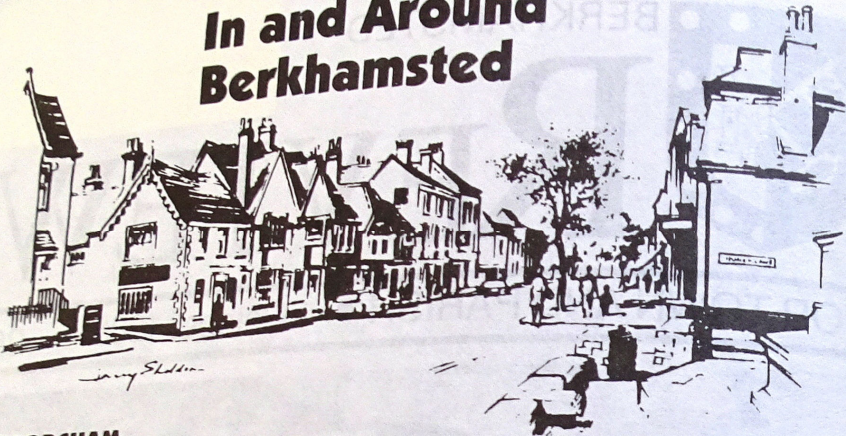


In and Around Berkhamsted



By BEORCHAM

Berkhamsted's Ancient Markets and Fairs

How many townspeople realise that the weekly street market is our oldest institution?

It has a long history – longer even than that of St. Peter's Church. Indeed, a decision of 1216 to change market day from Sunday to Monday may well have been due to the greater respect for the Sabbath inspired by the building of the church about that time.

Lipscombe, in his *Journey* of 1799, found a "shabby, decayed market" at Berkhamsted, but when the Castle was in its prime our market was one of the best in Hertfordshire. The town then enjoyed a status much the same as that of Windsor in more modern times, and it may be assumed that merchants found Berkhamsted a profitable venue for their silks, spices and other costly wares. But, generally speaking, there could not have been much to buy or sell other than livestock, corn, wool and woodenware.

COVER PICTURE: members of the Appeal Committee rediscover the alter stone from the 1642 Baldwin monument. The stone will form the alter of the newly revived Chapel of Our Lady of Grace and Pity.

ROYAL FAVOURS

Our mediæval market had royal favours bestowed upon it. Edward IV, in his charter, decreed that no other market was to be set up in any village within eleven miles of Berkhamsted, and James I granted the town an additional market day and two new annual fairs.

But privilege and prosperity did not always go hand in hand. When the Castle fell into ruin the market declined, and the "eleven miles" monopoly, if it was ever exercised, was soon forgotten. Berkhamsted's loss was a gain for neighbouring towns, and the markets of Tring, Chesham and Hemel Hempstead attracted much of the business that was formerly transacted in our High-street. Norden's Survey of 1616 tells us that the fair on St. James's Day was "much lesser than in former time", the seven-day fair in May had been discontinued; and the weekly market (still held on Monday) was "almost quite overthrown". The "profits of the toll of the market and fayre" (used by the churchwardens for repairing the church and relieving the poor) were meagre, the Survey stating: "Wee esteem them to be worth but £5 per annum and not much more. . . by reason of the Castle being decayed and no habitation or use there as antiently have been, and the discontinuance of the said antient libertys and priviledges and decay of two or three miles, and the great decay of the town both of trading and otherwise."

RIVAL MARKETS

The miles must have been long ones in a reference to "three new markets granted or set up not above three miles distance from the said burrough or antient market towne and three other markets within six miles thereof". At Berkhamsted market, the Survey continues, "there is not usually . . . above 10 quarters of all manner of grain in any one day one time with another, and no market for any manner of cattle in the whole year but only at the said fayre on St. James's Day, whereas in some of the said new markets not above three miles thereof it is conceived that there is usually 200 quarters and sometimes 250 or 300 quarters of all manner of graine, and good store of cattle there every market day."

DECLINE AND FALL

That was the melancholy situation in 1616 – not many years after a market house (destroyed by fire in 1854) had been built in the middle of the town. Hopes of recovering Berkhamsted's former importance as a market town were doubtless raised by James I's charter of 1619, for the burgesses were privileged to "keep one markt on Thursday in every weeke, besides ye ancient markt kept on Munday," and two new fairs, "one on Shrove Munday and ye other on Whitson Munday in every yeare, besides ye ancient faire on St. James's Day."

But what was the use of two market days every week and two extra fairs if there was little business to transact? The Berkhamsted market still failed to attract buyers and sellers, and its continued decline in the 17th century has been ascribed to a series of small-pox epidemics in the town.

