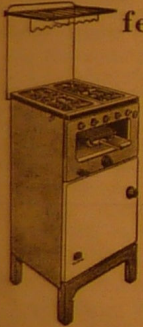


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The Wood-Turners of Berkhamsted

By 'BEORCHAM'

IN HIS "HISTORY OF BERKHAMSTED," the Rev. J. W. Cobb invites readers to form their own opinions whether the name "Berkhamsted" means "the fortress homestead" or "the homestead among the hills." Neither version satisfies modern etymologists, for the Place Name Society asserts that Berkhamsted is "the town of the birch trees."

Even in these days of wholesale tree-felling, birches still grow prolifically in the district, notably in Hockeridge Wood and on our commons. But the craftsmen who made Berkhamsted famous for woodenware used trees of many species, in particular the sturdy beeches of the vast Chiltern forests which, alas! have been slaughtered at an ever-increasing rate in modern times.

Six Hundred Years Ago

Bowl-turners and spoon and shovel makers were plying their trade when Berkhamsted Castle was in its prime. Did not William the Turner and Richard the Shoveller steal timber belonging to the Castle in Edward III's reign? Perhaps they were caught in the act by the Black Prince's park-keeper, who must have been a first-class man to merit what was then the very satisfactory wage of twopence a day! William and Richard no doubt imagined that the boughs they stole could well be spared by the prince, who often gave whole trees away as Christmas presents. For instance, the rector of Berkhamsted, in 1351, received three beeches for fuel, and six more trees were given to the warden of the hospital of St. Thomas, "at the end of the town of Berkhamsted," to repair the hospital.

The early bowl-turners and shovel-makers of Berkhamsted passed on their skill from generation to generation, and less than a century ago their tumbledown sheds and dusty yards were still a feature

of the district. Their tools were primitive. Instead of a lathe, they operated a "shaving horse" of a type similar to that still used by natives in the Far East. Yet what feats of craftsmanship were they able to perform! It is on record that a Berkhamsted man turned a wooden bowl so thin that it could be pushed inside out, like a soft felt hat.

Real Craftsmanship

A mid-18th century writer, William Ellis, of Little Gaddesden, tells us that alder poles were "turned to great account among the Berkhamsted and Cheshunt turners of hollow-ware, who in this commodity make more consumption of this wood and of beech than any other two towns in Great Britain. . . They make dishes, bowls and many other serviceable goods . . . the frames of the matted and other chairs . . . pattens, clogs and heels of shoes, gates, hurdles and small rafters."

One of the last of the "independent" wood-turners is still remembered by old inhabitants. Mr. T. Meek, who specialised in the manufacture of pump buckets and "pump suckers"—popular utensils before the days of a piped water supply—plied his trade in Cox's-lane (Kings-road) before he became licensee of the "Crystal Palace" public-house and transferred the turnery to the old railway station buildings.

The Industrial Age

But most of the old craftsmen were soon forced out of business when power-driven machinery revolutionised the industry. In early Victorian times five steam saw-mills raised their tall chimney stacks in Berkhamsted, employing many of the turners who formerly enjoyed independence in their own workshops.

Every day one could see teams of sturdy horses hauling beeches and oaks from neighbouring woods to the timber yards. Saw-dust was seen and smelt everywhere, and the town echoed the high-pitched whine of steam-driven saws in Holliday-street, George-street, Lower High-street, Bridge-street, and Gossoms End. In addition to these saw-mills there were two large coachbuilders' shops, a barge-building works, and two coopers' yards (one near the Town Hall and another in Castle-street) to provide barrels for the town's three breweries.

A century ago "war work" was not unknown. Berkhamsted supplied the British Army with tent-pegs, shovels and wooden bowls for the Crimean and later campaigns. Many townspeople have copies of a photograph taken during the Boer War, showing a wagon leaving

East's timber yard with thousands of tent-pegs, destined for our Forces in South Africa.

