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NINE CENTURIES OF HISTORY

The King's Way to the Castle . . .

CASTLE STREET is probably the most historic short thoroughfare in Hertfordshire. First a bridle way to the Norman fortress, then a broad lane to the mighty Castle of the Plantagenets, it must have been the scene of glittering cavalades. William the Conqueror, the Black Prince, Thomas à Beckett and such great men as these rode along the royal quarter-mile. Prince Louis of France and the "wicked barons" swaggered up the hill after defeating the valiant Castle garrison in 1216; a century later, King John of France rode dejectedly down Castle-street as the Black Prince's prisoner of war.

The Castle lasted for little more than 400 years, but the street it created can count nearly nine centuries of authentic history. Until 100 years ago it was the only important side-street in the town, and in early times it was probably lined with more houses than the High-street. The town was born in the valley near the Castle, and the main road meant little to serfs who travelled only when they were sent from the fields to the wars.

Picturesque Scenes

Though a mixture of old and new, with a fairly large proportion of undistinguished 19th century shops and cottages, Castle-street has more character than any other part of Berkhamsted. It has a certain charm, too, especially when the laburnums and other roadside trees in the valley are in blossom. Artists have returned again and again to Castle-street, occasionally gaining a Royal Academy subject. The street has even been filmed, though it was necessary to sprinkle houses and pavement with water to create the rainswept effect required for a recent Jack Warner "thriller"!

In Norman times, Castle-street was a grass track which swept down to the broad, shallow Bulbourne and continued across a swamp to the formidable earthworks of the Castle. The track led straight to the main entrance, and until fifty years ago remains of the draw-bridge walls and fragments of the stout timbers could still be seen behind the old railway station. By the beginning of the 13th century, Castle-street was important enough to determine the site of St. Peter's Church at what for centuries remained the only road junction of note for miles around.

Street of Good Causes

Castle-street ceased to be a "royal road" towards the end of the 15th century. But as the walls of the deserted Castle crumbled, a handsome building arose just below the church-yard of St. Peter's. It was in 1541 when John Incent, Dean of St. Paul's, built "a fair large school of brick and freestone, with a lodging for the school-master . . . where the dean himself did lye and kept house divers times."

Another distinguished divine lived nearby, for when Thomas Waterhouse, last rector of Ashridge Monastery, was "driven out on St. Leonard's Day" with a pension of £100 a year and 50 loads of wood, he made his home in Castle-street and worshipped at St. Peter's Church, to which he bequeathed his vestment of crimson velvet.

Later, Castle-street was the birth-place of several good causes and bold enterprises. The Congregational Church started in a private house and moved in turn to three larger buildings, all in the same street. Primitive Methodists held their first services in Castle-street. Roman Catholics met for worship in

Houses with a History—8 By "Beorcham"

Castle-street until 40 years ago. One of the first reading rooms of the Mechanics' Institute was in Castle-street.

When the canal was made, the town's first wharves were in Castle-street. When the railway was built, the town's first station was in Castle-street. Before reaching the High-street, travellers could quench their thirsts at seven public-houses—a fact which shocked George Cruickshank, the famous Victorian black-and-white artist, as he stalked along to deliver a lecture to members of the Institute.

A Shopping Centre

Before Lower King's-road was made in 1885, Castle-street was a shopping centre second only to the High-street. It contained the town's one and only pawnbroker's shop. In neighbouring shops and yards you could buy anything from a brush or a wooden bowl to a canal barge or a tombstone—and see them all made on the premises. You could visit a travelling menagerie in what is now Key's yard or watch football matches on a playing field now smothered by modern additions to Berkhamsted School. If you missed your train you could stand on the platform and hear the barges lustily coaxing their horses over Castle-street bridge—a rare bridge indeed with its special track for horses.

