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WHEN PRINCE EDWARD STREET WAS "SNOB'S ALLEY"

ELDERLY townspeople sometimes jokingly refer to Prince Edward-street as "Snob's Alley." They keep alive a familiar nickname of Victorian times, though few indeed are old enough to remember the alley which preceded the street.

One of the town's oldest rights of way, this convenient "short cut" from the High-street to Butts Meadow was almost certainly used by the archers of Berkhamsted when, with 6-ft. bows of churchyard yew, they practised at the butts—or paid a halfpenny fine for absenteeism!

In later times the green footpath became a rough, stony track, starting through a wide gateway which originally may have been the entrance to the yard of a long-forgotten coaching inn.

All in a Row

Let us try to picture the scene in the 'seventies, when an unbroken line of buildings stretched along the south side of the High-street all the way from Grubb's-lane (Chesham-road) to Cox's-lane (King's-road). Opposite Water-lane was a greengrocer's shop kept by Mr. John Batchelor, whose bedrooms extended over the "Snob's Alley" gateway and abutted on Mr. Noel Sandall's shop. On the right of Mr. Batchelor's shop was a cottage occupied by Mr. "Dick" Wood, the common carrier, whose horses and wagons had to be carefully manoeuvred through his neighbour's gateway to and from the stables behind the cottage.

Then, about 70 years ago, came an ambitious scheme to replace the alley by a street, and for some years it was the widest turning off the High-street. Mr. Batchelor's shop was pulled down, and Mr. Wood's cottage was replaced by the corner shop now occupied by Kennett & Co.

Great Expectations

Great things were expected of Prince Edward-street. The original intention was to create a long residential street, perhaps connecting with the upper part of King's-road. In the 'eighties speculators hoped to turn Butts Meadow into a housing estate, and, in addition, build six villas between the High-street and the meadow. To the lasting benefit of Berkhamsted, Mrs. Lionel Lucas, of Kingshill, purchased the meadow and presented it to the town. As for the six villas, only one ("The Gables") was built, and the remaining sites were occupied at the turn of the century by the Victoria Schools. Thus Prince Edward-street never fulfilled its early promise, and it is a pity this dwarfed cul-de-sac was given such an un-imaginative and meaningless name, Bowmen's Walk or Archers' Way would have recalled its early ancestry.

Apparently no one knows how the name "Snob's Alley" arose. Was the snob a humble cobbler or some supercilious nonentity? The name certainly

did not apply to the people who regularly used the alley—Mr. Wood the carrier; frequenters of the King's Arms "Tap"; members of the Working Men's Club, whose headquarters were in the alley; or the Strict Baptists, who worshipped in the club-room before their Beulah Chapel in King's-road was built.

Ancient Coaching Inns

The south side of the High-street west of Chesham-road was formerly devoted largely to the needs of travellers—and the thirsts of the inhabitants. Within a few hundred yards was a brewery (and another brewery on the other side of the street!), five coaching inns (six if Mr. Batchelor's shop was previously an inn), the common carrier's dépôt, a saddler's shop, a hay and straw merchant's shop, and, of course, the inevitable array of drapery and grocery shops.

Only three of the old coaching inns remain—the Swan, the Crown, and the King's Arms—and even the King's Arms has surrendered part of its

Houses with a History—7 by "Beorcham"

premises to shops. Victorians went through Mr. Sandall's shop to the tap-room, and the bedrooms were used by the hotel staff and guests. For a short time the Conservative Club occupied rooms over what is now Freeman, Hardy and Willis's shop, and the ground floor was a branch of the London and County Bank, now incorporated in the Westminster Bank. Previously, clients went to Mr. Slater's stationery shop (now T. W. Bailey's), where, at a special counter, bank business was transacted on Wednesdays and Saturdays by Mr. Jackson, of the Aylesbury branch. That represented Berkhamsted's sole banking facilities in the early 'eighties, apart from a Penny Bank which was open for an hour and a half on Saturday evenings at the Town Hall.

Next door to the King's Arms, the London and County Bank was able to offer better facilities, and in the 'nineties larger premises were obtained on the opposite side of the street. The London Central Meat Company then moved in, to be followed by Freeman, Hardy and Willis. This is the only shop on the south side of the High-street which has remained in the same hands and on the same premises for half a century. The clothier's shop next door, established about 55 years ago, has been owned successively by G. M. Gammon, A. H. Sprigge, J. F. Stevens, and N. Sandall.

