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There was a Little John (but no Robin Hood!) among
The BOWMEN of BERKHAMSTED

One of my minor ambitions—probably as unattainable as the major ones—is to have Prince Edward-street renamed Archers' Way.

In this short-cut from the High-street to Butts Meadow—a direct continuation of one of the two ancient rights of way to Berkhamsted Castle—we follow in the footsteps of warriors who practised at the butts when "the myghte of the realme of Englonde stode upon archeres." The butts vanished long ago, but their sites and the place where the archers stood to shoot could still be traced until the meadow was levelled some twenty years ago. It is interesting to note that in the Rectory Meadow, less than an arrow's flight from Butts Meadow, the "Berkhamsted Bowmen" have recently revived this royal and ancient sport.

A Halfpenny Fine

No-one can say when archery was first practised; eastern races were highly skilled in the use of the bow long before the Christian era, and Romans used it not only as a weapon of war but in sports of the arena.

But it was left to Englishmen to bring the art of bowmanship to perfection. Centuries ago, by royal decree, butts were set up in every parish, and men were compelled to practise every Sunday and holy day. Absentees were liable to a fine of one halfpenny—not an inconsiderable coin when the week's wages were reckoned in pence, not pounds.

Then, as in more modern times, there were wars and rumours of wars. When the Black Prince left Berkhamsted Castle, his favourite home, to fight the French, he was accompanied by archers from the little town that was growing up outside the castle walls. Berkhamsted men were among the victors of Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt.

Robert le Parker had not long been appointed keeper of the deer-park, thereby qualifying for a wage of 2d. a day and a new robe every year, when he was ordered, in 1346, "to choose in those parts (i.e. Berkhamsted) 24 good companion-archers, the best he can find, and come with them with all speed to Dover to the prince's master, Sir Bartholomew de Burgherssh, by Sunday next at latest." Similar orders were issued to the prince's parkers at Byfleet and Watlington.

The names of several of the Black Prince's henchmen from Berkhamsted are known. Best remembered is Sir John Raven, the prince's "esquire," who is depicted as a knight in armour on one of the oldest memorials in St. Peter's Church. It is believed that he lived on Whitehill; Raven's-lane perpetuates his name.

Then there was the Black Prince's marshal, Henry of Berkhamsted. He lost a number of war horses in Gascony, and an Order dated October 25, 1359, authorised the payment of £10 6s. 8d. to him—£6 for replacement of horses, and £4 6s. 8d. for wages.

Little John

Every schoolboy and schoolgirl loves Robin Hood and his gallant companion, Little John. But how many know that we had an archer named Little John in Berkhamsted, too? He is mentioned in a document which shows that there were supply difficulties even in 1356:

Order to Master John de Brunham, the prince's clerk and chamberlain of Cestre (Chester), to pay by indenture to Little John of Berkhamsted, whom the prince is sending to Cheshire with the king's commission to carry bows, arrows and bowstrings to Plymouth by land, a reasonable sum for the said carriage, and 6d. a day for his wages.

The Black Prince had ordered 1,000 bows, 2,000 sheaves of arrows and 400 gross bowstrings from the fletchers of Cheshire, who were to be paid from time to time such sums as would encourage them in their work. An early example of an incentive bonus to speed munitions of war!

For Services Rendered

The name of Little John (Petit Johan) also appears in earlier and later documents. In 1354, Robert de Eleford, the prince's yeoman and constable of the Castle, was ordered to deliver three beeches (for fuel) to Christiana, wife of Little John—presumably at a time when her husband was absent in France. In 1360 came an Order to deliver three beeches (for timber) to Little John, as a gift from the prince.

Remission of rent was granted to another bowman, John de Paylyngton,

"for good and free service rendered in Gascony." Here is an interesting extract from an Order dated 1357:

The said John holds (in Berkhamsted) three messuages and two virgates of land of the greater tenure which once belonged to William Wolston. For these lands William de Wolston used to render 35s. of rent and give four cocks, price 4d., four hens, price 8d., 40 eggs at Easter, price 2d., 2s. 8d. for the winter ploughing and harrowing, 2s. 4d. for the Lent ploughing and harrowing, 12d. for ploughing for fallow, 8d. for mowing the meadow, one boonwork in autumn with eight men for one day, for which he took nothing from the lord, the work of each man being worth (blank) and another boonwork with eight men, food being supplied by the lord once a day, the work of each man being worth 1d. . . .

It is good to know that valiant bowmen were suitably rewarded. But many a bowman of Berkhamsted must have perished on the battlefields of France, and it may be assumed that our little town, of perhaps not more than 500 inhabitants in those days, sent more than its fair share of men and boys to the wars. And, as has happened in more modern times, prisoners of war were brought to Berkhamsted; King John of France was among the captives who spent dreary months within the castle walls.

Practising In 1716

So much for times when the longbowmen of England brought the art of archery to perfection. It was not long before primitive firearms came into use, but the bow remained a respected weapon, and one writer was convinced that "there is no doubt but archers with their volleys of arrows would wound, kill and hurt above an hundred men for every one so to be done by the shot."

The need for continuing archery practice was often debated in Elizabethan days, and an endeavour to revive the art was made by Charles I. In fact, at the outbreak of the Civil War an attempt was made to raise a regiment of archers for the service of the king. The golden age of archery was then over, but as late as 1639 Highlanders armed with bows, arrows and quivers were in the Covenanters' Army at Duns Law.

Berkhamsted men were still practising archery in 1716, for in that year the butts—and the tumbrel!—were repaired at the expense of the parish. But our 18th century bowman had no warlike aims: they met in Butts Meadow for the fun of the game, and then adjourned to the King's Arms to quench their thirsts.

'BEORCHAM'

CHEMISTS' ROTA
Local arrangements to meet emergencies

The week-day evening and Sunday morning service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for this month:—

December 30—January 5: Boots.
January 6—12: Figg.
January 13—19: Taylors.
January 20—26: Dickman.
January 27—February 2: Boots.

On week-days the respective shops will open from 6 to 7 p.m., including Wednesdays, and on Sundays from 11.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:

Monday and Friday—2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.;
5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Thursday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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