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DOCUMENTS FROM THE COUNTY RECORD OFFICE

The Ancient Courts of Berkhamsted

Did you go to the Public Record Office Repository, Ashridge, to see the exhibition of documents from the County Record Office at Hertford? On show were documents of eight centuries—the oldest a charter of 1139, bearing a fragment of the great seal of King Stephen.

Though most of Berkhamsted's ancient documents are stored in the parish church chest, the exhibition showed that many manuscripts of local interest are in the safe keeping of the County Archivist, Col. W. Le Hardy.

OLD COURT ROLLS

It was especially interesting to inspect documents of the courts held in Berkhamsted centuries ago, and I hope that on some later occasion it will be possible for a much larger number of townspeople to see a similar exhibition in the most appropriate of all settings, the Court House.

Not that the Court House existed in 1436, the date of a court roll of the view of frankpledge for the borough of Berkhamsted.

The view of frankpledge—the organisation into groups of all males over the age of twelve years to keep the peace—was ancient even in the 15th century. It had its origin before the Norman Conquest, when the freemen of a neighbourhood were responsible for the good conduct of each other. The Court of Frankpledge, held on Whit Tuesday at the Castle, dealt with minor offences and nuisances: assault, theft, playing unlawful games, selling bad goods, polluting the water of the well, etc. On the following day a court was held for the Halimote of Berkhamsted, which seems to have been more or less equivalent to the parish of Northchurch.

A SIXPENNY FINE

An entry in the 1436 court roll tells us that Joan Heyeward was fined 6d. for

stealing a tub valued at 1½d., a mortar (2d.), "Greype" (1½d.), a hen (2d.), and a pair of tongs (2d.).

The 1438-9 court roll of the Halimote of Berkhamsted (the court which dealt mainly with domestic manorial affairs, such as transfers of land, fines payable to the lord on the death of a tenant, debts, breach of contract, and poaching) shows that Robert Brown, the parker of Berkhamsted, was granted a lease for seven years of all the rights of grazing cattle and swine in the royal park and woods at a rent of 30s. per annum.

Another court roll—that of the Portmote Court of Berkhamsted—recalls the borough court, which was held every three weeks, dealing mainly with pleas of debt, breaches of contract, and punishments for selling beer, bread, meat and fish of insufficient quality or at too high a price. At the first court of the year, in October, various officials were elected, such as the constables, bailiffs of the borough, tasters of ale and victuals, and keepers of the well of St. James.

IN THE OPEN AIR

Two entries dated 1446-7 are of interest. One concerns a breach of contract in which John Whithed alleged that Thomas Lecke, a doctor, had failed to fulfil his undertaking to mend Whithed's broken leg before a certain date. This case was later settled out of court. Another entry records a complaint that John Mundy had wrongfully kept his daughter Joan from the service of her master William Joyne.

By the 17th century the Court of Frankpledge was held twice a year, at Whitsun and Michaelmas, at the Castle. But, as a survey of 1607 points out, "uppon some extraordinary occasion (as in the tyme of sickness) the same Courtes . . . have bene kepte at an Oake within the Parke neere unto the sayd Castell; and at a willowe without the said Parke uppon a moore neere unto the said Castell banck." Two other courts, states the survey, were held at the Court House on Whit Tuesday and the Tuesday after Michaelmas.

FISHING RIGHTS

A court roll for the manor of the borough of Berkhamsted, signed by the jurors and dated 1723, contains orders for the repair of the butts and the pound, and for the removal of posts in the common footway. A draft court roll of 1726 refers to the death of Christopher Woodhouse, last bailiff of Berkhamsted; to the rights of residents to fish in the Bulbourne; to an order to provide weights and measures; and to regulations about the cutting of furze on Berkhamsted Common.

In the days of the Rev. J. W. Cobb, as he tells us in his "History of Berk-

hamsted" (first published in 1855), the courts of the Honour and Manor of Berkhamsted were still held twice a year, in the Court House, while there was an annual court for Northchurch at the Castle.

A BACK LANE OVEN

Conveyances and other old documents shown at the Ashridge exhibition give interesting family and place names. Where was Honey Lane, mentioned in a conveyance of 1582? We can place "Elvyn Lane alias Grubbs Lane" (1679)—it is now Chesham Road—and "Watery Lane" (1710). Back Lane is mentioned in a conveyance of 1664. On moving from Edlesborough to Back Lane, Joseph Grover was granted permission to use the oven in the neighbouring cottage "to heate, sett in, bake, take out . . . until there is an Oven made in the said cottage."

The earliest local document exhibited was a pre-1290 conveyance by John Gossalmer to Laurence de Brok of ten acres in the halimote of "Bercamstede" in "Westfould between the lands of the aforesaid Laurence and John." Here is an early mention of the family name which, later, was spelt Gossams and is perpetuated in Gossoms End.

According to a conveyance of 1555, we had a Mr. Tiptoe. Until learning that this was a family name, I had always pictured bygone Berkhamstedians tiptoeing over "Tiptoes Bridge," mentioned in other old documents. It was near Bank Mill.

A strange murder trial (details are too gruesome to be printed here) is recalled by 1623-4 references to "Joane ye wife of Awter Norket bu(ried) ye 8 of Juen" and "Mary and Awrtor Norket executed and bu(ried) ye 28 of Juen."

HIGHWAY REPAIRS

A list of persons in Northchurch parish liable to do statute duty for repairing the highways (1786) recalls the time when occupiers of property worth £50 had to send a cart with three horses and two men for two days or pay 4s. 6d. per day.

And there were matrimonial troubles, too. In 1810, a deed of separation shows that William Tomlin was to pay £100 per annum to his wife Juliet unless she obtained a situation as a governess.

Documents relating to our parish church included "an intimation" concerning a licence for the erection of a monument to John Sayer (1684) and a "mandate for the induction of John Cowper as Rector of Berkhamsted on the death of Robert Brabant" (1722).

STRANGE SCHOOL FEE

Among the documents concerning Berkhamsted School, I was delighted to read the report (1744) of a visitation held by the Rev. Stephen Niblett. Complaints were made against the master, Evan Price, for refusing to give the usher possession of his apartments, and for demanding money from the scholars "under pretence of buying brooms."

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:—

June 26—July 2: Dickman.
July 3—9: Taylors.
July 10—16: Boots.
July 17—23: Figg.
July 24—30: Dickman.
July 31—August 6: Taylors.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

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

Mon., Tues., Thurs., & 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.
Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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