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A 17th CENTURY MINUTE BOOK

When Berkhamsted was a Borough

Among documents from St. Peter's Church chest, exhibited at a recent meeting of the Local History Society, was the Berkhamsted Corporation minute book, covering the years 1637 to 1663 or 1664. (We cannot be sure of the last date; it has been rubbed out.)

This is the most valuable relic we have of the days when Berkhamsted, with its bailiff, principal burgesses, recorder, town clerk and sergeants, enjoyed a higher civic status than it possesses today. But no one would call the minute book a handsome relic. It looks like a grubby exercise book, with pages filled by "common clerks" who, with rare exceptions, were very poor writers. The standard of penmanship is far below that found in the churchwardens' accounts.

HOMELY MATTERS

Naturally, the burgesses were concerned with their own affairs, and there is scarcely a reference to the exciting happenings of the period: the Civil War, the Commonwealth, the Restoration of the Monarchy. An early item mentions an occasion when Charles I passed through Berkhamsted. We find a reference to Ship Money, the ancient levy which was revived by Charles I, only to provoke bitterness and opposition throughout the land. Several pages are devoted to Berkhamsted Common "improvements," a subject which deserves a special article. A melancholy note is struck by the reluctance of certain townsmen to accept office: obviously, all was not well with the Corporation, and it came to an untimely end in the early 1660's.

Residents on the south side of the town did not wish to have their houses connected with the sewer, as their present arrangements were satisfactory.

He pooh-poohed the idea that the present cesspools were likely to contaminate the public water supply, as if there were any leakage it couldn't run uphill.

And so he moved an amendment that the matter be referred back to the Committee for further consideration.

After a somewhat desultory debate, in which Councillor Evans announced that he had changed his mind from shallow to deep, the recommendation favouring the deeper sewer was carried by thirteen votes to four (Councillors Sprunt, Dell, Cain and Cole).

Incidentally, it will cost present property owners from £200 to £250 to be connected to the new sewer.

The first page of the minute book merely records the election of officers at a meeting held on September 25, 1637:

The Bayliffe—Mr. Steven Besouth.
The Princepall Burgess—Mr. Sameuell Dagnall.
The Recorder is continued.
The Comon Clerke—Mr. Robert Blunte.
The Sarjeants are continued.

A SERVANT AND HER CLOTHES

A servant girl's dismissal was discussed at a meeting on January 12, 1637 (a mistake, surely, for 1638). "Upon displeasure only and without any other just cause," Nicholas Moores dismissed Joane Brookes, whose contract was "for (4) yeeres yet unexpired." On turning Joane out of his house, Moores had apparently kept some of her clothes. The burgesses "thought it best for both parties" to dissolve the contract, and commanded Moores "to deliver all whatsoever apparell the said Joane did bringe with hir, and all other clothes and apparell made and applied to for and upon the body of hir the said Joane Brookes." The garments were: "One linsey woolsey apron, one pare of shoes, one blacke hatte, two wollen wastcoates."

An entry dated March 30, 1638, tells us that "the many officers who attended the king and Queene" when they passed through Berkhamsted in 1636 required their "severall flees," which amounted to £35. The bailiff and burgesses paid "forty shillings apiece (all exceptinge Mr. Wetheryd), and by some mediation were so excused from the reste of the flees but not from the blame that was layd upon us for neglectinge our formal attendance and presents to the kinge and queene."

SHIP MONEY IN ARREARS

In 1638 was recorded one of many refusals to take office. Robert Darvell was warned to take his oath of admission to be a capital burgess in place of Mr. Axtell, father of Daniel Axtell, the regicide. As Darvell declined to appear, "the company present adjudged him to pay an amerccement of 5£ and wee doe thinke it necessary that Mr. Bayley take a speedy course to levy the same."