Kennett's shop was originally a branch of the International Tea Co., and for many years the "Gentlemen's

Club" occupied rooms over the shop. Ford's was in turn a grocer's shop established by Mr. G. Chilton (who afterwards moved across the street to what is now Kingham's), and a saddler's shop kept by "Johnny" Walklate, who started business on part of the site of the police station.

The Old Post Office

How many of the younger generation—or the middle-aged, for that matter—are aware that Stimpson, Lock and Vince's office was formerly the Post Office? In the 'eighties it was a furniture and toy shop kept by Mr. Howard, who, on being appointed postmaster, abandoned his old trade. The Post Office, previously at Mr. Shambrook's shop, was then transferred to Mr. Howard's premises, and business hours were from 7 a.m. until 8.30 p.m. every weekday. Letters could be posted up to 10 p.m. with the certainty that they would be delivered in London by first post the following morning. Locally there were four deliveries on weekdays (6.30 and 9.30 a.m., 3 and 5.45 p.m.), with a delivery at 6.30 a.m. on Sundays.

Chapel in a Backyard

Adjoining the Post Office was a double-fronted shop which, when it was the home of Mr. John Lane, the nurseryman, was screened by posts and chains. Later this house was Mr. P. Gentry's drapery shop (the "Bon Marché"), and in more recent times it was a fish shop. With the adjoining house (for many years the property of Mr. William Nash, the builder, and afterwards the Urban District Council offices) it was pulled down in 1938 to make way for the Civic Centre. It is interesting to recall that in the 'seventies, Mr. Nash, a staunch Wesleyan, provided a chapel in his yard for fellow worshippers until they moved to Cowper-road. The chapel in Nash's yard, with seats for 125 worshippers, was afterwards the old Council Chamber.

The sign of the "Five Bells" has been replaced by an electric clock, but Mr. Norman Clarke's shop is still a picturesque feature of the High-street. This ancient inn, the first to close its doors when the coaching days were over, belonged successively to Messrs. Avery, King, and Ripley, who delivered the very best coal at £1 a ton. The adjoining building, now part of Mr. Clarke's shop, was formerly Mr. I. Bunker's corn and seed shop, Mr. Thornton's dairy, and a tailor's shop owned, appropriately, by Taylors.

Many Changes

Dwight's garage and W. H. Smith & Son's shop replaced old private houses which, in Victorian days, were converted into shops and occupied by various traders, including Mr. J. Cousins (draper), Mr. Saunders (corn, seed and hay merchant), and Messrs. Soar and Gardiner (bakers). Mr. Hubert B. Figg's shop, Messrs. Penny and Thorne's office, and Mr. Coughtrey's shop were rebuilt about 60 years ago by Miss Underwood (Mrs. Samuel Timson), who lived in a cottage on the site of Mr. Coughtrey's shop. Mr. Figg's site has

particularly varied history. In turn it was occupied by Mr. Mowday, a watchmaker and gunsmith; Mr. Holt, a printer; and then the small shop was divided into two, with Bailey's the watchmakers (who moved to Castle-street) on one side, and Mrs. Meikle's sweet shop on the other. Afterwards it was a tailor's shop owned by Mr. W. H. Newell. Penny and Thorne's office was preceded by a baker's shop, owned in turn by Mr. J. Morsley and Mr. A. W. Spicer.

Royal Patronage

Next we come to the Star Shipy Stores, formerly a draper's shop owned by the Rolph family, whose Hesel Hempstead business, founded in the reign of William IV, is still flourishing. The Berkhamsted shop was acquired by Mr. H. Robinson, who proudly displayed the Prince of Wales' coat of arms to commemorate the sale of a pair of white gloves to a servant girl who was shopping for "Teddy" (afterwards Edward VII) when he stayed at Ashridge as the guest of Lord and Lady Brownlow.

Beyond the Red Lion Yard—which at one time contained more cottages than any street off the south side of the High-street—we find the Midland Bank occupying the site of the old Red Lion, another coaching inn which was closed in the 'seventies. It was subsequently an off-licence and greengrocer's shop and then East's furniture shop. The florist's next door was for generations owned by one of the two local families of butchers named Tompkins.

(To be continued).

"Beorcham" thanks the many residents who have supplied information for this series of articles. Letters and verbal comments—and a few corrections!—will be summarised in a later issue of the "Review." Further information will be greatly welcomed, particularly in reference to the south side of the High-street west of King's-road; Castle-street; and old properties in other parts of the town and district.

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