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HOUSES WITH A HISTORY—VI

By "BEORCHAM"

The Bridewell at Cox's Lane Corner

FOR CENTURIES there has been a gradual but unmistakable westward movement of what may be called the "hub" of the town. In early times it was Castle-street; later it was the row of shops and inns between the Parish Church and the old Market House at the top of Water-lane; then, in late Victorian days, the High-street—King's-road crossing came to be regarded as the "Town Centre."

This important road junction, the only one with traffic signals between Watford and Aylesbury, is comparatively modern. Indeed, the crossroads were not created until Lower King's-road was made in 1885, and previously this was one of the quieter parts of the High-street, marking the end, with the exception of a few shops, of the business quarter. On the north side of the street, at "Pike's Corner," stood a row of villas, and opposite was a little side-turning no more prepossessing than Water-lane of the present day. Then, as now, it was named King's-road, but an older generation knew it better as Cox's-lane or Bridewell-lane.

These names are interesting. Cox is believed to be a corruption of the name of the ancient Cock Inn, which probably stood at or near the corner of the lane centuries ago. Bridewell was the name of the old prison which preceded the police station. King's-road, the most modern name, was an obvious choice, for the road leads to the old house and estate of Kingshill. Less than sixty years ago the road was so narrow that a heavily-laden hay-wain would brush the hedges and buildings on either side.

A Country Lane

Not that there were many buildings in King's-road in Victorian days. On the east side, just beyond the police station, was a row of eight little cottages, followed by two more small houses. On the west side, the only

building was the corner house (now Barclay's Bank) until 1874, when Hope Hall and Hope Villas (one of which was the home of the minister) were built.

Then, as now, there were no shops in King's-road, but in a ramshackle shed Mr. Meek plied the trade of wood-turner. He specialised in the manufacture of pump buckets and "pump suckers," two popular utensils before the days of a piped water supply.

Two minutes' walk from the High-street the scene became "truly rural," without another building all the way to Kingshill. Clarence-road did not exist and Charles-street was a little green lane.

The Old Days

The occupants of the eight little cottages had to share one drinking water tap, one rain-water tank, and one old-fashioned brick oven, the neighbours taking turns to cook dinners for eight families—and large families they were, too! Furze was used for fuel, and some time ago I had the pleasure of receiving a letter from Mr. Edward Emery, of Watford, who recalled furze-gathering expeditions to the Common when, as a boy, he lived in Cox's-lane.

Some of the cottagers, he said, could ill afford to pay the modest fees for sending their children to school—a penny a week for infants and twopence a week for older children. When they stayed away from school, Inspector Coulter did not have far to go to remonstrate with the parents, though he made longer excursions when, brandishing a big stick, he chased the truants!

August holidays, Mr. Emery recalled, were spent gleaning, and enough wheat was gathered in Dell Field to last the family all through the winter. Mr. Cook, of the Upper Mill (in Mill-street) ground the wheat into flour, and the home-made bread was "very good, and no mistake." A pleasant feature of those days was the farmers' readiness to help poor cottagers; they sent word when gleaning could be started, and gave the children many little jobs, such as stone-picking.

By the way, one of the cottagers was a chimney-sweep who used furze-bushes instead of brushes, finding furze more effective than the holly-bushes traditionally used for sweeping chimneys in country districts.

No major developments in King's-road took place until the police station was rebuilt in 1894. The old building extended several feet west of its

successor, and when it was pulled down the road was widened, obviating a "bottle-neck" which for generations had been the bane of Berkhamsted and Chesham waggons. The old cottages on the east side of the road were also demolished.

Photographs show that the old police station looked like a private house, with a projecting upper storey facing King's-road. But this "ordinary" looking building had a most extraordinary history. A legacy of the grim old days when Berkhamsted had its own prison, it probably stood on the site of the "cage" or place for the detention of prisoners mentioned in a document of 1816. The Charter of James I, it is interesting to recall, authorised "a prison or goale (sic) within ye borough."

An Escaped Convict

From the many references to the Bridewell in 18th and early 19th century Sessions Rolls, we learn that two small wards were provided, one for males, the other for females. Each ward was equipped with a wooden bedstead, straw and two blankets. There were no fireplaces, and the small windows in each ward were unglazed. Above the wards were the living and sleeping quarters of the keeper, who, in the 18th century, received £20 a year. For a time the keeper was a widow.

The Bridewell was sometimes in such a dilapidated condition that prisoners had little difficulty in gaining freedom. One of the most daring escapes was made by a man detained on a petty larceny charge; he broke his chains, smashed through the wall, and escaped by way of a neighbouring stable. Recaptured at Northampton, he was publicly whipped and sentenced to six months' imprisonment at Berkhamsted. But long before his term was up, he again escaped and was presumably never recaptured.

Tenpenny Shirts

How sorry was the plight of some of the prisoners is shown by a report dated 1786. Two men detained at the Bridewell were "almost naked," and four shirts, costing tenpence each, were bought for them. The clerk, in a long letter to the justices, tried to excuse this extravagance by pointing out that the men "might suffer, perhaps too much," from the cold.

In an age when prison conditions were generally appalling, the Berkhamsted Bridewell must have been bad indeed for the justices to admit that the premises were a menace to health. Nevertheless, the prison continued to be used until the 1830's, when Sir Robert Peel introduced a new police service. The Bridewell then became a police station, and for several years the local "force" consisted of but one man, whose flowing beard and shining top hat doubtless commanded respect.

The present police station occupies the site not only of the old Bridewell but also of two tiny shops. One was a boot and shoe shop run by Mrs. Garnett, wife of the secretary of Locke and Smith's brewery, and in a room behind the shop was a small private school

conducted by Miss Young. Next door was a shop with a particularly interesting history. It was Cooper's first sheep dip factory!

A Humble Beginning

William Cooper, founder of the world-famous firm of chemical manufacturers, was an ambitious veterinary surgeon who came to Berkhamsted in 1843. It would be incorrect to say that he arrived in the town penniless, but there is a tradition that he had but half-a-crown in his pocket and travelled by the common carrier's cart to save expense.

From a cottage in Castle-street he moved to a small house near "The Poptars," and later became a neighbour of the police inspector. He was soon recognised as a conscientious and able veterinary surgeon, but judging from the fact that he charged half-a-crown for staying up all night with a sick horse, he could not have made a great deal of money.

Success Story

William Cooper was determined not to spend his whole life touring the district on horseback, earning a few shillings here and a few shillings there. He constantly experimented with preparations for combating sheep parasites, and in the back-yard of his little home he mixed and packed the sheep dip which was destined to make "Cooper's" a household word in every sheep-raising country. What at first was nothing more than a sideline soon became a "best seller," and by 1850 William Cooper was looking around for larger premises. When part of the Pilkington Manor estate came into the market, he moved to Raven's-lane, and the "back-room" boy became the owner of a small factory built to his own specifications. And small it certainly was at first—it was literally one horse-power, with a grey mare plodding around the yard hundreds of times a day, turning the huge mill-stones used for grinding the sulphur.

(To be continued).

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