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Tasks for the Local Records Society

By 'Beorcham'

DELVING INTO BERKHAMSTED'S PAST

THE proposal to form a Local Records Society in Berkhamsted offers fascinating possibilities, for despite the rewarding work of Cobb and other historians, there is still great scope for original research.

The Society will be concerned with documents of almost every description, and not merely those regarded as "official." Much information of general interest may be gleaned from old private books and papers—account books, inventories, insurance policies, receipts, recipes, diaries, and correspondence. In this field much will depend, of course, upon the consent and co-operation of the owners concerned, and it is hoped that nothing of value was discarded during the recent salvage campaign!

In the past many valuable records have been lost through carelessness, ignorance, and, occasionally, barefaced theft. Often a document is thrown away just because it is old—surely a very good reason for keeping it, at least until expert advice has been obtained.

The Churchwardens' Accounts

A notorious example of carelessness is the absence from the parish church chest of the churchwardens' accounts for 1584-1748. This volume of 366 folios is in the safe keeping of the British Museum, but an inscription on the flyleaf—"Purchased at Putticks, Dec. 4, 1851"—shows that the book could easily have fallen into the hands of a private collector and subsequently of someone who had no respect for old manuscripts. Mr. Cobb suggests that the book was taken away from Berkhamsted when enquiries were being made regarding the parishioners' rights under the old charters.

The great interest of the church-

wardens' accounts is shown by the following extracts, which have been made by Mr. C. M. Cox and are printed for the first time:

1592. For watching and tending James Clarke in the tyme of his sickness xs. 4d.
Setting out of soldiers for the townes behouffe vs.
A payer of shoes for Mother White 17d.
1597. For Richard Grove's wyfe when he was in prison 8d.
Altering a cote for Thomas Abower 5d.
A pair of shoes for percivale when he went for a sogier. 20d.
1598. Setting of the clerks new pue xs. 4d.
For Mychell for 3 yds narrow coarse grey cloth for a peticote.
1632. John England for brasing agen the Church key and if it doth not hold for a yeaere he is to mend it agen for nothing.

Great Events

Payments to bellringers recall the following notable occasions:—

1616. When Prince Charles came to the towne.
1633. When the Kinge came thro the towne.
1657 (July 25). When Ye Lord Protector was proclaimed.
1660. Barrel of beer when the King was proclaimed.
1690. Ye victory in Ireland (Battle of the Boyne).
1745. A pound of candles on ye Re-joining day when the Rebels were driven into Scotland.

Several items in the churchwardens' accounts, dated 1630, are of especial interest. There are references to a very bad harvest—"God's heavy hand"—and "carrying stone into ye Church which were (*sic*) blown off in ye greate winde." A question arose about seating in church following a complaint that the poor pushed themselves forward!

Last-Minute Reprieve

Happily, we still have many valuable documents in the parish church chest, and the triple locks and keys should be kept busy when the Local Records Society starts operations.

The Free Churches, too, will be asked to co-operate. In the past, local historians (with the exception of the late Mr. George Loosley) have been apt to neglect the Nonconformist churches, and inspection of their old minute books should lead to interesting discoveries. Most Berkhamstedians have heard of Nathan Paine, who dared to criticise the execution of Charles I, but how many would recognise the

name of his contemporary, Thomas Monk? As pastor of Berkhamsted Baptist Church, he was sentenced to death—just because he was a dissenter. Surely one of the most dramatic incidents of local history was the journey Thomas Monk's son made to Westminster to interview Charles II and secure a reprieve for his father.

Stolen: A "She Ass"!

Then there are the minute books of old local associations to be inspected. The history of the Berkhamsted Institute (founded in 1845) has been published, but little is known of the Property Protection Association, which, when it was founded some 155 years ago, drew up a list of rewards to those who brought to justice such persons as horse thieves, cattle maimers, fire raisers, footpads, and highway robbers. There were even tree vandals, for a member of the Association, the Rev. Dr. Bingham, reported in 1804 that some person or persons had maliciously cut with a handsaw nearly 60 fir, holly and other trees in his pleasure gardens at Great Gaddesden. But the list of rewards did not cover every contingency: no one thought a "she ass" was in danger of being stolen until a member lost an animal answering to that description on Berkhamsted Common in 1802. The Association thereupon decided that the reward for the prosecution of ass thieves should be half a guinea!

Perhaps innkeepers will ransack their attics—or their cellars—to find documents which tell us more about the days when the best beer cost 6s. a barrel. The Local Records Society may also have an opportunity of inspecting ancient account books, such as one kept by a Berkhamsted farmer in 1850-1. The wages bill for 16 employees totalled but £11 a week; 250 eggs were sold for 13s., and chickens and ducks were 2s. apiece!

A Cowper Discovery

From these brief notes it will be seen that the Society has great opportunities as it sets forth on its voyage of discovery. And already there has been an interesting sequel to the announcement in last month's *Review* that a Local Records Society is to be formed.

A newcomer to Berkhamsted has informed me that on going through his late father's papers, he found a letter written by William Cowper, the poet, in 1781. Thus, by an interesting coincidence, this document is now the treasured possession of a resident of Cowper's native town.

The letter does not bear Cowper's address, but it was certainly written at Olney, Bucks, during the year which saw the writing of "Table Talk" and a number of other long poems, including "Expostulation," with which the letter is mainly concerned. It answers points or criticisms made by Cowper's publisher, John Johnson, who, incidentally, was a son of the poet's cousin Catherine.

As a business letter it is not the literary gem one might have expected

of "the prince of English letter-writers," but it shows Cowper in what to many will be a new light—not as a timid poet divorced from everyday affairs, but as a business-like writer who was prepared to justify and stand by what he had written.

The letter is given below, followed by relevant extracts from the printed version of "Expostulation."

The Cowper Letter

Sir,
By your not mentioning it, I suppose you have not yet received *Conservation*. Shall be glad to know it when you have. *Retirement* is grown to about 500 lines, so that I begin to hope that I shall reach the end of it.

Cry aloud, &c.

Though the verse has rather an unusual run, I chose to begin it in that manner for the sake of animation, and am not able to alter it without flattening its energy quite away.

Providence adverse, &c.

The reduplication of those words was a point I rather labored for the sake of emphasis, and the transposition of them strikes me as artful and as having an agreeable effect upon the ear.

Cured of the golden calves—

The expression has a figurative boldness in it which appears to me poetical.

All your other marks have been attended to, and I thank you for them.

I am Sir

Yours most obedt
Wm. Cowper.

Sept 16. 1781.

EXTRACTS FROM "EXPOSTULATION"
Cry aloud, thou that sittest in the dust,
Cry to the proud, the cruel, and unjust;
Knock at the gates of nations, rouse their fears;
Say wrath is coming, and the storm appears:
But raise the shrillest cry in British ears.

Is adverse providence, when ponder'd well,
So dimly writ, or difficult to spell,
Thou canst not read with readiness and ease
Providence adverse in events like these?

Cur'd of the golden calves, their fathers' sin,
They set up self, that idol god within.

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