A more serious matter was discussed on August 29, 1638. Payment of Ship Money was "longe behynde," and the Corporation was required to pay on September 2 "or else to appeere before the Counsell the same day to answer the neglecte." A resolution was passed to the effect that it was the bailiff's "forbearance to distrayne that causeth the non payment, therefore he resolveth to distrayne." Though reluctant to collect Ship Money, the bailiff evidently lacked the unyielding stubbornness of John Hampden!

Ten weeks later, it was "agreed that every burgess shall paye 6s. 4d. for the discharging of a quo. warrant brought against the Corporation, and Mr. Blount hath undertaken upon receipt of every mans money to discharge it."

SENDING BOYS TO AMERICA

A reference to the "towne hall" appears under date January 21, 1638. The burgesses agreed "that all the evidences and bondes be brought in and locked up in the cheste in the towne hall: And Mr. Baylye to keepe the greate outwarde Keye and Mr. Principall burgess one Inwarde Keye and old Mr. Balliffe another."

The question of sending "boyes beyond the seas to some of the American landes" was debated on May 3, 1639. Mr. Newman had conferred with a merchant, who was prepared to take a dozen boys "if we will clothe them or gyve the merchante 20s. apiece and he will clothe them himselfe." How many poor boys, I wonder, did England send to America under such early emigration schemes?

MONEY FOR A PRISON

The House of Correction, or prison, caused some trouble in 1639. At the General Sessions at Hoddesdon, the bailiff and burgesses of Berkhamsted were required to account for £30 received from the Dacorum Hundred with which, "as it is moste untrulye suggested" the bailiff and burgesses bought a house which they afterwards sold and converted to their own profit. The Corporation replied that no such house was bought with the £30. Having a convenient house available, they allowed it to be used as a house of correction for the Hundred and installed their own officer, Henry Holmes. To prepare this house "with fitte roomes and all necessary Instruments of correction and all other needfull instruments of labour for men and women, Mr. Ffrancys Barker, then Ballive, havinge this 30£ in his hande, layd foorth that 30£ and more so to prepare and furnishe the said house and to the custody of their owne officer they were committed untill the dissolution of the said house."

This answer did not satisfy the justices. The house of correction was no more, and the £30 belonged to the inhabitants of the Dacorum Hundred, not to the inhabitants of Berkhamsted alone. The Corporation replied: "Wee humbly confesse and saye that so much moneye was given us from the hundred to erecte and furnishe an house of correction for the hundred. And that the sayd sune was received by Mr. Francys Barker, then Ballive, who bestowed that moneye and more towards the sayd house of correction and other necessary instruments of the sayd house. And wee that survive the sayd Bayliffe are willinge to maintayne the like house of correctione havinge the fee proportionable for the same."

BEORCHAM

(To be continued).

("BEORCHAM" acknowledges with thanks the loan of a complete typescript copy of the Corporation Minute Book, made some years ago by Mr. Edward Popple).

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:—

April 25—May 1: Figg.
May 2—8: Dickman.
May 9—15: Taylors.
May 16—22: Borts.
May 23—29: 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.

"A tough nut" was how the Rev. W. B. Wilkinson, priest-in-charge of All Saints' Church, described the Durrants Estate.

He said that most of the people living there were not church-people, and while they were glad to see him when he called they had apparently no intention of attending church.

But, he added they were all anxious that their children should go to Sunday School and that was a big opportunity for the Church.

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changed, and at the Council meeting the councillors performed a "right-about-turn."

To Councillor Cooper's remark that the view of the bricks was not in keeping with the building, Councillor Jay retorted that they could see bricks through every window, whereupon Councillor Miller asserted that the Council wanted as much light as possible—a remark which might be taken in more ways than one!

So Councillor Mrs. Hocken's amendment that the Council refer the matter back to themselves in committee, was carried by a substantial majority.

Having thus dropped a brick—or, rather, a lot of bricks and some sheets of corrugated iron—the councillors received the whip of Chairman Harrowell's tongue.