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HIGHFIELD, SUNNYSIDE AND PARK STREET

Berkhamsted Developments in Victorian Days

The Local History Society has had the good fortune to receive a bundle of plans and notices published when the Kitsbury, Kingshill, Doctors Commons and other estates were sold in Victorian days. The documents were collected by John Sills, who, at his steam saw and turning mills off Holliday Street, manufactured brush handles, shovels, yokes, bowls, trays "and woodware in general" until he retired about fifty years ago.

Though we have not a complete record of local property sales, the documents are full of interest and enable us to date many of the developments which doubled the size of the town in half a century. It was the heyday of free enterprise: terraced cottages were built by the score, while the rising prestige of Berkhamsted School and the "discovery" of Berkhamsted by London business-men encouraged the building of dozens of large houses—some of them over-large by present standards.

THE HIGHFIELD ESTATE

Large and small speculators made (and, some think, marred) Victorian Berkhamsted. Occasionally their plans misfired, and we should be glad that a proposal to build on Butts Meadow never matured. On the other hand, two proposals of 90 years ago, though not adopted at the time, were very similar to two housing developments of fairly recent date.

One concerns the Highfield Estate. "Villa building land" at Highfield was offered for sale by auction at the Goat Inn on September 30, 1867. It was

intended to extend and link up Highfield Road and Victoria Road and build 34 villas in what would have been called Highfield Place and Highfield Crescent.

For sixty or more years, however, Highfield House continued to stand in splendid isolation, and Highfield Road and Victoria Road remained culs-de-sac. The link was not made until recent times. Now, instead of 34 villas, we have prefabricated houses in Highfield Meadow.

Incidentally, the plan of 1867 shows Highfield House (now demolished) with its stables, billiards room, harness room, coach house, cottages, laundry, drying ground, paddock, lawn,inery, large kitchen gardens and forcing beds. Mr. Alfred Compigné was the owner.

IN GEORGE STREET

A year earlier (1866), it was proposed to make a road from High Street (just east of the Bull Inn) to the canal, with a row of nine cottages. This New Street, as it was to be called, was never made. Yet, only a stone's throw away, Londrina Terrace, with six houses, was built between High Street and the canal sixty years later.

The abortive New Street of 1866 (not to be confused with the New Street off Ellesmere Road) was only a small part of a large area which came in the market in 1866. On the north side of the canal the first (western) part of George Street was ripe for development, and 52 plots of land were offered for sale on both sides of the street.

George Street then ended at a point opposite Swing Gate Lane; a footpath continued towards Bank Mill bridge, and a short cul-de-sac, named Smith Street, with six concrete houses, was to be built from George Street to the canal almost opposite the Bull Inn. Oddly enough, the bend in George Street was named "The Circus" on the plan.

OVER 100 PLOTS

Building proceeded rapidly at the western ends of George Street and Ellesmere Road. Then, in 1880, over 100 "eligible freehold building plots, remarkably well adapted for the erection of small cottage property," were offered for sale by auction. These were in the middle and eastern portions of the two roads, as well as in three little turnings from George Street to the Canal, named Hampton Court, William Street, and Charles Street.

Lot 47 (east side of Paxton Poad) was described as "Public House Plot," but to the best of my knowledge this area never had a "Paxton Arms" or whatever the proposed public-house was to be called.

While in this district, it is interesting to find that land on the east side of Gravel Path, above the railway bridge, came in the market in 1879. Between the railway and "Private Road to Millfield House" were two fairly large plots of land and twelve others, each with a 30-ft. frontage. But the smaller type of house was *not* built in this part of Gravel Path!

THE PEOPLE'S PARK!

Thirteen plots in Park Street were offered for sale by auction in 1867. The prospectus referred to a large plot "abutting on land sold to the Primitive Methodists for the erection of a chapel, and now staked and marked out." The remaining twelve lots were for "neat, convenient dwelling houses and good gardens."

Then comes this remarkable statement: "The Park Street is set out 30-ft. wide and is intended to conduct and open on to the New Recreation Ground and the Berkhamsted People's Park."

No deliberate attempt was made to mislead the public. It is a fact that there was a possibility that Berkhamsted would have a recreation ground along the Bulbourne valley, from Billet Lane to Mill Street, and Park Street would certainly have led to it. But the so-called "People's Park" was to be Berkhamsted's on one condition: Lord Brownlow would present it to the town if the inhabitants would waive their common rights. We kept the Common and lost the recreation ground.

"FLOURISHING" TOWN

Park Street, the prospectus continued, "is situate in the most improving part of the flourishing town of Great Berkhamsted, and possesses uninterrupted views over the surrounding beautiful scenery of the Ashridge Estate and the celebrated nursery grounds of Messrs. Lane and Son. From the advantages of rail, road and canal, the fast-increasing, prosperous population of Great Berkhamsted requires more accommodation, and houses readily let at high rentals, will prove a safe and lucrative investment to the builder, speculator or investor."

KITTS END BURY

In the following year Berkhamsted offered much larger baits to the speculator. At the Kings Arms Hotel, on 13th November, 1868, the "meadow, pasture and arable land" of the Kitts End Bury Estate (Kitsbury) was offered for sale by auction. Within half a century almost the entire hillside was a built-up area.

The rough track to Kitsbury Farm, isolated for generations, became the first metalled side-street in this part of the town, and Gilham's Lane (now Cross Oak Road) ceased to be a rustic byway. A rough track became Charles Street. The large Boxwells Estate was not spared; Steel's Meadow was criss-crossed by Cowper Road and Torrington Road; and houses began to sprawl southward over Doctors Commons and the vast Kingshill Estate. The story of these developments will be told in a later article.

'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:—

Jan. 30.—Feb. 5: Figg.
February 6—12: Dickman.
February 13—19: Taylors.
February 20—26: Boots.
Feb. 27—Mar. 5: Figg.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Mon., Tues. and Fri.—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.;
2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—CLOSED ALL DAY.
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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