Varied Products

But the manufacture of tent-pegs was only a small part of the industry. Our saw-mills turned out almost anything from their own massive timber wagons to pick handles and children's spinning tops. Here is a list of the specialities of a saw-mill which stood on the site of George-street recreation ground: butchers' trays, milk yokes, malt and barn shovels, Indian clubs, sceptres, cricket bats and stumps, and spinning tops.

The woodenware trade was closely linked with the brushmaking industry, which once employed some 100 townspeople. Our timber merchants made brush-backs and handles by the thousand.

Sixpence an Hour

Mr. Joseph Tufnell, who was 86 years of age when he died some two years ago, had interesting recollections of the time when he was apprenticed to one of the town's master-craftsmen, Mr. John Sills, whose modest workshop, now known as Tower Mills, stands at the end of Thompson's-row, off Holliday-street. There Mr. Tufnell learnt his trade the hard way. He often had to help to fell and cart the trees to the workshop, where pit-sawing was the vogue and little use was made of the circular saw. Hours were from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, except on Saturdays, when the men "knocked off" at 4 p.m. Sixpence an hour was considered a good wage for a skilled craftsman. On piecework the customary payment was 4d. for a dozen whitewash brush handles, and 4s. for a dozen malt shovels. It required a fast worker to make a malt shovel in half-an-hour. Incidentally, in the 'eighties 200 men and boys were employed in the various timber yards, 50 more were engaged in coach-building, and 16 in boat-building.

New and Old

Today only two saw-mills remain in Berkhamsted (there is a third at Bourne End), but they have been considerably enlarged, and the industry has also developed along new lines through the establishment of the pulley works in Water-lane and the large cabinet-making works at Gossoms End.

And so, because it has moved with the times, woodenware is still a flourishing local industry. Modern, speedier methods have destroyed much of the old-time romance but not killed the true craftsman's pride in his work. Berkhamsted firms have a high reputation for quality, and the variety of articles they produce is astonishingly large. The town is capable of producing almost anything made of wood, from massive canal lock-gates and smart office furniture to brush handles.

Dwindling Woodlands

Yes, a fine old trade—but it has completely altered the face of the countryside around Berkhamsted. Once upon a time the Common, the Park and scores of fields were densely forested, but at no period has replanting compensated for losses caused by felling. During the two world wars felling of trees was greatly accelerated, and the countryside is still

being robbed of some of its finest features. Happily, the National Trust has an enlightened reforestation scheme for Ashridge, and it is a healthy sign that the Council has recently undertaken a complete survey of groups of trees and woodlands in the urban area.

A Church Window "Squabble"

One does not expect to find a reference to Berkhamsted Parish Church in a Norfolk book, least of all the interesting information that "squabbling" was provoked by a decision of nearly 80 years ago to insert a memorial to William Cowper in St. Peter's Church.

However, the author of "A Norfolk Diary" was no stranger to this district, for Benjamin John Armstrong (born 1817) married Ann Rebecca, daughter of William Duncombe, of Lagley, in 1842. An entry in his diary, dated August 8, 1878, is as follows:—

"Went to see the new memorial window in Berkhamsted Church to Cowper, and felt some interest in it because, about 20 years ago, I tried to get one inserted at Dereham. I failed through the Low Church adherents of the poet, who did not consider this sort of memorial as being with the poet's sentiments. . . This window, it seems, has caused almost as much squabbling as the proposed one at Dereham." (Afterwards a similar window was in fact inserted in Dereham Church.)

According to the late Mr. R. A. Norris's "History of Berkhamsted St. Peter," the glass in the east window, the only direct memorial to William Cowper in the church, was inserted in 1872 as the result of the energy of the Rev. J. W. Cobb, who induced subscribers to come forward soon after his institution as rector. The son of one of the poet's most intimate friends assisted in the selection of the subjects, which are all chosen with reference to Cowper's poems.

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