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ESTAB. 1826

AFTER Shooters-way, the Saxon "robbers" way" discussed in last month's article, let us visit an even older thoroughfare, Bank Mill-lane. It is believed that it was part of a Roman highway, and in pursuing this theory it may be helpful to refer to a map showing the district between Berkhamsted and Watford.

Our High-street is almost certainly part of Akeman-street, but experts maintain that the main road east of the town is too erratic to be of Roman origin. It is therefore suggested that Akeman-street, on leaving Berkhamsted, crossed the Bulbourne at Bank Mill and continued on the north side of the river to Boxmoor and St. Albans.

There is still a road (through the Sewage Farm it is only a track) which runs parallel with the main road all the way from Bank Mill to beyond Hunton Bridge, and although this is also erratic, it may follow the general line of a very ancient road. A point of interest is that many Roman relics have been discovered in the section between Nash Mills and Kings Langley.

Incidentally, Bank Mill must have been an excellent spot for crossing the Bulbourne, and it is interesting to recall that before the main road was widened, strangers who followed the winding kerb past the Mill House often drove along Bank Mill-lane, mistaking it for the highway.

A Tudor Gem

So much for the rather doubtful origin of Bank Mill-lane. More important is the fact that it is still a very pleasant byway; indeed, it is Berkhamsted's only riverside lane. The deep channel of the Bulbourne gives New Lodge a moated appearance, and one almost expects to see a drawbridge at the entrance to this former home of Rear Admiral and the Misses Smith-Dorrien.

Facing New Lodge is one of the loveliest Tudor buildings in West Herts.

Was Bank Mill Lane a Roman Road?

A year ago "The Old Cottage"—known in earlier times as "Rustic Cottage"—was not particularly attractive, but it has now shed its stucco, and the red bricks and crooked timbers are bared for all to see. The interior, too, has been much improved by exposing the sturdy black oak beams. An ancient barn in the garden is a relic of the days when the cottage was a farmhouse.

On the opposite side of the canal stands "Rose Cottage," believed to be about 200 years old. In early days of the railway there was a level crossing near the cottage, and a tree-lined track skirted the allotments to Ivy House-lane. This track was disused when the present road was made from "Rose Cottage" to George-street and a bridge built over the railway 200 yards west of the level crossing.

"Banckes Mill"

The Old Mill House, now a hotel, adjoined one of the two watermills mentioned in the Domesday Book. The rent was then ten shillings a year! Usually it was known as Lower Mill, or, in earlier times, as Nether Mill; the third name, Bank Mill, was simply taken from the banks of the mill-stream. The Survey of 1616 states that the mill was "in the possession of Richard Besouth, with Banks to the said Nether Mill containing by estimation one acre and a half or thereabouts." Seventeen years later the Sessions Rolls record the prosecution of a husbandman "for destroying a footbridge known as Tiptoes Bridge, which connects Banckes Mill with Tiptoes Lane." What delightful names!

Lower Mill was closed about fifty years ago, not because trade dwindled but because insufficient water was available to turn the waterwheel. A disastrous fire occurred at the mill a few years after it was closed, but the huge iron waterwheel remained in place until it was taken away to help the war-time salvage campaign. In the 19th century the mill was leased by the owners of Ashridge to the Norris family, two members of which, Mr. Daniel Norris and his son Mr. R. R. Norris, helped to start the Berkhamsted (Mechanics') Institute in 1843. The late Mr. R. A. Norris, author of "Berkhamsted St. Peter," and his sisters, of Boxwell-road, were born at the Mill House.

The Hall

Twenty years ago the first house one saw on the south side of the High-street was The Hall. Like Egerton House and Highfield House, it is no longer with us, and all that escaped demolition a few years before the war was a barn of earlier date than the Georgian mansion.

A Victorian writer described The Hall as "plain but massive, presenting no special attraction beyond the suggestion of plenty within." Passers-

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BY "BEORCHAM"

by often remarked that it looked like a prison, but they were probably not aware of a tradition that it was built on the foundations of a prison in which Royalists were kept in the Civil War. In the cellars were rooms and corridors—one L-shaped and ending with a flight of steps—which exactly resembled a 17th century prison dungeon.

A Magnificent Estate

From the High-street, The Hall certainly looked dour and forbidding. The mansion itself was gaunt and grey, and high walls surrounded the gardens. There was no space for a carriage drive, and consequently a gravelled crescent was made on the opposite side of the High-street for the carriages to turn round. But the general public did not see the finer features of The Hall. The mansion showed its best face to the gardens, and many of the rooms were handsome. There was a magnificent garden with some large green-houses, and the park was entirely unspoiled. The only public way through the estate was Swing Gate-lane, then "truly rural" and lined with forest trees. Until the Council bought the meadows belonging to The Hall for a housing estate some thirty years ago, the only building in Swing Gate-lane was the flint house, formerly the home of the head gardener.

Army of Servants

The Hall not only dominated the scene but was regarded as the manor house of eastern Berkhamsted. The house and estate gave employment to scores of townspeople.

In the High-street, almost opposite The Hall, the head coachman and bailiff lived in two cottages which still stand in a much-altered form. Waverley House, next door to the "Black Horse," was the home of the butler, and on the opposite side of the street lived a number of gardeners and labourers.

The Hall ended its life as a preparatory school. Previously it was the home of the late Mr. Edward Greene, and in its Victorian heyday it was owned by the Curtis family. Many older readers will recall Captain Constable-Curtis and his son, the Rev. H. G. Constable-Curtis, rector of Berkhamsted from 1902-3.

A Forge—and Saw-Mills

Over a century ago the eastern part of the High-street was notorious for rows of little straw-thatched hovels, some of which were destroyed by fire. Few really old buildings survive. The "Bull" is one of the town's ancient hostleries, and the "Black Horse" and Waverley House are much older than they look. The grey house named "Valhalla" has some interesting features and may be as old as its neighbour, the "Queen's Arms."

A notable relic was Pocock's forge, owned by the same family for generations until it was taken over and modernised by Messrs. Kempster about thirty years ago. Henry Nash, in

"Reminiscences of Berkhamsted," recalls meeting "the aged patriarch of the Pocock family," who was well acquainted with Peter the Wild Boy.

A member of the Pocock family was for many years licensee of the "Black Horse," and among his patrons were employees of East and Sons, whose first saw-mill was on the site now occupied by Mr. G. Callaghan's garage. Some of the town's oldest photographs show carts leaving the yard. Near the entrance was a thatched barn, and some magnificent elms stood on the land now occupied by modern houses. Mr. Job East, of Chesham, purchased the timber business from a Mr. Howard in 1843, and, as stated in an earlier article, it was transferred to Gossons End largely because the owner of The Hall objected to the tall chimney and the dense smoke!

School for Straw-Plaiters

Opposite East's saw-mill stood several quaint cottages, replaced in 1875 by the row numbered 38 to 44. The predecessor of No. 44 was a straw-plaiting school, and a writer in *Hertfordshire Countryside* tells us that it was kept by a fierce old dame who, armed with snuff-box and birch rod, enforced discipline and swiftness in plaiting by teaching a chant to which the children had to time themselves.

The slowest child received a taste of the birch rod, but there were often home-made "treacle suckers" for the fastest worker. The old dame received some small remuneration, and the rest of the children's earnings went to their parents.

Adjoining the plaiting school, on land now occupied by the Cooper Technical Bureau and recreation ground, was another timber yard, started by Mr. William Key and continued by his nephew, Thomas Norris, until the business was transferred to Castle-street. Fairs were often held on this land until about thirty years ago.

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