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The Wool Merchants of Berkhamsted

By 'BEORCHAM'

ONCE UPON A TIME the woollen industry brought prosperity to towns and villages now remote from the great industrial centres. The merchants waxed rich and often spent their money wisely—hence the richly decorated “wool churches” and handsome old houses to be found in many parts of the country, notably in East Anglia and the Cotswolds.

Five, six and seven centuries ago Berkhamsted, too, was the home of many wool merchants. Cobb, in his “History of Berkhamsted,” is content to say that “in early times we may imagine that the chief business of Berkhamsted consisted in the trade in wool,” but modern research has shed considerable light on the subject.

Prosperous Merchants

We now know not only the names of several local merchants but have evidence that two were sufficiently wealthy to lend considerable sums of money to the King. In all probability these were “forced loans”—a not uncommon method of raising money in early days. Another local merchant had the misfortune to lose a valuable cargo of wool when a London ship was captured by the French off the Isle of Thanet.

It is possible that Berkhamsted is partly indebted to prosperous wool merchants for one of the largest parish churches in the Home Counties, but it would be presumptuous to claim that it is a “wool church.”

By the 12th century a great and widespread industry had been created in this country, and our wool was held in high esteem abroad. It was customary to send the wool to Flanders to be made into

cloth until Flemish weavers were induced to settle in this country; they passed on their knowledge to English craftsmen and craftswomen, who soon equalled and then surpassed the skill of their foreign tutors.

Wool merchants were doubtless the chief beneficiaries of Henry II's Charter of 1156, which stated that the men and merchants of Berkhamsted and Wallingford were to be “free of all tolls and duties whithersoever they go, whether through England, Normandy or Spain”—a handsome concession to help the export drive. Anyone disquieting our travellers was liable to a fine of £10.

THAT LOCAL MEN journeyed abroad is proved by a letter from the King to various merchants living at Bruges. Dated May, 1332, it includes the names of John le Fuller, John Gentilcorp, Ralph de Cheddington and William le Shepard, all men of Berkhamsted with business interests in Flanders. Another member of the Gentilcorp family, Thomas, was one of the three men elected to represent the borough of Berkhamsted in the Council held at Westminster in 1338.

Loans to the King

John le Fuller and William le Shepard were prosperous men, for in September, 1332, they lent the King £246 17s. 1d. and £94 2s. 2d. respectively. Nine years later these two merchants were appointed receivers of wool in the county of Hertfordshire, and in 1344 they had yet to recover their money from the King.

Then, in May, 1345, William le Shepard obtained a writ from the King authorising him to collect £16 9s. 2d. from dues in the port of London, the balance of the £94 2s. 2d. having already been collected at Southampton. No interest was paid on this 12-years loan! In August, 1351, William le Shepard lent another £40 to the King, and it was arranged that he should recover the money “out of the issues of the customs and subsidies of wool, hides and wool-fells which he shall export in such ports as he shall select . . .”

The “Alnager”

In the reign of Richard II there was a subsidy of fourpence per broadcloth. Every piece was inspected by the alnager, an official who examined and measured the cloth and, if it was up to standard, affixed his seal. It was illegal to sell unsealed cloth, and defective or short-



Wool merchants demanded good, sound fleeces—so, as this reproduction of a quaint woodcut of 1510 shows, shepherds powdered and washed their flocks centuries before Cooper's Dip was invented

length pieces were confiscated. A Hertford clothier was fined for selling a “frieze cloth” that was 1 lb. under the recognized weight.

Prices appear to have been rather high. For example, six yards of red cloth were sold at St. Albans in 1423 for 5s. Although 10d. a yard now seems ridiculously cheap, it must be remembered that wages of 2d. and 3d. a day were then customary.

Fulling Mills

In the year 1387 thirteen Berkhamsted producers qualified for the broadcloth subsidy of fourpence, compared with 27 producers at St. Albans and five at Hertford. St. Albans was obviously the chief wool centre of Hertfordshire and the industry was well established there—and doubtless in Berkhamsted, too—by the end of the 12th century. Generally speaking, however, production was on a small scale in Hertfordshire.

Our neighbours at Hemel Hempstead, it is interesting to learn, possessed a fulling-mill in 1290, if not earlier, and as

late as 1580 we have evidence that there were two fulling-mills under one roof. The name John le Fuller, already mentioned as one of the Berkhamsted merchants with an agency at Bruges, suggests that there may also have been a fulling-mill at Berkhamsted.

THE YEAR 1316 was a worrying one for a leading Berkhamsted exporter, Adam Puff. Off the Isle of Thanet, the Admiral of Calais attacked and captured a London ship called *La Petite Bayarde*, belonging to John Prior and destined for Antwerp with a cargo of wool worth £1,200. The largest individual owner was Adam Puff, who had on board 21 serplers of wool valued at £210.

Many attempts were made to obtain satisfaction for this outrage from the King of France, who made promises but did not compensate the English merchants. The King of England retaliated, in June, 1318, by commanding the sheriffs to seize

the goods of French merchants in English ports—to the value of £600 in London, £400 in Southampton, £200 in Yarmouth, and £133 6s. 8d. in Ipswich.

Broken Promises

This measure shocked the French merchants, notably those of Amiens, whose goods were seized in the port of London. They protested to their King, and on the strength of his promise to pay compensation, the King of England, on August 16, 1318, ordered the sheriffs to release the goods already seized. But full satisfaction was not forthcoming, and in January, 1319, the sheriffs of London were again ordered to seize the goods of French merchants to the value of £402 11s. 10d. As it happened, they still had in their hands goods to the value of £197 8s. 2d., which they had taken the previous year and not released—proof that the French promises were not taken seriously. Finally, the Bishop of Winchester was ordered, in August, 1320, to complete the whole business by seizing French goods to the value of £303 6s. 8d. at St. Giles' Fair, Oxford, and the bailiff of Southampton goods to the value of £400.

“Buried in Wool”

In all probability Berkhamsted's woollen industry ceased to exist in early Tudor days. According to one authority, the chief local industry in Queen Elizabeth's reign was the manufacture of malt, and at a later date Berkhamsted was noted for its woodenware. The famous Act of Parliament which from 1678 to 1815 made it illegal to bury a body unless it was wrapped in wool came far too late to benefit local wool producers—incidentally, the church-wardens' accounts contain many statements such as “All buried in wool and so certified at the time”—and today we have to travel some forty miles to the nearest “wool town,” Witney.

(“Beorcham” is indebted to Mr. C. M. Cox for kindly placing at his disposal the results of original research into the ancient Berkhamsted woollen industry.)

Frank C. Templing

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