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WHEN BERKHAMSTED WAS A BOROUGH — IV

The End of the Corporation

In 1659—three years before the Berkhamsted Corporation was abandoned—"Orders and Constitutions" were "made and agreed upon for the better government of the Corporation." The manuscript, with a faded copy of somewhat similar standing orders adopted in 1620, is preserved in the parish church chest.

Any person who derided or spoke evil against the Corporation, the bailiff, the capital burgesses or officers, "or any one of them against another," was to pay a fine of 5s.

Any capital burgess who, having lawful warning and no lawful excuse, refused to meet the bailiff "in a convenient tyme and place and upon necessary occasions," was to pay 6s. If he departed before the meeting was over, or refused to give his opinion upon the matter in question, a similar fine was to be paid.

Three capital burgesses, in turn, were to attend the monthly court, and five at least were to attend the bailiff at every quarter sessions, wearing their livery gowns, or pay 2s.

If the bailiff, capital burgesses or officers discovered or revealed "any thing of the Corporation to the scandall, damage or injury thereof, or of any of the members of officers thereof," the offender was to pay 10s.

The common clerk, the attorney and all other officers were to attend the monthly court constantly, and faithfully perform their duties, or pay 3s. 4d.

No person living within the borough was to let to "any forayner or stranger" any house within the borough for any term whatsoever, or allow any person to stay in his house for more than a month, without giving "such security to save the parish harmes from all charges and troubles as may come

thereby as the bailiff, capital burgesses or the major parte of them shall thinke fitt. The offender to be prosecuted according to the statute and to pay 20s. a moneth for every moneth so offending."

Any person who, within the past 20 years, had erected, or thereafter erected, "any cottage within the borough, not layeing flower [four] acres of land to the same according to the statute," was to pay "beside the penalty in the statute . . . 20s. a moneth for every moneth soe keeping it."

If any stranger wished to become an inhabitant within the borough, he was to "compound for his freedome and pay five pounds att the least before he sette up or useh any manner of trade there," or pay a fine of £5.

The final "Order" stated that there should be not more than six alehouses licensed to draw or sell beer or ale within the borough "without the consent of the major parte of the whole Company."

From these "Orders" we know that, in 1659, the bailiff and burgesses still took their duties seriously and had no intention of abandoning the Corporation. What, then, went wrong in the next three years?

Cobb, in his "History of Berkhamsted," states:

The corporate officers seem to have been regularly elected till about 1662 or 1663, at which time Chauncy tells us "they let their government fall, having grown very poor in the time of the late war." We find, however, an attempt to revive the charter by a petition to the King, to which His Majesty gave a favourable reply in these terms: "His Majesty is graciously pleased to refer this petition to Mr. Attorney General, to consider the same and to draw a confirmation of the charters of Berkhamsted, with such alterations, enlargements, and additions, as he shall thinke fit. Whitehall, Nov. 3, 1664." Notwithstanding this reply, we hear of no result, and the attempt appears to have been ultimately dropped.

At the beginning of the next century, however, when Chauncy wrote his history, he tells us that there were four of the chief burgesses still living in the town, who by the charter might choose a bailiff, and fill up the number of burgesses. This, I need hardly say, was never done.

With the decay of the corporation, the town generally seems to have become less prosperous. The market was almost entirely abandoned—a circumstance which may have been accelerated by several virulent attacks of the small-pox . . .

We cannot quarrel with the findings of Cobb and Chauncy. But recent research has brought to light further facts which help to explain why the Corporation came to an untimely end.

Though the Corporation minute book is not very informative, it records many instances of apathy and reluctance to take office. Moreover, great personal losses were sustained in 1661-2. William Hill, elected bailiff at Michaelmas, 1661, died during his term of office and was succeeded by Robert Reynold, who also died a few days or weeks later. He was followed by Christopher Woodhouse, who was elected bailiff on August 29, 1662. The last entry in the minute book (September 2, 1662) states: "Christopher Woodhouse gent, sworn Bayliffe

for the tyme being." There is no mention of the next annual meeting at Michaelmas, 1662, and we may presume that it was never held. The Corporation was undoubtedly weakened by the deaths of two bailiffs within a few months.

Further important clues are provided by some small documents in the church chest, relating to the application in 1664 for a new charter.

A small sheet of paper, endorsed on the back "A noate of what is desyred," states:

The Additions to be inserted in the new charter to the Corporation of Berkhamsted:

1. Berkhamsted St. Mary als Northchurch town and parish to be incorporated into one.
2. Weekly market changed from Thursday to Friday.
3. Cognizance and plea of Action to £40 value.
4. Fines and amercement to be levied by their officers and ministers.
5. Power to fine members refusing.

Another document gives "Mr. Clarke's proposals for enlargement of Berkhamsted":—

1. That Berkhamsted St. Peter and Berkhamsted St. Mary be one Burrow.
2. That Alberly, Tring, Putnam, Long Marston, being situated below the Burrow and fair remote from Hertford, be taken into the liberty of the Burrow, being about 20 myles from Hertford . . .

Then we find "A note of the thyngs desyred by the Bayliffe and Burgesses of Berkhamsted," which asks for the profits of all the courts held within the hallimote, and continues:

. . . the extent of the Corporation was sett downe verye smale, viz. onlie the south parte . . . from the Ryver leavinge out dyvers houses and lands . . . 600 acres on the North . . . and all the frith and wast att leaste 1,400 acres, wherein the best hope . . . of waifes and estrayes are beside the Parke.

To sum up, the Corporation failed because (a) Berkhamsted had been impoverished by the Civil War; (b) the Corporation ruled a very small area; (c) revenues were correspondingly small; (d) the market declined, and tolls were almost nil; (e) several leading burgesses died within a short time and their successors were apathetic.

The market might, or might not, have been revived by the suggested transfer of market day from Thursday to Friday. Much more helpful would have been the inclusion of Northchurch to give the Corporation a larger area and larger revenues. But we can well imagine that the people of Northchurch were not enamoured of the proposal; there had been sharp clashes of opinion on common rights, and Northchurch regarded its larger neighbour with suspicion. Some 275 years were to elapse before the extension of the urban district boundary brought Northchurch and Berkhamsted together for purposes of local government.

Towns smaller than Berkhamsted are still boroughs, but only because they have guarded and cherished their ancient rights. Attempts to revive the old charters, or to obtain a new charter, have been made, notably by Mr. Thomas Whately in Victorian times. His ambitions were never realised, though in his day there was still some hope of success. Today it would be an utter waste of time to raise such a question: Berkhamsted could not hope for higher civic status unless it had many times its present population. 'BEORCHAM.'

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

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:—

August 1—7: Taylors.
August 8—14: Boots.
August 15—21: Figg.
August 22—28: Dickman.
Aug. 29—Sept. 4: Taylors.

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.

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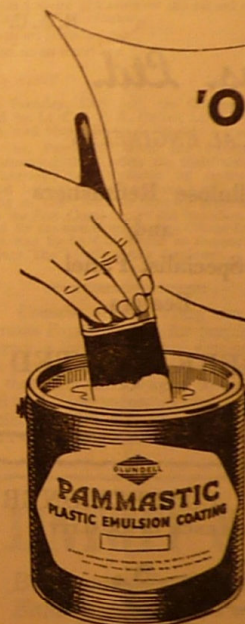
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