor-street and Raven's-lane were developed in time to meet a sudden demand for homes for factory workers.

Incidentally, the attractive house next door to the Manor House, now the residence of Dr. White, was the dower house of the Pilkington estate.

Peter Pan's Home

On the opposite side of the High-street stood a picturesque Elizabethan house which was pulled down some twelve years ago to make way for the Rex Cinema. Egerton House was its

name, and it was said to be haunted! Early history is obscure, but the name suggests that it may have been connected in some way with the family of Lord Chancellor Egerton, of Ashridge, father of the first Earl of Bridgewater.

Once a year, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the rector of Berkhamsted stood outside Egerton House to distribute faggots to poor parishioners—a charity founded by Charles I. Later, in the 1830s, the railway builders who introduced Wesleyanism to Berkhamsted held their first services in Egerton House. But the house is best remembered for an association with Sir James Barrie; he was a frequent guest when it was the home of the Llewellyn Davis family, and while playing with his hosts' children the famous dramatist was inspired to create Peter Pan. Thus the most famous figure of modern mythology was a Berkhamstedian!

Egerton Terrace

Three doors away, on Egerton Terrace, a young statesman had already made a name for himself frequently called to see a young lady named Miss Clementine Hosier. Yes, Mr. Winston Churchill came to Berkhamsted for his bride, who on many occasions has returned to visit her old school and to view her old home, now occupied by Mr. A. W. Turner, the optician. Egerton Terrace, it is interesting to recall, occupies the site of a granary where the poet Cowper, as a boy, loved to hear the sound of the flail and watch the grain carted away to the old water-mill in Mill-street.

On the opposite side of Rectory-lane stand the White House and the Red House. Originally these two houses were one, named the Red House. One of the first occupants, if not the very first, was the Rev. George Nugent, a man of wealth, culture, and public-spirit. Though Rector of Bygrave, a tiny parish near Baldock, he elected to live in Berkhamsted, taking an active part in local government and presiding at the Select Vestry. His gift of £1,000 for building a new workhouse, which afterwards bore his name, was but one of many generous bequests.

Notorious John Tawell

In the 1840s the Red House was the home of another wealthy and, it seemed, deeply religious man. He was John Tawell, who married a widow named Mrs. Cutforth, proprietress of a small private school for girls in Berkhamsted. By subscribing liberally to good causes, and more especially by wearing the Quaker's traditional long cloak and broad-brimmed hat, John Tawell convinced the townspeople that he was a man of great piety and unimpeachable respectability. But he was a humbug—and a murderer. For adding arsenic to the beer of his former lover, Sarah Hart, he was hanged at Aylesbury in 1845, having gained further notoriety as the first murderer to be caught through the

medium of the electric telegraph. His name has often been linked with that of Crippen, who, many years later, was the first murderer to be trapped by a radio message.

John Tawell gave Berkhamsted plenty to talk about; so did the next owner of the Red House, a self-made man named Joseph Paxton. As the Duke of Devonshire's head gardener at Chatsworth, he attracted wide attention by designing elaborate glass-houses, and when the Great Exhibition of 1851 was planned, he designed an immense glass structure to house the exhibits. "Paxton's Glasshouse," as it was nicknamed, was built in Hyde Park, and Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort shared the popular view that it was a masterpiece. Subsequently it was moved to Sydenham and named the Crystal Palace. Paxton, who was knighted in 1851, wrote several knowledgeable books on botany and for twelve years represented Coventry in the House of Commons. Berkhamsted honoured the great man by naming one of its public-houses "The Crystal Palace" and giving a one-house turning off Ellesmere-road the name Paxton-road.

Dean Incent's House

To the regret of many, William Cowper's birthplace was pulled down over a century ago, when the present Rectory was built. But opposite the parish church we may still admire a fine old half-timbered house reputed to be the birthplace of another great Berkhamstedian—John Incent, founder of Berkhamsted School and Dean of St. Paul's. It is difficult to estimate the age of this much-restored house, but if the association with the Incent family is authentic, it must be some 450 years old. Perhaps the house was built for the Dean's father, Robert Incent, who was secretary to the last tenant of Berkhamsted Castle—Cicely, Duchess of York.

(To be continued)

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