The Old Railway Station

Unfortunately, we cannot start our detailed tour of Castle-street at the old railway station. It was closed nearly eighty years ago, and the last remains of the red-bricked mock-Elizabethan building (no more absurd than a "Tudor" garage) were pulled down between the two World Wars. The solid-looking Castle Hotel, well

sited to serve the needs of early railway travellers, was probably considered an opportunist venture by owners of the old hostelrys in the High-street, who lost much of their trade when the lively coaching days were ended by the railway era. But there was still plenty of horse-drawn traffic, and the Castle Hotel, noted for its large stables, catered not only for the well-to-do but also for the constant horse-drawn canal traffic.

"Sunken" Cottages

Beyond the hotel we come to the most-photographed row of cottages in Berkhamsted—the so-called "sunken" cottages. They were built about 350 years ago and were level with the road until the end of the 18th century, when the cutting of the canal made it necessary to raise the road to provide approaches to the bridge.

It is sometimes claimed that these cottages were built for servants at the Castle. But the Castle fell into ruin long before the cottages were built! All the same, it is highly probable that the site was previously occupied by the homes of Castle servants; indeed, every inhabitant was a servant of the lord of the manor in feudal days.

One of the "sunken" cottages, adjoining the Castle Hotel, was pulled down in Victorian days. The home of "Billy" Wood, a fishmonger, it was found to contain an ancient, grimy wall painting supposed to be of Berkhamsted Castle. An effort was made to preserve this remarkable relic, but its fate is unknown.

Relic of the Past

The cottage in the middle of the row has a particularly interesting history. Many years ago the interior was stripped, giving it the appearance of an ancient tithe barn. Roman Catholics worshipped here before their Park View-road church was opened in 1909; the converted cottage was afterwards an upholsterer's shop and is now a workshop for C. and M. Motors.

One of the few "fire-marks" in Berkhamsted may still be seen on the wall of the "sunken" cottage nearest the Castle Hotel. This metal plate, bearing the name and emblem of the County Fire Office, is a relic of the days when property owners who took out fire insurance policies had to fix fire-marks on their houses. The reason was that in large towns the fire offices maintained their own brigades, confining the fire-fighting service to their own policy-holders. Not until the end of the 18th century did the brigades of the various companies begin to attend fires generally; even then fire-marks continued to be issued, presumably as advertisements.

Berkhamsted was too small for the fire offices to provide their own brigades, but they helped to defray the cost of new engines and other fire-fighting appliances purchased by the local authority. For instance, in 1788 Berkhamsted bought a new manual engine costing £58 15s., and contributions totalling £21 were received from the Sun, Phoenix and Royal Exchange offices.

The Bulbourne

Nowadays no one is sufficiently interested in the river Bulbourne to peer over the wall in the valley below the cottages. The clear stream we knew when the "Domesday Book" water-mill in Mill-street still functioned is now a dry, stony ditch. Before the canal stole most of the water, the Bulbourne was a wide, shallow river, and in Castle-street it provided a "watersplash" for generations of horse-men. It is not known when the ford was bridged for carts and carriages. No doubt there were stepping stones or a footbridge for pedestrians way back in Norman times.

A Victorian Pre-Fab

Beyond the Bulbourne is a private house known as St. George's, formerly a temperance hotel or coffee tavern named "The George and Dragon." Believe it or not, this is a Victorian pre-fab! About 60 years ago, the late Lord Brownlow saw a new type of house, partly prefabricated, at an exhibition in France, and ordered a similar one to replace two tumbledown half-timbered cottages in Castle-street. Until fairly recent times the house still vaunted a handsome carved signboard showing St. George and the Dragon, designed by Lord Brownlow and carved by one of his Ashridge craftsmen.

For many years the "George and Dragon" was owned or managed by a Mr. Topp, who offered good, clean beds for a shilling a night, sold fruit syrups at a penny a glass, guaranteed "comfort, cleanliness and civility," and unsuccessfully tried to woo Berkhamstedians from public-houses by brewing excellent coffee. But at least he attracted the drum and fife band for their weekly practices, and it was said that the members played just as spiritedly as older bands who trained on ale at the "Five Bells" and the "Red Lion"!

(The History of Castle Street will be continued in next month's issue.)

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