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WHEN TRADESMEN COINED THEIR OWN MONEY

The Lace-Maker's Halfpenny

The Local History Society has been enriched by a halfpenny. Not an ordinary halfpenny, of course: it is a tradesman's token, almost as large as a penny, and an interesting memento of the time when pillow-lace making was a thriving cottage craft in Berkhamsted.

On one side of the token is the figure of a young lace-maker, plying her bobbins as she sits demurely on a grassy bank beneath a tree. Above this rustic scene are the words "Lace Manufactory." The other side of the token is less artistic: a rather poor representation of a sheep and the date 1794, encircled by the words "Pay at Leighton, Berkhamsted or London."

NO SMALL CHANGE

These tokens, or "money of necessity," were circulated at a time when small change was scarce, and were eventually returned to the issuer, who supplied coins of the realm in exchange.

The lace-makers' halfpence were struck by the thousand for what must have been an important firm: Chambers, Hall & Co., wholesale haberdashers, of 46 Gutter Lane, London. Their tokens circulated in many towns and villages of Herts, Bucks, and Beds, and the fact that Berkhamsted and Leighton Buzzard are specially named shows the importance of the lace trade in these two towns.

BY THE TON

At the end of the 18th century the shortage of small change was not so acute as at some earlier periods of English history, and few tradesmen came to the rescue with tokens. As, however, Chambers, Hall & Co. issued at least a ton of their tokens, it is surprising that specimens are

apparently as rare as 17th century tokens. The 1794 token presented by Miss Estwall to the Local History Society was bought in a London shop and is perhaps the only one in Berkhamsted at the present time, though similar specimens are in museums and in the possession of Leighton Buzzard residents.

ANCIENT CRAFT

We have often referred to the town's old trades in wool, wood, malt and straw-plait, but little has been said about the pillow-lace craft which once gave employment to hundreds of women in Berkhamsted and neighbouring towns and villages.

Theirs was an ancient skill, passed on from generation to generation. Jingling gaily beaded bobbins, the craftswomen worked on pillows to which were attached pricked parchment or cardboard patterns, glittering with pins which made a framework for the threads. Sometimes the pins were beaded, too. The patterns were used over and over again, some showing the influence of Flemish and French refugees who established lace-making "colonies" in England over three centuries ago.

"KEEPING KATTERN"

Henry Nash, whose "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" appeared in 1890, was old enough to remember seeing "some ancient dame" in 18th century costume jingling her bobbins and being admired by children who "looked with longing eyes upon the rich adornment of her pillow." And our own poet, William Cowper, wrote of

Yon cottager, who weaves at her door
Pillow and bobbins, all her little store.

The lace-makers observed an ancient custom known as "Keeping Kattern." On the day of their patron saint, St. Catharine, they held parties for which "Kattern" cakes were baked. In this district Wigginton was, I believe, the last place to "Keep Kattern." In some towns and villages the lace-makers elected their "queen" and went in procession, singing a traditional ballad, to receive "Kattern" money.

LINK WITH THE PAST

In the early part of the 19th century a less dainty but more remunerative craft superseded lace-making in Berkhamsted—straw-plaiting. But we still have Mrs. J. Deacon, of Ravens Lane, to delight audiences with talks on the history of the craft and to give demonstrations on a pillow that was owned by her grandmother. It is fascinating to watch her nimble fingers as she works on

patterns of some antiquity. Among Mrs. Deacon's treasures is a bobbin-winder made for her grandmother by a blind man; though perhaps cumbersome, it is remarkably effective.

Alas! few craftswomen of Mrs. Deacon's skill and patience are to be found in England today. But on the Continent pillow-lace making is still a profitable cottage pursuit, notably in the Belgian city of Bruges, to which Berkhamsted merchants sent much of their wool six centuries ago.

17th CENTURY TOKENS

As has been stated, the lace-maker's token is comparatively modern, and rare. Volumes have been written about earlier tokens, notably those issued during and after the Civil War, when small change was notoriously scarce.

Over 200 different tokens were circulated by Hertfordshire tradesmen, and at least 230 Buckinghamshire specimens have been preserved. The fact that Ivinghoe had three varieties, Edlesborough two, Wendover six, and Thame 18, shows that towns and villages relatively unimportant today must have been busy centres in the 17th century.

Four Berkhamsted tokens are listed in Cobb's "History of Berkhamsted":

1. *Obv.* JOHN SEELING OF In the field I.E.S.
Rev. BARKHAMSTED. In the field 1655 between two roses.
2. *Obv.* JOHN CARVELL, 1667. In the field HIS HALFE PENNY.
Rev. IN BARKHAMSTED. In the field I.M.C.
3. *Obv.* WILLIAM BABB, 1667. A knot ending in two roses between W. K. B.
Rev. IN BARKHAMSTED. In the field HIS HALFE PENNY.
4. *Obv.* WILLIAM PRESTON. In the field HIS HALFE PENNY.
Rev. AT BARKHAMSTED, 1668. In the field W.I.P.

What trades were pursued by these four Berkhamsted merchants? We do not know; but it is interesting to note that both Babb and Seeling were churchwardens. Incidentally, one of William Preston's tokens was found, two or three years ago, in the garden of Mr. W. L. Benson, opposite the Parish Church.

BROKEN COINS

Tradesmen issued tokens to overcome the shortage of small change long before the 17th century. Sometimes pennies were cut or broken into two or four parts to make halfpennies and "fourth-things," or farthings. Coins that are now almost useless were essential in days when a man's wages were reckoned in pence, and when three gallons of beer cost but a penny.

In 1330, the King was petitioned "that smaller coins may be struck for little purchases, and for works of charity." Which recalls the cynical last line of a quatrain written when Edward I decreed that all pence, halfpence and farthings should be made round: "Men give God aye the least, they feast him with a farthing."

'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 28—September 3: Taylors.
September 4—10: Boots.
September 11—17: Figg.
September 18—24: Dickman
September 25—October 1: 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., Thur., & 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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