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ESTAB. 1826

Castle Street: A Last Look Round

ONE of the rarest of old local photographs is given a place of honour in the vestry of the Congregational Church. It is a scene of the east side of Castle-street from Chapel-street to the High-street, and an unfamiliar chapel in the foreground proves that the photograph must have been taken at least 83 years ago. A plain, austere building, known as the "Independent Chapel," it stood on the corner site now occupied by the Congregational Church and adjoined a row of tiny Tudor cottages.

For more than 160 years—ever since the first services were held in the parlour of a Mr. Langston—Congregationalists have met for worship in Castle-street. Mr. Langston, incidentally, was a close friend of Mr. Rowland Hill, of "penny post" fame.

Four Chapels in 80 Years

As the number of worshippers increased, a barn was fitted up for regular services, conducted by the Rev. W. Baker, who started his pastorate in 1790. A few years later there was another overcrowding problem, and a little Gothic-style chapel, known as the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel, was built. Judging from an old drawing, it must have harmonised well with the old-world architecture of Castle-street in the early part of the 19th century.

The Gothic chapel was followed in 1834 by the "Independent Chapel," and this was replaced in 1867 by the large, attractive Congregational Church we know today. At the same time the neighbouring Tudor relics were pulled down to make way for typical "Industrial Age" cottages.

There is a tradition that the hymn-singing of the Primitive Methodists

sometimes "drowned" the Congregational minister's sermon—or vice versa! This could never have been anything more than a leg-pull, but it is a fact that the two denominations were near neighbours, for in the 'sixties the Primitive Methodists held services in a small building behind what is now Mr. C. E. Everett's furniture shop. In Victorian days this shop was kept by Mr. Lawrence, a grocer and straw-plait agent, who sold straw to housewives and bought the finished plait for re-sale to Luton and Dunstable hat makers.

In the attractive house adjoining Mr. Everett's shop, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. W. Ward, lived the "Grand Old Man" of Victorian Berkhamsted. He was Mr. Henry Nash, whose engaging book of reminiscences, published in 1890, is a

By "Beorcham"

mine of information for local historians. A cripple from birth and barely 5-ft. in height, Mr. Nash kept a little leather shop; but he was much more than a humble tradesman. His leisure time was devoted to "good works," and he strove unceasingly to provide better schools for the children and evening classes for adults. In his youth he helped to start the Mechanics' Institute; in his old age he was largely responsible for the foundation of Berkhamsted School for Girls.

One-Room Tenements

Mr. Henry Nash campaigned for better houses, too—and he did not have far to go to find some shocking slums. Only 50 yards from his home, on the site now occupied by Mr. Knowles Drew's house, was a dingy alley which led to half-a-dozen or more one-room tenements with earth floors. In one of the tenements a hole had been dug in the floor for the storage of coal. The old crane who lived there lifted the trap-door and shovelled coal straight on the fire!

Nearby stood some larger but very dilapidated cottages which survived until Messrs. Matthews' offices were built. In one of the cottages lived an old character named George Butcher, who, in a large brick oven, cooked Sunday dinners for neighbours while they were at church or chapel. He charged each family threepence or twopence, according to the size of the joints and puddings. Fuel cost nothing at all; George relied entirely upon gorse and wood gathered on the Common. Dinners were also cooked by Mr. Keen, the baker, whose shop ad-

A TUDOR VISITOR

John Leland, Henry VIII's chaplain and one of the greatest of English antiquaries, mentioned Castle-street in his famous "Itinerary." After commenting upon the "metely well buildid" High-street, he referred to the "sumwhat lesser" street "where the ryver remeth." He tells us that there was "a bridge of wood" over the Bulbourne and that "on eche side be very faire meadows."

joining the "Gardeners Arms" has been rebuilt and is now owned by Mr. E. G. Crisp. Besides baking and selling his own bread, Mr. Keen made a speciality of baking bread made by housewives, some of whom gleaned their own corn and had it ground into flour at Mr. G. Cook's watermill in Mill-street.

In the Background

Beyond the Bulbourne bridge and opposite the orderly row of "sunken" cottages we find houses here, there and everywhere. It is thought that originally this may have been a wide, marshy, open space, fringed on the eastern side by a row of cottages in line with the houses and shops between the "Gardeners Arms" and Messrs. Matthews' offices. The cottages with front gardens probably perpetuate the original "building line," and it is likely that in pre-canal days the row continued all the way to the quaint old cottage ("Poet's Corner") adjoining the "Crystal Palace" public-house. The fact that some very old cottages formerly stood in the middle of Key's yard lends support to this theory.

This part of Castle-street may have suffered the same fate as the High-street when "Grab-all Row" was built; the old cottages were hidden behind new buildings. But "new" is hardly the right word. For instance, a former public-house known as "The Boot," now an antique shop, is said to have been built in 1605.

"Happy Valley"

In this quaint corner of the town we find the "Railway Tavern" and a neighbouring house perched high on the canal bridge embankment. The front doors are a storey higher than the back doors!

The narrow building now occupied by C. and M. Motors, as stated in last month's *Review*, was the first printing works of the *West Herts Post*. For a short time it was a photographer's studio, kept by an ex-circus clown named Lionel Jerome, who must have known how to make his clients smile!

Adjoining the two grey cottages on the right-hand side of the entrance to Key's yard is a curious alley (note the battlements!) which leads to a row of cottages known as "Happy Valley."

In Key's Yard

Key's yard has a story to tell. Here was Berkhamsted's first canal wharf, and here were unloaded the town's first supplies of cheap coal. Previously the high cost of road transport made coal a luxury, and almost everyone in the district, even the brewers, used furze and wood for fuel. The wharf was

owned in late Victorian days by Mr. J. Hatton, who not only ran a flourishing coal business but started a barge-building works. It was customary for circuses, menageries and theatrical performances to be held in Hatton's yard, and many an old resident can recall paying twopence or threepence to see the lions—or a performance of "East Lynne."

Later, the barge-building section of the business was owned by the Costin family, and the coal yard became Key's timber yard. The firm of Messrs. W. Key and Son has an interesting ancestry. There is a tradition that William Key, the founder, was a fencing contractor for the London and Birmingham Railway. He came to Berkhamsted, noted the town's high reputation for woodenware, and started a small business on what is now the Cooper Recreation Ground, almost opposite Messrs. East and Son's original timber-yard (on the site of Mr. George Callaghan's garage).

The Navvies' Threat

William Key left the business to a nephew, Mr. Thomas Norris, who moved to Hatton's yard. The firm later acquired the adjoining barge-building works of Messrs. Costin. In the first World War most of the large sheds were commandeered by the Army; the barge-building shed was a mess-room where 900 men could be accommodated at a time, and another large shed was fitted up as a theatre.

Here we must leave the story of Castle-street—but there is just time to stray a few yards and recall that it was outside the "Crystal Palace" public-house where Mr. Augustus Smith's navvies, after smashing down the railings on Berkhamsted Common in 1866, threatened to duck William Hazell in the canal when he tactlessly remonstrated with the men. Hazell reluctantly reached for his purse and bought "drinks all round"—in the circumstances, a very wise decision!

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