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"TREACHERY" AT ASHRIDGE :: THE ARMADA SCARE

Berkhamsted in Elizabethan Times

At the start of a new Elizabethan era, writers and speakers are appropriately recalling the colourful, adventurous times of the first "Good Queen Bess."

As Princess Elizabeth, she spent much of her youth in Hertfordshire, mainly at Hatfield and Ashridge. Though no documentary evidence is available, it may be assumed that the young princess often visited Berkhamsted, passing the ruined Castle which, little more than half a century earlier, had been the home of her great-great-grandmother, Duchess Cicely. But there was only a rough track between Berkhamsted and Ashridge in those days, and Elizabeth's journeys to and from London were usually, if not always, by way of Hemel Hempstead.

The Queen and the Charter

What was Berkhamsted like in Elizabethan times? Probably there were not more than a thousand inhabitants, most of whom lived in the triangle bounded by Castle-street, Mill-street, and that short stretch of the High-street known as "Shoppe Rowe." But Berkhamsted was still a borough—Edward IV's charter was, in fact, confirmed by Queen Elizabeth on June 12, 1598—and the town was recovering from the lethargy into which it sank when the Castle was no longer tenanted.

There were many visual signs of progress in Elizabethan Berkhamsted, and some still remain: indeed, with the exception of St. Peter's Church and Dean Incent's house, all of our oldest buildings are late Tudor. It must have been a grand era for carpenters and masons, starting with the building

of Dean Incent's School when Elizabeth was a child. The Court House, the "Swan" Inn, and the "sunken" cottages in Castle-street probably date from that period.

An Elizabethan Mansion

Efforts were being made to recapture Berkhamsted's mediaeval reputation as a good market town. At the top of Water-lane, twenty stout oak posts were driven into the ground to support a market house which survived until 1854, and public subscriptions defrayed the cost of new stalls and shambles. A much more handsome contribution to the High-street was Egerton House: but let it be whispered that the demolition squad found that it was jerry-built! For the largest of local Elizabethan houses we have to go to Berkhamsted Place, which must have employed the entire labour force of the district when it was built for Sir Edward Cary, Master of the Queen's Jewel House.

The building of this mansion, huge by Elizabethan standards, probably encouraged the townspeople to anticipate a return to the golden age when the Castle dominated the town. True, Berkhamsted again had a resident of importance and wealth, but the new squire did not take an active part in local affairs. Life must have been tranquil for the farmer, the craftsman, and the labourer, who saw seven rectors come and go during the 44 years' reign of Elizabeth. Berkhamsted was still essentially an agricultural community, and the one important change was that malt-making became a flourishing local industry.

The Spanish Armada

In 1587 came rumours of war. Hertfordshire, which was singled out to provide Queen Elizabeth's body-guard, played a very full part in the preparations made to resist the threatened Spanish invasion, and descendants of the Black Prince's archers were among those who shouldered pikes for the Queen.

In October, 1587, the entire armed forces of the county were mobilised and joined their Essex comrades "to be exercised and so be enabled to encounter any enemy that shall offer to assail them."

When the Spanish Armada was sighted off the Lizard in July, 1588, Hertfordshire was ordered to send 25 lances and 60 light horse to Brentwood, 1,000 foot soldiers to Stratford-le-Bow, 500 more to London "to guard her Majesty's person," and 1,000 trained men to join the Earl of Leicester's big land force at Tilbury. But the British fleet and a great gale scattered the enemy, and our soldiers and sailors

returned home without so much as setting eyes on a Spaniard.

After the destruction of the Armada, there were several more invasion scares, the last in 1601, when trained bands of Herts, Essex, Bucks and Surrey were called up to London. The Court was like a camp, with troops of armed men marching up and down as if the Spaniards were already in the country. Unfortunately, Hertfordshire soldiers of the Queen fell into sad disgrace: between the various scares there was some slackness in supplying remounts for the light horse, and—this deserved a court-martial!—a store of gunpowder could never be accounted for.

At Ashridge

But let us return to Elizabeth's associations with our district. Ashridge did not stay empty for long after the dissolution of the monastery: it became the home of Henry VIII's children, but the only one who stayed there for a long period was Elizabeth. She retired to Ashridge on the coronation of her sister, Mary, and spent hours embroidering with gold and silver. Dainty articles made by the princess were kept at Ashridge for centuries afterwards. Among them was a Geneva Bible, covered by the skilful hands of the princess with beautiful designs in silver thread over silk.

Elizabeth was destined to figure in one of the most callous royal intrigues in English history: she was suspected of being implicated in the Wyatt rebellion, which was inspired by objections to Mary's marriage with Philip of Spain.

Off to The Tower

The Queen's commissioners, with a warrant for Elizabeth's arrest, arrived at Ashridge at nightfall. Despite protests that she was ill, orders were given for her to be ready by nine o'clock the following morning to journey to the Tower of London, the commissioners stating that they would take her dead or alive. When the hour arrived, Elizabeth was unceremoniously dragged across the courtyard to a horse litter, and the cavalcade started its long—long at least in point of time—journey to the Tower. As the first night was spent at Redbourn, the second at St. Albans, the third at Mimms, and the fourth at Highgate, it is not surprising that so many buildings proudly proclaim: "Queen Elizabeth slept here!"

Arriving at the Traitor's Gate, Elizabeth declared: "Here landeth as true a subject, being prisoner, as ever landed at these stairs: and before Thee, O God, I speak it, having none other friends but Thee alone."

"This Mighty Queen"

But Elizabeth had many friends. She left the Tower, and in due course started her glorious reign. She never returned to Ashridge, which was granted to one of her gentlemen courtiers, and soon after her death, it became the home of a man she had often admired and sometimes feared—

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:—

March 2—8 : Figg.
March 9—15 : Taylors.
March 16—22 : Dickman.
March 23—29 : 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.

Thomas Egerton, whose brilliant handling of a case in the Courts caused the Queen to exclaim: "By my troth, he shall never plead against me again." Thus, two of Elizabeth's confidants, Egerton and Cary, made their homes in the Berkhamsted district.

What did Berkhamsted people think of "Good Queen Bess"? The answer may be found in St. Peter's Church, where, beneath the Queen's coat of arms, the following simple lines by some unknown writer have been inscribed:

This mighty Queen is dead and lives
And leaves the world to wonder
How she a maiden Queen did rule:
Few Kings have gone beyond her.

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