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HOUSES WITH A HISTORY—13

By "BEORCHAM"

Along "Robbers' Way"

THIS MONTH we leave the valley for the heights of Shootersway—perhaps the oldest byway for miles around. Maps of the 18th century show it as "Sugarsway"; in James I's reign the spelling was "Shukersway"; and as early as the 13th century we find mention of "Shokersweye." Yet even then it must have been an ancient track, for the name is believed to be derived from a Saxon "Robbers' Way."

There's history for you! The name takes us back to olden times when a stranger who wandered about the country without crying aloud or sounding his horn ran the risk of being taken for a thief and either slain or banished!

For centuries after the Norman Conquest our forests and heaths were still notorious for lawlessness; indeed, the King appointed Stewards of the Chiltern Hundreds to round up the bandits and introduce law and order. But no Dick Turpin or Robert Snooks figures in the history of Shootersway, and it would be wrong to imagine that ruffians made a practice of lurking behind the trees of Champneys or Cross Oak, waiting to pounce upon innocent travellers. There could not have been many pockets to pick, for the only passers-by were a few poor farmers and bands of gipsies and peddlars, of whom we are reminded by "Tinker's Hole" and "Tinker's Lane." Law-breakers doubtless favoured Shootersway because it was lonely and by-passed the town of Berkhamsted, where parish constables might be on the look-out for suspicious characters.

Five Miles Long

Shootersway was originally five miles long, starting near Pendley and ending at Bourne End. The first half (from Newground Waterworks to Brickhill Green) is now a road; beyond Brickhill Green we can still follow an ancient track which starts in the drive to Ashlyns Hall, continues through Sandpit Green and Long Green, and

then descends to the main road at Bourne End. It is significant that the last part of this delightful walk is still known as Sugar-lane, a name which at once associates it with "Sugarsway," one of the old spellings of Shootersway. Though no longer unfrequented, Shootersway retains much of its rural charm. Until fifty years ago there were not more than a dozen buildings throughout its length. One of the oldest is Shootersway Farm, with gay red bricks and timbers that have braved the storms of three centuries. A quarter of a mile away, at the top of Darr's-lane, stands another veteran, "The Old Cottage." Originally two little cottages, it has been altered so much from time to time that it is impossible to estimate its true age, but the sturdy oak beams suggest a Tudor origin.

A "Pest House"

Centuries ago a combined workhouse and pest-house for the people of North-church stood on the narrow roadside heath near the top of Woodcock Hill. Here, according to a Survey of 1616, "a cottage was newly erected upon the King's waste called Shootersway by licence of Sir Edward Carey, to lodge and succour poor and impotent persons in the times of common sickness or other great necessity." Sir Edward Carey, Master of the Jewel House to Queen Elizabeth and James I, was lord of the manor and builder of Berkhamsted Place.

Marlin Chapel

Ten minutes' walk from the roadside waste is a ruined chapel which brings more requests for information than any other building in the district. Frankly, little is known of the history of Marlin Chapel, but stories that it was the chapel of a monastery can at once be discounted. It was almost certainly the domestic chapel of a manor house which stood on the site now occupied by Marlin Chapel Farm. The deep moat still surrounding the farm proves that the manor house must have been of great importance. A 13th century document tells us that Sir Hugh de Broc, lord of the manor of "Maudelyns," augmented the endowment of "his chapel of Magdalene," and that the chaplain was Sir Richard de Berchamsted. It is thus clear that "Marlin" is a corruption of the name Magdalene. In the early part of the 18th century the chapel was used as a malt-house; but it has been in ruin for generations, and large trees have grown up within the crumbling walls.

A footpath as old as the chapel brings us back to Shootersway and "Cross Oak," the home of Lieut.-Col. and Mrs. R. Humphrey Haslam. The mansion, built about 150 years ago and enlarged some eighty years later, is young compared with the 17th century farmhouse and outbuildings near the road. Now converted into two cottages, the farmhouse probably stands on the site of a much older building—perhaps the home of Robert de Cruce, whose name appears in a document of 1307.

It is open to question, however, whether "Cross Oak" takes its name from the Cruce family. Popular belief is that the name was suggested by an ancient oak tree, shaped like a cross, which formerly stood at the junction of Gillam's-lane (Cross Oak-road) and Shootersway. According to a curious legend, this tree was reputed to cure the old trembling disease known as the ague. Anyone suffering from this complaint was advised to bore a hole in the trunk, peg a lock of his hair into the hole, and then spring away, leaving the hair behind.

The "Cross Oak" Cure

No doubt the shock effected the cure! In a glorious under-statement in his "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted," Henry Nash says that weak patients found this process "rather trying," and by some authority unknown the treatment was modified. "It was found to be equally efficacious," he says, "to remove a lock of hair by gentle means and carry it to the tree and peg it in securely, and with the necessary amount of faith the result was generally satisfactory. This is no mere fiction, as the old tree with its numerous peg-holes was able to testify." As Henry Nash comments, the bane and the antidote passed away together; the tree was blown down many years ago.

Flints and Bricks

Unfortunately, little is known of the history of the attractive old house at Kingshill, which has been considerably enlarged and altered from time to time. On the opposite side of the road we find a pair of flint cottages with an attractively patterned tiled roof. Flint cottages are rare in Berkhamsted, perhaps because materials for brick-making have always been freely available in the district. A quarter of a mile from Kingshill, on Brickhill Green, clayponds and mounds still survive to remind us of the days when bricks were made on the green, the kilns being fired by gorse and brushwood. Berkhamsted may still possess a few old cottages built of bricks made on Brickhill Green, or Brick-kiln Green, as it was known in James I's reign.

Robert Asselyn's Home

Another short walk brings us to Ashlyns, the home of Robert Asselyn as long ago as 1314. The present mansion was built in the middle of the 18th century, but older buildings still survive; for instance, what was formerly the gardener's cottage has features dating back to the 15th or 16th century. Another point of interest

is that some of the ornamental trees in the garden and park were planted for decorative purposes before the present mansion was built—perhaps by the Wethered family, who lived at Ashlyns for generations. It was Francis Wethered who, in 1622, gave to St. Peter's the attractive font now in All Saints' Church.

Towards the end of the 18th century Ashlyns became the home of James Smith, descendant of Thomas Smith, founder of the Smith Bank at Nottingham in 1699. This family was united by marriage with the Dorriens, who were also bankers; George Dorrien was Governor of the Bank of England in 1818-19.

Augustus Smith

Berkhamsted has good reason to remember the Smiths, the Dorrien-Smiths, and the Smith-Dorriens, who in turn lived at Ashlyns, Haresfoot, and New Lodge. But no member of this distinguished family—or, indeed, any townsman of the 19th century—did more for Berkhamsted than Augustus Smith, who was born at Ashlyns in 1804. He revived the Grammar School, helped to start elementary schools, and instigated the famous raid which saved Berkhamsted Common from enclosure. It is good to know that a biography of this remarkable Victorian is being prepared by a writer in the Isles of Scilly, where Augustus Smith spent much of his long, useful life. Incidentally, after he left Ashlyns the house was for many years the home of Mr. William Longman, of the famous publishing house of Longmans, Green & Co. Ashlyns afterwards passed to the Cooper and Kingsley families, and in 1929 the estate was bought by the Foundling Hospital.

Haresfoot

Haresfoot, by the way, was built a few years after Ashlyns Hall. Here again it probably replaced a much older house. We find mention of "Haresfote-hull" in 1357 and "Haresfordeshende" in 1287.

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