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ESTAB. 1826

Mill Street Water Lane & The Wilderness

IF Castle-street was the "royal road" to Berkhamsted Castle, Mill-street may be described as the "tradesmen's entrance." Here, on the Bulbourne, stood the watermill which ground the flour used in the Castle kitchens eight or nine centuries ago. It was probably in Mill-street where some of the king's horses were stabled, for a 13th century document mentions "a certain great stable" which stood "without the Castle." As another reminder of early times, we find that near the watermill, perhaps on the Moor, was a "Rotten Row"—a name thought to be a corruption of "Routine Row." The Moor would have been a convenient parade ground, for within the Castle arena there could not have been sufficient space for a large number of horsemen to assemble for State processions.

Varied Industries

In more modern times, when Castle-street became noted for its school and picturesque cottages, Mill-street kept its workaday character. The watermill survived until the 20th century, and before the age of motor-cars and mechanised canal boats Mill-street offered not only "good stabling" but the services of a resident blacksmith. Many older residents can recall the time when the Moor was used for the storage of timber, when the buildings of Locke and Smith's brewery stretched along both sides of Water-lane, and when the gasworks stood at the corner of The Wilderness.

Many years ago The Wilderness was considered a very "rough" quarter. Timid folk gave it a wide berth; they were frightened by both the name and the surroundings. At one end of the lane were stables and slaughterhouses; at the other end were

the flames, smoke and fumes of the gasworks; and half-way down the lane, through an iron gate, we may still glimpse a little burial ground. Ignorant gossipers were sure the gas-holder would one day explode and "blow up half Berkhamsted"; if that prediction did not make listeners quake with fright, bloodcurdling tales were told of body-snatchers who haunted The Wilderness at night.

Age-Long Traffic Problem

For centuries Berkhamsted did not expand westward beyond Mill-street, which was the only side-street of note other than Castle-street. But Mill-street never achieved the importance and dignity it deserved. It lacked, and still lacks, an adequate link with the High-street. For some curious reason, no attempt was made to widen Water-lane, not even when the Tudor market house (burnt down in 1854) was built at the top of the lane, near the "One Bell" public-house. As the loft of the market house was used as a granary, there was constant traffic between that building and the watermill, and congestion in Water-lane sometimes led to free fights between rival wagoners.

Before modern drainage was installed, the lane was often known as "Watery-lane." As long ago as 1831 an 18-in. drain was laid, but in heavy rains it failed to cope with the flood-water from the High-street, and the lane then resembled a tributary of the Bulbourne. The brewers were apt to frown upon the nickname "Watery-lane"!

Planners' Paradise

When the "new" railway station was built in 1874, Water-lane and Mill-street provided a popular "short-cut" for residents living west of Castle-street. Plans were made in 1883 to construct a footpath from Water-lane to the station, with a footbridge over the Bulbourne and the canal; but later on a more ambitious proposal, which led to the building of Lower King's-road, was adopted. In recent times our planners have been dreaming of a sensational scheme which will turn Water-lane into a handsome boulevard, abolish The Wilderness, and bring Back-lane to the front.

Water-lane lost its smell of hops and malt shortly before the first World War. A few years earlier, for the first time since 1849, The Wilderness ceased to reek of gas. Few townspeople are perhaps aware that the smallest of the three gas-holders in Billet-lane

originally stood in The Wilderness, or that "Adelbert House," at the corner of Mill-street, was formerly the office and home of the manager of the Gas Company. School workshops were built on the old gasworks site.

In 1916-17, the Court Theatre replaced a 16th century shop, and Water-lane lost more of its old buildings some twenty years ago, when a disastrous fire swept Kepston's factory.

The Old Baptist Chapel

Water-lane was the home of Berkhamsted's first Nonconformist meeting house. Baptists had met for worship, either in barns or in private houses, as long ago as 1640, but it was not until 1722 that they built their first meeting house. It stood a few yards west of "Adelbert House," and, judging from an old picture, it was a very plain, austere building. It survived until 1864, when the "Claremont" Church was built at Raven's-lane corner.

The Water-lane chapel contained a gallery and was enlarged during the ministry of a notable Berkhamstedian of the first half of the 19th century, the Rev. Joseph Hobbs. On weekdays he kept a stationer's shop (now T. W. Bailey's), and in the course of his business he undertook many small jobs for the parish church, including the repair of the lectern Bible, for which he charged half-a-crown. But his busiest day was Sunday. He regularly conducted a communion service at Water-lane Chapel, an afternoon service at Tring, and an evening service at Wendover or Chesham. He walked the whole way—sometimes nearly twenty miles—in all weathers. During his 38 years' ministry he preached 3,550 times at Berkhamsted, 639 times at Tring, and 580 times at Chesham, in addition to conducting services at Wendover, Frittsden and Northchurch.

Changes in Mill Street

Between the two World Wars, Mill-street lost a number of old cottages and gained the handsome Music School and the massive School Gymnasium. Mr. J. Nash's forge, near the old gasworks, has gone, but "The Fish" public-house and two neighbouring cottages survive. Another licensed house, the "Edward VI," was closed in 1922 and is now a private house; the adjoining stables and a loft, used as a threshing barn, were pulled down to make way for the Music School.

No doubt many old residents can recall seeing a cart bearing the Royal Arms in the yard of the "Edward VI." It was owned by a firm of carriers who had a contract with the Post Office. The driver of the cart lived in the attic of the public-house, and it was customary for night-shift workers at the gasworks to call him at 3 a.m., in good time to meet the 3.45 mail train. He then conveyed letters to post offices at Ashley Green, Chesham, Amersham, Little Missenden and Great Missenden, returning some 18 hours later with the day's collection of letters to catch the night mail-train.

Next to the "Edward VI," on an island site created by two arms of the

Bulbourne, stood the watermill—a black wooden building which leaned against the miller's quaint old cottage. One of the "two mills of 20s. rent by the year" mentioned in the Domesday Book, it was known as the Castle or Upper Mill to distinguish it from the Lower or Bank Mill. Here, within the memory of old residents, Mr. George Cook and his son kept alive an ancient industry and a grand tradition. Corn arrived by the wagon-load and sometimes in small sacks brought by gleaners, who, by paying the miller a few pence, obtained sufficient flour to provide bread for their families throughout the year.

The Mill's Memorial

A quarter of a century ago the mill was pulled down, and five courts were built on the miller's garden. The bed of the millstream is now dry, and the mighty millstones have been given an honourable resting place in the forecourt of the Music School. On the opposite side of the street, as a memorial to the mill, a low, half-circular wall bears a tablet with an inscription in Latin. It is a pity English was not used to commemorate a typically English institution. Prizes were once offered for a translation, and one of the successful entries was as follows:—

Here for a thousand years the old Mills stood
And gave us bread;
Here now our School in rival Motherhood
Feeds minds instead.

The Moor

The mill which gave the street its name has gone, but it will not be forgotten. And in our changing town we still have a little open space which, in a document of 1616, was described as "one wast plot or moore lying by the river neare the Upper Mill." Many a "wast plot" was stolen in less vigilant times by greedy builders, but right in the heart of the town the Moor survives as a favourite resort of the younger generation.

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