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A HALF-FORGOTTEN LOCAL CRAFT

The Straw-Plaiters of
Berkhamsted

A profitable cottage craft of Victorian and earlier times is now little more than a memory. Here and there, in the towns and villages of West Herts and neighbouring parts of Beds and Bucks, old ladies still chat about the days when almost every cottager plaited straw for the Luton and Dunstable hat-makers. With luck, one may even see plaiting demonstrated. But the simple little implements which were in daily use until fifty or so years ago are already museum-pieces.

For generations our part of the country was famous for its straw products, due to the fact that the soil was particularly favourable to the growth of suitable varieties of wheat-straw. Like many another old industry, it was said to have been introduced from abroad—in this instance by immigrants from Lorraine, who were brought to Scotland by Mary Queen of Scots and transferred to the Luton district by James I. The ladies of Lorraine may have introduced new methods, but the craft was already well established in this country, otherwise Shakespeare would not have written about "the rye-straw hat."

All the Family

Straw-plaiting looks easy—but just try it! Even with diagrams it would be difficult to give working instructions. So let us try to picture the scene in a Berkhamsted cottage parlour three or four generations ago. There was still a good demand for English plait, and mother and children were seldom short of work. Father lent a hand when, as so often happened, no other employment was available.

In a box, or on the table, we would have seen bundles of straw, usually purchased from men who bought the finished plait, but sometimes gleaned

from the fields by the cottagers themselves. (Gleaners not only obtained vast quantities of straw, but often collected sufficient wheat to keep them in flour throughout the winter.)

Simple Implements

The "chines" (short for "machines") were few, small, and simple. Most important was the straw-splitter, made of wood, bone or iron, into which holes were bored to "house" a series of cutters. These cutters were like miniature wheels, with razor-sharp spokes, the spokes varying in number to produce four-, five-, six-, seven-, eight-, or nine-ply splints of straw. In the hub of each "wheel" was a cone, on which the straw was centred before it was pushed through the cutter and sliced into the desired number of splints.

The sliced straws were then moistened and pressed flat by passing them through a "mill," or miniature mangle, which was usually fastened to the door. Great care was necessary to prevent twists or breaks in the straw. Then the plaiting started, the workers customarily holding the straws in their mouths. Speed depended upon the variety of plait being produced; the most popular varieties in Berkhamsted were known as China Pearl, Rock, Coburg and Moss Edge. The plait was then again pressed and cut into lengths of 20 yards, known in the trade as "scores." Practised workers were able to judge the exact length by winding the plait over their arms; others cut niches on the mantelpiece to serve as measuring aids.

'Ware the Plait-Men!

Once a week the finished product was sold to agents of Dunstable and Luton hat-makers. At Berkhamsted, Tring and Hemel Hempstead, special markets were held regularly, and plaiters bargained for the highest prices. When demand was exceptionally keen, buyers visited the workers' homes or met them on the way to market—usually to offer a lower price than they would get in open competition. Rightly or wrongly, the buyers were regarded as "spivs"; their morals, too, were often questioned. Over 100 years ago a ballad called "Ladies! Beware of the Plait-Men!" was printed, telling the story of a parson's daughter who was lured away by a "naughty, naughty plait-man." The doggerel starts:

To Dunstable and Hempstead
And to Luton he would go;
He dearly loved the ladies
And could whistle "High gee wo!"

But the plait-man was already married,
so here's the moral:

Oh, nigh and day, you maidens gay,
Mind well what you are at;
Beware of all the naughty men
Who deal in ladies' plait;
They will strive for to deceive you
Like the parson's daughter gay,
Then 'twill be "Why, who'd have thought it?"
If you chance to cut away.

Plaiting Schools

The craft of plaiting was passed on from generation to generation, but as a rule children were sent to dame schools—there was at least one in every town and village—to learn the speediest methods of splitting, plaiting and pressing the straws.

An elderly Potten End woman once told me that, in her young days, she attended a plaiting school at Frithsdon from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a short break for dinner, consisting usually of bread and lard. Then, after returning home for tea, she had to go to another plaiting school in her own village. At Bovingdon, a speciality was made of teaching children to plait in the dark, to accustom them to working without looking at the plait.

Cause of Ill-Health

Children started plaiting at five years of age, and many never had an opportunity of playing games. In consequence there were sad cases of stunted growth, and a visitor to a nearby village attributed the puny size of the inhabitants to straw-plaiting. Not only were the children robbed of fresh air and exercise, but the habit of moistening straws in the mouth was said to have a bad effect on health.

Still, it was a profitable occupation, and in the first half of the 19th century many women and children earned more than men who laboured in the fields. A good hand at Berkhamsted could earn about 15s. a week—then a handsome wage—and a 13 years old St. Albans girl received as much as a guinea for a week's work. Farmers complained that straw-plaiting "did mischief, making the poor saucy, rendering the women averse to husbandry, and causing a dearth of indoor servants and field labourers."

The End of an Industry

Changing fashions, and foreign competition, eventually killed this cottage craft, which established Luton's fame as our premier hat centre. It was obviously impossible to compete with Continental and Coolie labour when plait could be imported at a third of the cost of the home product. At one time a hat of Chinese plait could be bought for 2½d.

For a final comment, let me quote from Berkhamsted Parish Magazine of 1871:

Children now acquiring the art of plaiting will, by the time they are grown up, find the bread taken out of their mouths—and that because parents look upon the earning of a few pence at present as of more consequence than their future welfare. The cry for good servants is heard on all sides, and children now brought up to straw-plaiting, with good home training and good home example, could supply the deficiency. In respectable service they would enjoy comforts, not to say luxuries, which are now entirely beyond their reach.

That homily was probably written by the Rev. J. W. Cobb. Perhaps there was a servant shortage at the Rectory!

'BEORCHAM'

MEDICINE AND PETROL

Local arrangements to meet
emergencies

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine and petrol are now operating in Berkhamsted as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

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

April 27—May 3: Figg.
May 4—10: Dickman.
May 11—17: Taylors.
May 18—24: Boots.
May 25—31: Figg.

GARAGE OPENING

During the summer months one garage in Berkhamsted will open on each Sunday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For the current month the rota is as follows:—

May 4—Berkhamsted Motor Engineering Co., Gossons End.
May 11—Snoozalls Garage Ltd., Chesham Road.
May 18—Underhill & Young Ltd., High Street West.
May 25—Callaghan's Garage, High Street East.
June 1—Kingsway Garage Ltd., Upper Kings Road.

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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