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MORE GLIMPSES OF BYGONE BERKHAMSTED

In Early Stuart Times

From time to time, local historians have visited the British Museum to inspect the first book of Berkhamsted Churchwardens' Accounts, 1584-1748. Many items have been copied and, occasionally, printed, but few enthusiasts can have taken such copious extracts as an American student who, some time ago, sent to me over fifty closely typewritten pages. It is perhaps rare to receive hitherto unpublished material of local interest via the United States; but this form of lend-lease is very welcome!

A few of the hundreds and hundreds of items which shed light on customs, wages and prices of centuries past have been quoted occasionally in these articles. For example:

Paid Tomas Abower for whipping dogs out of the Church and kepeinge cleen the market howse, 4s.

Paid for oyle for the Clocke and bells this year, 3d.

BREAD AND WINE

But the ancient tome in the British Museum is not wholly devoted to receipts and payments. It also records decisions taken by "the minister, churchwardens and the rest of the vestrie."

At Easter, 1602, communicants were required to "paye for ever hereafter towards the charge of the bread and wine at Easter." Single persons had to pay one penny, and "the rest of the perishoners according to their abilities." Results were seen in the following year: wine and bread cost 17s. 6d. and 9d. respectively, and the communicants contributed 18s., leaving the trifling deficit of 3d. But by 1628 the gap had widened: contributions were £1 7s. 4d., but wine and bread cost £2 16s. 7d.

There is a further reference to communicants in an entry dated 25th January, 1631, recording "some inconvenience and unseemlynesse amongst the communicants at the Lordes Supper wherewith some are offended."

"MEANER" PEOPLE

The "meaner sort of people" were warned not to "presse into that seate in the chancell where the minister doth usually begynne to distribute the holy bread and Cuppe, but leave it free for the Bayllyf and such others as are fitte to sitt with him and next after hym and them."

Class distinction, indeed! But, to appease the "meaner sort of people," it was further stated that "though the faith of Christ bee not to bee helde in Respekte of persons, yett comelynesse and order are commanded by God in doinge holy things." The clerk was ordered to stand "at the side of that seate to pray such people to forbear."

At the "greater Communion," many members of the congregation, "through lacke of devotion, are idle beholders, and others well asserted are not so well able to fixe and perform their holy meditations as is meete." It was therefore decided that "some fitte Psalme or so much of it as shalbe fitte with the tyme be begunn by the Clerke readinge everye line of the verse for helpe of such as cannot reade or have no bookes, or prairie some fitt Communicant to doe it."

APPRENTICED TO KNITTING

An entry dated 1622 tells us that William Bard "hathe taken aprintice Cristien Adames for three yeares and hathe given hur 3d. in erneste of the som and he is to keepe hur with meate drink and wages as is fitt for a prentice that is to saye the firste year 10s., the second 12s., the third 13s., and his wiffe is to teche hur to knite garsse stockers." Stockings, presumably.

That ominous phrase, "the heavy hand of God," appears in a memorandum dated 1630. It was a bad year; many crops were not worth gathering, "come and grayne" were "double the price which they were wont to bee," and so parlous was the plight of the poor that a special parish meeting was called in December to provide additional relief.

NO AID FOR "OVER TWELVES"

Old, lame and sick persons were to have the "largest allowance." Children of poor people, "who are not able to mayntayne them of themselves and are but six yeeres old or under and so not able to earne their owne maintenance," were to be allowed "as much as is allowed to any other sick person." To poor children over six but under twelve years, "wee thinke it meete to gyve them some supply of monthly

reliefe untill they are growne up to more dexteritey and growth of 12 yeeres, and this reliefe wee thinke fitte to bee monthlye 8d. to each child during these harde tymes and afterwards to bee allowed as cheapnesse or other reason shall require."

Having provided for younger children, the meeting found that as "nature intended as well as God and law of man that they who have bodyes of yeares and health may and ought to provide for themselves necessities that the churchwardens and overseers shall henceforth forbear to gyve any collection to such healthy women or children above 12 yeeres olde."

RESERVED SEATS

The question of "reserved seats" in church has aroused consternation at many periods. Way back in 1631, John Daye, new tenant of the church house, complained that widow Burre refused to allow him to sit "in the seate set up for hir husband when hee was tenant in the same house." The Vestry considered it "very fitte" that their church house should not be without a church seat, and decided that the seat should be used by John Daye and his wife, together with the widow Burre "and no one except there bee convenient roome for some other, and they bee placed there lawfully by the consent of the churchwardens and the minister". One imagines that the Dayes and the widow were not very happy pew-companions!

There was further trouble in 1638, when, "upon disagreement for some seates in this Church for which suyte hath been commenced and for a finall ende of both, it was referred to the Churchwardens and the minister to determyne and order the whole busynesse viz., this manner following: That Ralphe Beninge and his wife shall sitte in the seate which was latelye gayned by makinge three of two, together with Mr. John Douer and his wife and the wife of Nathan Payne." Yes, dear old Nathan Payne, the man who had the courage, many years later, to say that the execution of Charles I was "the most horrid murder that ever any history made mention of . . . a plot worse than the gunpowder treason."

THE 4 A.M. BELL

An entry of 1631 refers to stonewardens, who were responsible for maintaining footways in the parish. This curious statement appears: "The rule for stonewardens is this: the beginninge is at both sides of the Towne and so to come on into the midst of the town."

And, again in 1631, agreement was reached that the sexton should receive yearly 20s. for ringing the bell at 4 a.m. and 8 p.m. from September to Lady Day. This bell was much appreciated by tradesmen, farmers and other early risers, and over 100 years later, when the custom had fallen into disuse, a request was made for those "time signals" to be revived.

'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:—

February 28—March 6: Figg.

March 7—13: Dickman.

March 14—20: Taylors.

March 21—27: Boots.

March 28—April 3: 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.

The possible use of the Red House and White House in Berkhamsted High Street, as residential accommodation for thirty old people and staff, was reported at the February meeting of the Berkhamsted Urban Council.

The views of the Council had been asked by the County Welfare Committee, and in reply the Council have signified approval "in principle" subject to the existing Georgian facade of the premises being preserved and to a portion of the gardens being retained and used for the same purpose.

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