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Local Links with Royalty

One of the most fascinating features of the Coronation souvenir programme is a genealogical table showing the descent of the Throne. Starting with the House of Normandy, this, the most famous "family tree" in the world, provides a reminder of the town's many direct associations with the Royal Family.

The most memorable episode in local history recalls the coronation of William the Conqueror in Westminster Abbey nearly 900 years ago, for it was at Berkhamsted where he was offered the Crown of England. From Norman until Tudor times, many members of the Royal Family were well acquainted with Berkhamsted, staying for days, weeks and even years at the Castle.

Royal Guests

In Tudor days the Castle was abandoned, and it was then the turn of Ashridge to receive royal guests. Henry VIII visited the monastery a few years before it was dissolved, and his children, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, were no strangers to the former home of the monks. Indeed, Elizabeth, before her accession to the throne, spent several months at Ashridge.

In more modern times, Earl and Countess Brownlow entertained Queen Victoria and the Prince and Princess of Wales (afterwards Edward VII and Queen Alexandra) at Ashridge; it was there, too, where the parents of the late Queen Mary spent their honeymoon. And Berkhamsted Place was not without royal visitors. Charles I, as Prince of Wales, was a guest of the Murrays in 1616, and George V, as Duke of York, was entertained at the mansion by Lady Sarah Spencer.

From time immemorial, coronations and jubilees have been celebrated with

thanksgiving and fervour. Parades and sports are traditional, but, owing to such counter-attractions as the radio and television, it is unlikely that Berkhamsted (and hundreds of other towns, for that matter) will ever surpass the brilliant festivities of 1902 and 1911.

Roasting the Ox

This year, for good measure, an ox will be roasted, and old inhabitants will be reminded of a similar event when Queen Victoria's golden jubilee was celebrated in 1887.

Here is a contemporary report: "The ox-roasting took place in Mr. Ginger's park, to the right of the road to Berkhamsted House. The ox was about 90 stone weight, fed by Mr. J. Clarke, of Park Hill, Tring, and killed by Mr. Tom Tompkins, junior. An apparatus was fixed on Saturday, and at about 4 a.m. on Tuesday the fire was lighted, and the ox was slowly turned on a spit until cooked by machinery worked by an attendant.

"Mr. Savage, from Stratford-on-Avon, a man used to ox-roasting, attended to the cooking, and Mr. Rogers, Ashridge House, assisted, also men in Mr. Ginger's employ. A fence had been erected to form an enclosure round the ox, and some 3,000 tickets of admission had been issued. Great numbers of people went to witness the roasting, and at about 5 o'clock the cutting up commenced, people having tickets getting slices of the well-cooked delicious meat, which, in paper or on plates, was taken home."

Many customers were less enthusiastic than the reporter; there were widespread complaints that the portions were either burnt or under-done!

Feeding the Fifteen Hundred

I have searched in vain for accounts of local celebrations when Queen Victoria was crowned. But a diary kept by the Congregational Church minister tells us something about the local junketings when George III had been on the throne for fifty years.

About 1,500 poor people (almost half of the total population) were entertained to a great feast in the middle of the town, presumably in the wide part of the High-street near Water-lane. Hot meats, baked and boiled, were served, and one wonders how the town managed to provide seats and tables for such a large party. Music was played by a local band, the church bells were rung, and appropriate services were in St. Peter's and in Nonconformist churches. Joseph Hobbs, the Congregational minister who reported the celebrations in his diary, adds that

he took for his text the words "God save the King."

Beer and Fireworks

What of earlier coronation celebrations? Information is scanty, but we know from the churchwardens' accounts that public money was spent on beer and fireworks.

For instance, when the monarchy was restored after the Commonwealth, 10s. was spent on a barrel of beer and 15s. 2d. on powder and match for a firework display. The bellringers received £1; and 4d. was paid to one Thomas Benning for cleaning the King's coat of arms in the parish church.

1066 and All That

But enough of these tit-bits. The most worth-while story to recall at this time of national rejoicing takes us back nearly nine centuries, to the time when William the Conqueror was offered the Crown of England at Berkhamsted. Everybody knows the year—1066—but how many know the month? It was in December when William arrived at Berkhamsted. Victorious at Hastings, the Normans ravaged the country as they marched, hoping to secure the submission at London, which William wished to enter by invitation as King Edward the Confessor's heir, not by storm and conquest. But London was closed against him; he marched west to Wallingford and then east to Berkhamsted.

What transpired when William came to Berkhamsted? The Historical Pageant of 1922, repeated in 1931, gave a blood-curdling version:

I saw them cross the Thames at Wallingford. Thousands on thousands, clad in woven steel... Tring hamlet's burnt. The speed of armed horse
Clangs hither through the Chiltern gap, Woe's me!

The North Kirk burns already—next, our own. God, man and woman carve them in their rage. These French, as ruthless as the Danes of old. When on the Pitstone Hill their blood ran red... The godless horsemen, sword and torch in hand,
Ride round the town, and cry like fiends of hell. I heard them laugh. All is to them a jest; Berchehamstede is burnt down.

On to Westminster

But was Berkhamsted burnt down? I doubt it. In all probability, there was little or no resistance to the Normans by the time they approached Berkhamsted. The Saxon cause was lost, and the deputation that met William at Berkhamsted "submitted when the greatest harm had been done; and it was very imprudent that it had not been done earlier, as God would not better it for our sins. And they gave hostages and swore oaths to him, and he promised that he would be a kind lord to them."

And so victorious William, after halting at Berkhamsted, moved on to Westminster for the coronation. It must have been one of the most unpopular coronations in history; a cowed, sullen and apprehensive London had no cause for rejoicing. But, after nearly 900 years, how nice it is to think that William's coronation procession started, in effect, at Berkhamsted!

'BEORCHAM'

Medicine and Food

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m. - 12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

May 31—June 6: Dickman
June 7—13: Taylors
June 14—20: Boots
June 21—27: Figg
June 28—July 4: Dickman

FOOD OFFICE

The Food Office, in the Town Hall, is open on four week-days as follows:—
Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 to 5 p.m.
Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 noon.

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