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SECOND of a new series of articles by "BEORCHAM"

## Houses with a History

THIS month we continue our historical tour of Berkhamsted by visiting the row of houses opposite St. Peter's Church, between the Red House Hotel and Dean Incent's House.

The first call is at 93 High-street, the home of Mr. F. King. This roomy house, believed to be about 150 years old, was originally separated from the Red House by a wide gateway, conveniently situated so that the coachman could drive straight ahead to the old railway station in Castle-street. The coach-house is still standing, but the gateway was filled many years ago by a cottage, the ground floor of which was turned into a shop when Mr. R. O. Rippon, the chemist, lived at No. 93. The shop has for many years been a doctor's surgery.

### The Admiral's Home

A distinguished occupant of No. 93 in the 'sixties was Admiral G. C. Gambier, a gallant old seadog who filled his home with curios collected during his world-wide voyages in the days of sail. A keen churchman, he subscribed £100 towards the cost of restoring St. Peter's Church in 1870, and his daughter gave a similar amount. In all probability he was a descendant of the celebrated Admiral James Gambier, who commanded H.M.S. "Defence" under Lord Howe off Ushant in 1795, and was rewarded by a peerage when he commanded the British Fleet at the Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807.

No. 97 High-street, for many years the home of Mr. and Mrs. W. L. Benson, was from 1900 to 1903 a branch of Prescott's Bank, afterwards transferred to the old Bourne School and incorporated in the National Provincial Bank. Mr. Benson's Georgian house,

with its many attractive and unusual features, is believed to occupy the site of a much older building, perhaps an inn or some religious foundation. Like other houses opposite the parish church, it has a fine old cellar, but for the most interesting glimpse of Berkhamsted's "underworld" we must go next door, to the home of Mrs. Dellar ("Maud's" shop).

On two sides of this cellar, which burrows beneath the pavement of the High-street, are what appear to be a series of bricked-up archways. One immediately suspects secret tunnels—and thereby hangs a tale.

### The Secret Tunnel!

The claim is made that early in the 19th century, when the house was occupied by Mr. George Compigné—a churchwarden of St. Peter's in 1822—a tunnel ran under the High-street from the cellar to the church crypt. One evening, during the sermon, a stir was caused by ghost-like noises beneath the floor of the church. Many members of the congregation were visibly alarmed, but not Mr. Compigné. Suspecting that his young sons had crawled through the tunnel to the crypt, he dashed across the street to his home just in time to find the "ghosts" returning to the cellar. He promptly gave his sons a sound thrashing and had the tunnel bricked up.

### In the Vaults

This story was told by the late Mrs. Shuffrey, grand-daughter of Mr. George Compigné, who further stated that in 1870 she visited the church while the centre aisle floor was being relaid. One of the workmen invited her to inspect the vaults, and she plainly saw the tunnel through which her father and uncles, as small boys, had crawled when they "haunted" the church.

Although this is the most plausible of the town's many secret tunnel stories, it must be stated that when a 6-ft. trench was dug in the High-street for the main drain, there was no evidence of the chalk having been previously disturbed. Incidentally, a blacksmith's shop stood on or near the site of Mrs. Dellar's house some 150 years ago, and when repairs were made to the cellars the workmen found an exceptionally thick wall which was very difficult to penetrate.

### 16th Century Court House

Let us now cross the street and pay a visit to the grand old half-timbered Court House. This was the town's first Civic Centre, the meeting place of the mayor and burgesses when Berkhamsted was a borough. In those early days the Court House had two storeys, and the beams which formerly supported the floor of the "great loft" may still be seen beneath the fine timbered roof. This roof is original; the porch, door

and windows are comparatively modern, and the lower storey has been refaced with brick and flint.

### Feuding and Feasting

The Court House was built in the 16th century—not earlier, as is sometimes claimed—and its ownership caused many a squabble between squire and townspeople. As it stood on waste land of the manor, the lord of the manor claimed to be the owner; on the other hand, as it was built at the expense of the parishioners, the churchwardens considered they were the owners on behalf of the inhabitants.

Cobb's "History of Berkhamsted" tells us that the Councils of the Honour and Manor of Berkhamsted were held in the Court House twice a year, and in addition to the usual business the following officials were regularly appointed: constables, vice-constables (or headboroughs), flesh-, bread- and ale-tasters, leather-sealers, and water-bailiffs. The annual parish feast was customarily held in the Court House, and Cobb refers to a typical Berkhamsted "dyner" of Tudor days. Beef, mutton, three geese, nineteen piglets, four capons, and nineteen chickens, not to mention 1s. 6d. worth of "horsmete," provided ample fare for the "City fathers," who consumed 31 gallons of "hale" (about 1½d. a gallon) and three pottles of "small hale" (1d.). The cook and "his man" received 9s., "ye botteler" 4d., and the "squeeler and turner of sptyys" 2d.

### The Old Schoolrooms

In early Victorian days, rooms were built behind the Court House for the Church School, which was transferred to this central site from the old school buildings at Gossoms End, now a shopfitters' depot. The jerry-built rooms were condemned for use as a day school towards the end of the 19th century, when the Victoria Schools were built, and the rooms were pulled down to make way for St. Peter's Hall about 18 years ago.

The sexton's cottage adjoining the Court House was built about 90 years ago, on the site of two tiny cottages, for the headmaster of the Church School. Mr. Porrett has pointed out to me the little doorway, now bricked up, through which the headmaster entered the school direct from his drawing room.

### The Candle-Maker

Next door to Mr. Porrett's house is an old building which was once the workshop of a tallow-chandler. He did a roaring trade making and selling "penny dips" and larger candles before the days of paraffin lamps, gas, and electric light. There was no need for the chandler to advertise: the acrid fumes of his tallow could be sniffed far, far away!

Nearby are some old slaughter-houses, successors of the butcher's shambles which were originally set up on the village green near the old Market House. The shambles were gradually replaced by permanent buildings, hence the row of shops be-

tween the "One Bell" and the church, once nicknamed "Grab-all-row." This flagrant encroachment consigned the Court House and neighbouring buildings, which faced the High-street in Tudor days, to the shadows of Back-lane. Whether the ambitious proposal to demolish this row and restore the original High-street frontage will ever mature remains to be seen! At any rate, the worst obstruction vanished when the old Market House, near the "One Bell," was burnt down in 1854.

On the site of the Court Theatre (built 1916-17) stood a half-timbered house, probably as old as the Court House, which for many years was Stafford's brush-works. Older residents will remember it better as "Go-ey" Adams' shop. Next to this shop stood the old Salvation Army barracks, reached by a flight of wooden steps; this rickety building was also pulled down for the cinema. On the opposite side of Water-lane, the Court Café, the "Wool Shop," and a dressmaker's shop share an old and much-altered building which was formerly the offices of Messrs. Locke and Smith, whose brewery was in Water-lane. In the 'sixties part of the office building was occupied by what was almost certainly Berkhamsted's first bank.

### Malt—and Gas!

Malt was once a characteristic smell of this area, varied on occasion by odours from the original gas-works set up in The Wilderness exactly 100 years ago. The transfer to Billet-lane was made over 40 years ago, and the largest of the old Wilderness gas-holders is the smallest of the present trio beside the railway. No one was more thankful to see the gas-works depart from the centre of the town than Dr. Fry, headmaster of Berkhamsted School, who protested in no uncertain terms that in an unfavourable wind he could not open his windows. And in those days gas-works' fumes were much more pungent than they are today!

(To be continued)

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