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ESTAB. 1826

Built from the Castle Ruins

BERKHAMSTED PLACE and the OLD GATE-HOUSE

THE much-publicised tree-felling episode in the Park has prompted a number of requests for the history of Berkhamsted Place. "It must be one of the most interesting buildings in the neighbourhood, but you have not mentioned it in your 'Houses with a History' articles," protests a reader.

Quite so. But memories must be short, for a few years ago, before the present series started, an article was devoted to Berkhamsted Place. However, as it was concerned more with the tenants than with the building itself, it may be an opportune time to revisit this historic house.

Chequers

Some find Berkhamsted Place attractive, others consider it grim and forbidding. You peer through the iron gates and take your choice! But the Castle's natural heir and successor—it was built partly with flints from the Castle—does not show its best face to the public gaze. The style, though severe, was not without charm until the masonry was smothered with cement. But the west front is still in its original state. Here the walls are faced with flints and Totternhoe stone in chequers 7-in. square, and the design is particularly attractive when the two shades of grey are tinted by the setting sun.

As few people have an opportunity of seeing the west front, it may be pointed out that the "draughtboard" walls flanking the entrance gate are in keeping with the original masonry of the mansion.

The Porter's Lodge

The gateway is worth close inspection. At both ends of the short walls may be seen the stone moulding of two small windows, now blocked up.

These were the windows of a gate-house, or porter's lodge, which was pulled down early in the 19th century. The lodge may or may not have been built at the same time as the mansion (1580), but it was certainly standing in 1650, for a document of that date states: "At the entering in of the house standeth a porter's lodge, built with flint and Totternhoe stone . . . with four pinnacles at each corner, and in the middle standeth a light turret covered with blow slat with a payne on

Houses with
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the topp of the same, which said turret doth much adorne the said house."

A watercolour by Miss Dorrien (dated 1804 and reproduced in the late Mr. R. A. Norris's interesting booklet on the Murray memorial in St. Peter's Church) shows a quaint two-storeyed gatehouse, with rooms above and on either side of the high gateway. A large clock adorned the bell turret.

Why was the lodge demolished? In all probability a 19th century squire decided that it was too near the mansion and obstructed the view. It was, however, a happy thought to save part of the wall, and no doubt the flints it contains were taken from the Castle in the valley.

THE story of Berkhamsted Place starts over 370 years ago, when Queen Elizabeth leased the Castle (already in ruin) to her Keeper of the Jewel House, Sir Edward Cary, at a nominal rent of one red rose, payable yearly on St. John the Baptist's Day. In 1580 Sir Edward built a "courtyard house" on the hill, using the Castle as a quarry. The original plan provided for wings on the north and south sides, extending over part of what is now the garden, the ground plan suggesting the letter E as a compliment to the Queen.

A Disastrous Fire

In 1610, the castle, honour and lordship were granted to Henry, Prince of Wales, who purchased Berkhamsted Place for £4,000. The building, it is believed, was then considerably altered and enlarged. In 1661 or 1662 fire destroyed nearly two-thirds of the mansion. The portion which escaped serious damage was repaired by John Sayer, who built the hall (at the south-east corner) on part of the old courtyard between the wings. Externally, few changes have been made since that time, but successive tenants have extensively altered the interior. The most ancient features are a 17th century staircase and two fireplaces,

one richly carved in oak and another with plaster decorations of late 17th century date.

Frankly, there is little of general interest to say about the building, but a book could be written about its inhabitants.

After building the mansion, Sir Edward Cary preferred to live at his older home at Aldenham, and his brother (Sir Adolphus Cary) was the first tenant of Berkhamsted Place. A parchment in the church chest tells us that he was "a most loving benefactor of ye poor of this towne." Sir Adolphus was succeeded by his son, Sir Henry Cary, afterwards Lord Falkland. A friend of Ben Jonson and a blundering Lord Deputy for Ireland, he was the father of Lucius Cary, who, when the Royalists sustained a particularly dis-

royal visitor—George V, who, as Duke of York, was the guest of Lady Sarah Spencer in Victorian days.

We have a reminder of the Murray family in the parish church, for on the north wall of the chancel is a beautiful monument to the memory of John and James Murray, "youths of the most winning disposition," who lived and died at Berkhamsted Place. The family supported the Royalists in the Civil War and were victims of a childish act of revenge when Parliamentarians cut the water pipes and destroyed a mill which "standeth afaire" and conveyed water to Berkhamsted Place. Incidentally, the daughter of the house, Anne Murray, aided the Duke of York's escape to Holland in 1648 by dressing him as a girl.

The Duchy of Cornwall

During the Commonwealth, Daniel Axtell, who was in command of the guard at the trial of Charles I, was for a short time a sub-tenant of Berkhamsted Place; at the Restoration he was tried and hanged as a regicide. Commonwealth grants were then void and the honour, castle and manor returned to the Crown, and, as parcel of the Duchy of Cornwall, remained in the Crown or the eldest son of the reigning sovereign until 1862, when the manor was purchased by trustees on behalf of the second Earl Brownlow.

In 1660, Berkhamsted Place was leased to the Lord Treasurer, the Earl of Portland, and it was during his occupancy that the disastrous fire occurred. He assigned the remainder of his lease to John Sayer, founder of the almshouses. In 1718 Berkhamsted Place passed to the Atwells and, two years later, to the Ropers, who received various renewals of the lease. In 1807 John Roper assigned his interest to John William, Earl of Bridgewater, to whose descendants, the Earls Brownlow, the manor, including Berkhamsted Place, passed by purchase from the Duchy of Cornwall.

—"BEORCHAM"

UNDERGROUND

For generations Berkhamstedians have been intrigued by a legend that "the Black Prince's secret tunnel" linked Berkhamsted Place with Berkhamsted Castle. The secret has been well kept: no one has ever been guilty of a breach of confidence by stating where the tunnel may be seen, although in years gone by a number of townsmen would speak knowingly of friends who had actually seen the tunnel.

The legend almost certainly arose from a lively imagination or from the discovery of an old drain which served a perfectly normal function and was never the Black Prince's "hide-out"!

Incidentally, Berkhamsted Place did not exist when the Castle was inhabited—and when the mansion was built the Castle was already in ruin.

couraging defeat in the Civil War, placed himself at the head of his regiment and rode out to meet his death at a gap in the hedge where the shots rained thickest.

The Cary association with Berkhamsted Place was short-lived. As already stated, the mansion was sold in 1610 to Henry, Prince of Wales, and on his death two years later it passed to his younger brother, afterwards Charles I.

But it was never intended that Prince Charles should live at Berkhamsted; the mansion and estate were leased to his former tutor, Thomas Murray, whose wife had also served in the Royal Household, having nursed the prince at Dunfermline. This led to the common but erroneous belief that Charles I was nursed at Berkhamsted Place.

Charles I's Visit

The prince did, however, pay at least one visit to the mansion. On August 14, 1616, two months after installing themselves in their new home, the Murrays had the honour of entertaining the prince, who spent the afternoon hunting in Berkhamsted Park, where he killed a fat buck. Over two and a half centuries elapsed before Berkhamsted Place received its next



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