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Treasures of the Church Chest

By 'BEORCHAM'

A few days ago, the Local History Society staged in St. Peter's Hall a small exhibition which gave members an opportunity of seeing a few documents selected from the hundreds kept under triple lock and key in St. Peter's Church chest.

The chest, now in the vestry, is believed to date from the early 17th century, though the lid is modern. The chest is soundly made, competently carved, and, unlike many another old parish coffer, has kept the contents dry and safe from attacks by church mice. The few documents in bad condition were probably damaged before they were placed in the chest.

To historians it is a treasure chest—and a challenge. If only one had time to study the hundreds of documents and their thousands and thousands of facts! Some papers are modern, some are two, three, four, five or even six centuries old. Hefty tomes record the churchwardens' accounts from 1748 onwards. A copy of James I's charter is neatly rolled up, still looking important and "official." A brown paper packet holds the secrets of Salter's charity. There are deeds by the score, some still bearing centuries-old seals. The oldest, without a seal, is dated 1296, and thus is only 76 years younger than St. Peter's Church.

THE CORPORATION BOOK

The most important document? I would select what, at first glance, looks like a grubby exercise book. Many of the entries are badly written. But it is the Corporation Book for the years 1637 to 1662, and, to my mind, is the finest relic we have of the time when Berkhamsted was a borough, with burgesses who had far greater powers than councillors of today. And what an interesting period the book covers:

the Civil War, the Commonwealth, the Restoration. It is sad to think that no more books were required by the Corporation, for in 1662 or thereabouts, through poverty and apathy, the town lost its high civic status. Yet the last item in the Corporation book is in no sense an obituary notice. It states: "The second day of September, 1662, Christopher Woodhouse, gent., sworn bailiff for the tyme being."

When delving into the church chest, historians should be grateful to a London firm of record agents for classifying most of the documents some 45 years ago. Several hundred were grouped under the following headings: 1, Charters and Deeds; 2, Bonds; 3, Rates and Assessments; 4, Apprentice Indentures; 5, Removal and Settlement Papers; 6, Bastardy Papers; 7, Letters; 8, Ecclesiastical Papers; 9, Waterworks Papers; 10, Legal Papers; 11, Miscellaneous Papers.

OLD FAMILY NAMES

The earliest of the deeds (Class 1) is dated 1296, and concerns land in Northale. Most of the documents from 1332 onwards carry seals (some broken) and give interesting family and place names. For instance, a deed of 1379 mentions the hospital of St. John the Evangelist. Among 14th and 15th century family names are Coc (or Cokke), Bourne (or Burne), Kyng, Chalfhunte, Harthong, Dounce, Rich, Alleyn, Fawkener, Bedford, Godale. The reading of these early deeds, by the way, is a job for experts.

A lease dated 1541 (year of the foundation of Berkhamsted School) gives the names of John Incent, Dean of St. Paul's, John Atte, of Berkhamstead, and Robert Gage of Berkhamstead, clothier. A document of 1585 refers to the church house or town house (now the Court House), and one of 1588-9 mentions the loft over the market house, "where the pillorye now standeth." Gosham or Goshams are early spellings of Gossoms End.

Bonds (Class 2) span the years 1600—1715, and, like the Rates and Assessments (Class 3) are full of names to interest genealogists.

THE APPRENTICES

Over fifty apprentice indentures are in Class 4. They are dated 1601 to 1794 and show that varied careers were open to the lads and lassies; shoemaker, tailor, brewer, currier, glover, "cowper" (cooper), weaver, cloth-worker, cord-wainer, maltster, collar-maker, silk-thrower, barber, butcher, turner. The earliest indenture tells us that John Stanborowe was apprenticed to Thomas Person, a "musitioner."

Many girls served apprenticeships as servants and bone-lace makers, sometimes combining the two duties. For example, Ellon Bailly was apprenticed in 1628 to Stephen Standlye and Ann, his wife, to learn the trade of bone-lace

maker "and such other business and housewife as they now use." In 1665, Mary Wheeler was apprenticed to William Davis to be instructed in spinning, weaving, etc. Of rare interest is an indenture of 1674—5, apprenticing Mary Gould to Robert Bennitt, of Uxbridge, bricklayer. A woman bricklayer in Charles II's reign? It seems fantastic. Were there claims for equal pay for women, I wonder?

CURIOUS LETTERS

Class 5 papers refer to removals and settlements of paupers, and Class 6 papers deal with orders as to the support of illegitimate children. Oh, the efforts made to get other parishes to accept responsibility!

Letters and Petitions (Class 7) deal with a variety of subjects. One letter, dated March 29, 1596, concerned a legacy and was written by Robert Wolley to Thomas Waterhouse, a relative of the last Rector of Ashridge Monastery. A series of letters of 1619 starts with George Dover's protest against his arrest for debt; the second letter promises speedy payment; the third announces the discharge of the debt.

In 1619, James Mayne wrote to Francis Barker, bailiff, resigning his office of Burgess of Berkhamsted.

And here's a nasty one. In an undated document, the Earl of Bridgewater, replying to a petition, declined to contribute to the support of the church.

EXCOMMUNICATED

Ecclesiastical papers (Class 8) refer to the release of a number of persons from sentence of excommunication. One gentleman so released (in 1637) was Francis Wethered, of Ashlyns, who, in 1662, gave to St. Peter's Church the font which in modern times was transferred to All Saints' Church.

A mouse-eaten document lists all persons who paid 3d. an acre on their holdings in land for the repair of the church, dated February, 1636.

Much older is an inventory, thought to date back to 1500, headed: "Here followeth an inventory of all those books found in the Parish Church of Berkhamsted St. Peter in the county of Hertford as hereafter followeth every book by name." Antiphoners, a Legend, Psalm books, Mass books or Missals, Grays or Graduals, Manuals, and Processionalers are mentioned.

A BOW AND ARROWS

A later church inventory, dated 1771 and signed by the rector, John Jeffries, mentions "Two fire engines and 13 leather buckets."

Of unusual interest is an inventory of the goods of a widow (deceased). Most of the goods were apparently stored in the church. In addition to usual household furniture and kitchen utensils were "an elm bowe and 19 arrowes." A few items to the value of 10s. 4d. were handed over to a creditor for a debt of that amount.

Space does not permit even the briefest reference to Classes 9, 10, 11, but it should be made clear that "Waterworks Papers" refer not to the local undertaking, but to a London waterworks which figured in an ancient charter.

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:—

January 31—February 6: Figg
February 7—13: Dickman
February 14—20: Taylors
February 21—27: Boos
February 28—March 6: Figg

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.

All Welfare Foods are also obtainable from Gossoms End Stores.

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—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 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.

Much sympathy has been expressed with Mr. and Mrs. S. T. Chappell in their bereavement by the death of Mrs. Chappell's mother, Mrs. Mary Jane Saltmarsh, who passed away in her 89th year.

The family had long been connected with the Parish Church, where the late Mr. Frank Saltmarsh was a bell-ringer and sidesman for many years—offices in which Mr. Chappell also served, until comparatively recently, since when he has been one of the enthusiastic band of workers at All Saints' Church.

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