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FINED FOR NOT GOING TO CHURCH

The Seamy Side of Local History

LICENCES for bicycles, cats and cage-birds are sometimes suggested by well-meaning tax-raisers, but not even the most ardent friend of the Inland Revenue dares to propose that men and women should be fined for not going to church.

What a wonderful source of revenue that would be! But there really was a time when citizens were brought before the justices for not attending church, and among the offenders were Berkhamsted and Northchurch parishioners.

In 1666, John Goodwall, a Berkhamsted yeoman, was prosecuted for not attending church. Earlier still, in 1621, William Barton, a Northchurch wood-turner, and Mary Sermon, wife of a yeoman, were "presented at court" for not going to church for three months. Northchurch sinners were not only absentees but guilty of such offences as carting on holy days and "mis-spending the evening prayer by serving of hogges." Many, many others faced the much more serious charge of attending chapel instead of church, and paid penalties which have appalled generations of churchmen.

Crime and Punishment

Times, customs and laws may change, but magistrates seldom suffer from under-employment. Way back in the Middle Ages, washerwomen were prosecuted for polluting the water of St. John's Well, and local men stole timber from no less a personage than the Black Prince. Penalties did not always fit the crime, and we may well be astounded and angered by the banishment, in the early part of the 19th

century, of men and women to Botany Bay for what were often trifling offences. Even in Victorian days it was rare for sympathy and understanding to be shown to juvenile delinquents; for instance, less than 70 years ago a 10 years-old girl stole a farthing's-worth of salt from a Tring shop and was sentenced to ten days in St. Albans gaol, followed by five years in a reformatory.

At the "Crooked Billet"

But it would be futile to wax indignant about the harsh sentences of less humane times. Historically speaking, the "cases" recorded in the Sessions Rolls and other documents are full of interest, and we may be sure that "laughter in court" was not unknown two, three, four or more centuries ago. What a queer story must have been told by James Austin, shoemaker, when he accused John Grove, spoon-maker, of selling him an empty sack for sixpence and a pint of beer at the "Crooked Billet" in 1751!

The licensing of public-houses is centuries old, and there was a time when applicants for licences were required to be not only "of honest life" but "well affected to the present Government." Michael Handcock was evidently favourably disposed towards the Commonwealth when, in 1656, he was granted a licence "to keep a tavern at the sign of the Swan in the borough of Berkhamsted." Duly licensed, Handcock escaped the troubles which befell a Northchurch spinster named Elizabeth Gosson who, in 1630, appeared before the justices for keeping an alehouse without a licence. Similar offences were committed by Richard Twisdell and Ann Stone (widow) in 1666, and by Rebecca Clarke in 1669.

Not Apprenticed

Did publicans have to serve an apprenticeship? Probably not; but woe betide the tradesman who had not learnt his job the hard way. In 1658, Henry Sears (shoemaker) and John Bilby and Stephen Stanley (bakers), of Berkhamsted, were prosecuted for trading without having been duly apprenticed. In 1663, a similar charge was brought against Charles Edge, a yeoman, who evidently thought he could make a better living by becoming a dyer. The prosecution of George Verney in 1665 for plying the trade of baker without having served an apprenticeship is especially interesting; possibly he was an ancestor of Mr. Verney, the baker, who was in business in Berkhamsted until about 20 years ago.

A schoolmaster, too, was prosecuted: in 1666, Edward Halsey, husbandman, of Great Gaddesden, was convicted for

keeping a private school and teaching without licence from the Bishop of Lincoln. He "had not taken the oath of allegiance and does not attend any place of common prayer."

A Good Whipping

Shame on Elizabeth Hale who, in 1669, broke into the premises of Richard Mullington and stole six quarts of beer, value 6d. I do not know whether she was fined, whipped, or imprisoned, but four years earlier William Humfrey was "well whipped" for stealing 11d. worth of wheat from our old friend John Sayer, of almshouse fame. A worse fate befell John Rolfe, labourer, who was ordered to be transported for seven years for stealing one cock value 1s. and five hens value 5s. in 1767.

In 1631, Michael Younge, a Berkhamsted yeoman, was prosecuted for failing to repair hedges and fences between the lands of Mordecai Halsey and his own, with the result that "the said Mordecai's sheep escaped and were lost." Of greater consequence to the general public was the destruction by Thomas Halsey of "a common footbridge commonly known as Tiptoes Bridge, situate over the footway leading from Tiptoes Lane as far as Banckes Mill."

Riot in the Park

Worse, far worse, were the misdeeds of Richard Hardinge, who put "heapes of doung and strawe" on the highway between Wilstone and Berkhamsted. His namesake, William Hardinge, caused an obstruction in Shootersway when he "dug up, ploughed and diverted a common highway there called Shookers Way."

"Dyvers and sondrey persons" caused a "ryott" by pulling down the fences of Berkhamsted Park in 1620, and after the evidence had been heard at Whitehall the rioters were "to remain in prison for the space of one week longer from this date."

Our leading citizens were not above reproach. In 1638, the bailiffs and burgesses of Berkhamsted were ordered to attend the next monthly meeting of the justices to give an account of "the moneys received for the sale of the House of Correction there."

"Contemptuous Persons"

Twelve years earlier our "city fathers" had been described as "contemptuous persons" for refusing to contribute to the cost of road repairs in East Hertfordshire "for easier discharge of the King's carriages." They not only refused to pay, but refused to appear at the sessions or before any justices "for hearing such defaults."

It seems a little unsporting that our ancestors, after refusing to bear East Hertfordshire's burdens, had the nerve to petition the justices in 1647 for permission to receive contributions from other parishes in the county towards the relief of the poor of Berkhamsted, "they being very numerous and the said parishioners being unable to relieve the same."

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:—

January 27—February 2: Boots.

February 3—9: Figg.

February 10—16: Taylors.

February 17—23: Dickman.

February 24—March 1: 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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