Berkhamsted was apparently so impoverished that the townspeople did not persist with their efforts to secure a new charter in 1664. One of the desired alterations was: "Ye weekly markt on Thursday to be changed to Friday."

VICTORIAN REVIVAL

Livelier times did not return until Victorian days. According to Loosley's Directory for 1882, a cattle market was held on alternate Wednesdays, and there was a market every Thursday for straw-plait, in addition to a miscellaneous market on Saturdays. By the turn of the century the plait market had disappeared, but the Victoria "History of Hertfordshire," published over 40 years ago, credited Berkhamsted with three market days: one for vegetables on Tuesdays, another for meat and flowers on Saturdays, and a cattle market on alternate Fridays – "all so small as to be scarcely noticeable."

John Sayer, founder of the alms-houses, played a less praiseworthy role when in 1674, he seized the market and fair tolls, which had previously been devoted to the relief of the poor and the upkeep of the parish church. Later, the market rights were vested in the owners of Ashridge until the death of Earl Brownlow in 1922, when, principally through the foresight of the late Mr. E.H. Sedgwick, the Town Hall Committee purchased the rights for a nominal sum. That was a fine stroke of business, as the annual accounts of the Committee always show.

HIGH STREET A FAIRGROUND

The market has always been held in the High-street, and many townspeople can recall the time when the stalls stretched all the way from King's-road to the Parish Church. But few indeed can still remember the ancient statute fairs, nicknamed "stattie," which brought all the fun of the fair to the High-street.

Between King's-road and Water-lane one could patronise boxing booths, swings, cokernut shies, spinning jennies, and freak shows where two-pence was charged to see the fat lady and threepence to see a six-legged horse. Cakes, sweets and souvenirs were on sale, and at Michaelmas one could, if one wished, buy a cartload of onions, for the stall of a Leighton Buzzard market gardener, set up outside the Crown Hotel, was so lavish and odorous that the late September event was popularly known as the "Onion Fair."

UNDIGNIFIED?

By all accounts our statute fairs were gay, robust, and extremely noisy. And because they were so noisy, the fairs were not universally popular. Many townspeople considered it undignified for the market-place to be turned into a fairground, and coach-drivers and carters reinforced opposition by complaining of traffic congestion. But protests alone did not cause the fairs to be abandoned: they attracted less support as time went on, and the loss of those links with "Merrie England" was not greatly mourned.

In the late 19th century our statute fairs were largely given up to merry-making, but originally they were big seasonal markets at which cattle, corn and goods of many descriptions changed hands. The Michaelmas fair was especially important, as it served as a "labour exchange" at which farmers engaged labourers for the next twelve months. Thus, a guide book of 1810 speaks of the Michaelmas fair "for the hiring of servants." This book mentions another statute fair on October 11, a cheese fair on August 5, and a small fair for cattle on Shrove Tuesday. Incidentally, the tiny hamlet of Frithsden had a cherry fair which attracted buyers from miles around.

THE WHITSUNTIDE FAIR

For many years Berkhamsted's Whitsuntide fair was held on the Common, and we learn that it was of the traditional rural character, with such games as jumping and rolling in sacks, bobbing for treacle rolls, and climbing greased poles for legs of mutton, to entertain the crowd. Apparently little business was transacted; indeed, a notice of 1819 described it as a "Holiday Fair". It was a two-day event, with donkey races, "cricketing", and flat races, the prizes including linen shirts and stockings for men and boys, and chemises and stockings for women and girls. There was also a pair of breeches "to be jingled for."

The last Whitsuntide Fair on Berkhamsted Common was held in 1867 – a year after the thwarted enclosure – and it appears that the chief event was a cricket match between married and single. A contemporary writer tells us that "booths were erected for the sale of refreshments, and stalls, with their tempting wares, were plentiful. A great variety of amusements were carried on through the day, and, weather permitting, fiddling and dancing extended far into the night."

Perhaps someone will suggest a revival of that event for the Festival of Britain? Worse ideas have been put forward!
(From the 'Review' of Jan 1951)

Notice Board

THE COWPER SOCIETY

The Choir of Helene Lange Gymnasium, Furth West Germany: All Saints' Church, Shrublands Road, Wed. Oct 22. Proceeds to the Hospice of S. Francis.

Noël Agate

ST. PETER'S WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP

There will be no meeting in The Court House during October, but will all members who have booked for the outing on October 15th be at the Post Office Car Park at 1.45 pm. as the coach leaves at 2 pm sharp.