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THE FURZE-CUTTERS OF BERKHAMSTED

## Gathering Winter Fuel

In the 19th century, before Cox's Lane was widened and renamed King's Road, my grandfather lived in one of six cottages which stood near the Bridewell, now the police station.

The cottages, though small, had large fireplaces. That was because furze and wood were burned on ample hearthstones, resting on dog-irons, until the canal and railway reduced the heavy cartage cost of coal. And long after grates were installed for coal fires, the cottages were visited once a year by a chimney-sweep who used not brushes but a furze-bush.

Among the industries of the town at that time was brush-making, which gave employment to scores of people. But why should the sweep patronise the brush-makers when a few furze-bushes cost him nothing but a walk to and from Berkhamsted Common? His gnarled old hands were inured to the spiky bushes; nothing, he said, got into the crannies and swept a chimney so well as furze.

### COVETED PRIVILEGE

The sweep was perhaps the last man to find an everyday use for gorse, furze, or, as the old country people called it, "fuzzen." Yet for generations the taking of furze and fern from Berkhamsted Common was one of the coveted rights of the commoners. This privilege was cited in the law-suit which followed the frustrated enclosure of the Common in 1866, when witnesses related how they had cut furze for fuel and fern for various husbandry needs.

Inexpertly used, the furze blazed quickly and dangerously, showering the room with sparks. But our forebears knew how to coax an intense heat which kept the pot boiling and the kitchen cosy. There was a rustic odour, too! Furze was especially useful for starting or reviving a log fire in days when

newspapers were small and scarce; indeed, hundreds of cottagers never handled so much as a scrap of paper from one year to another.

Many interesting references to furze appear in the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow's "History of Berkhamsted Common." As long ago as 1607, the inhabitants and tenants "of this Manner dwelling within Barkhamsteede & Northchurch have used by auncient customs . . . bushes, furzes, stubbes and fearn for their necessary uses for their landes and tenements . . ."

### FINES FOR "FORRAINERS"

But excessive cutting sometimes created a shortage of fuel. To make matters worse, outsiders or "foreigners" helped themselves to the Berkhamsted commoners' furze. Not content with a bush or two, they took cartloads.

To stop this abuse it was ordered, in 1666, that any person who had no right of common was to be fined three shillings if he cut or dug up any "furzes." A similar fine was imposed upon any person (commoner or otherwise) who sold furze "to any forrainer," not having right of common. Half of the fine was to be paid to the lord of the manor, and the other half to the common informer.

More restrictions were to follow. Even the implements used by furze-cutters were limited in size. In 1725, it was forbidden to use "any other weapon or working tool than a one-handed Bill with a stale helve or handle thereto affixed of the length of twelve inches & no longer." Offenders were liable to a fine of five shillings.

### EXCEPTIONS

A year later, exceptions were made in favour of persons under 14 and over 60 years of age, and disabled or infirm persons. They were empowered to use "Hows or handbills or short bills but not long bills."

In a growing town the cutting and selling of furze became a little industry. There was steady employment for carters, but it was repeatedly necessary to remind all concerned that the selling of furze was restricted to fellow commoners. The possibility of a fine, however, did not deter the "foreigners." Among the intruders was a Kensworth brickmaker, who had the nerve to complain about high cartage costs! His men were known to lurk in a public-house until dark and then set off with their illicit loads of furze.

Such men as these must have looked like brigands. Perhaps they were responsible for giving the Common a bad name as a haunt of footpads and vagabonds. Lady Bridgewater would not set off from Ashridge to Berkhamsted at night unless her carriage was guarded by outriders with loaded pistols, for fear of a hold-up on Berkhamsted Common.

It was a calamity when an accidental fire on the Common reduced supplies

for the hearth. But the shortages were mainly caused by selfishness. From time to time the Common was almost denuded, and it was to ensure a more bountiful crop that the Court Baron of the Manor, in 1764, ordered that no person was to cut or cause to be cut any fern on the Common from June 1st until September 1st.

Thereby hangs a tale which is not told in Mr. Whybrow's book. The "close season" over, the furze- and fern-cutters were keen to secure the best expanses, and surveyed the land long before September 1st. Then, at nightfall on August 31st, they would set off from Berkhamsted and Potten End, make for their coverted corner, and stand guard until midnight. (It was said that they listened for the chimes of the parish church clock; either their hearing was exceptionally acute or an earlier church clock rang out loud and clear on the midnight air.)

### STAKING CLAIMS

At zero hour the men staked their claims in "gold rush" style. By dawn they were busy with the regulation 12-in. one-handed bill, and it was not long before the first loaded carts were jolting down Gravel Path or Petticoat Lane to Berkhamsted.

There would be a shuttle service between the Common and the King's Arms Inn, for John Page, "mine host," used furze exclusively for fuel in his own brewery. Exiled Louis XVIII of France, waiting for horses to be changed on his frequent journeys between London and Hartwell House, warmed himself before a "fuzzen" fire at the King's Arms while he flirted with pretty Polly Page.

The furze blazed not only in cottage, inn and brewery; it fired the brick-kiln that was started on the Common by the Duke of Bridgewater when he planned the rebuilding of Ashridge House. The Common became quite bare, and it was not until Ashridge House was built that fresh growth restored the fuel stocks of Berkhamsted. By then the canal had been cut, and coal was reaching the district at a price more people were able to afford.

### DECLINE AND FALL

Better transport and industrialisation were taking their toll of another old local occupation. Though many years were to pass before the Common was admired more for its beauty than for its products, furze was not so essential as it had been in the 18th century. Fewer carts were seen on the Common; it was more profitable to transport coal from the new canal wharves.

As the half-dozen or so people who still take a walk over Berkhamsted Common are aware, furze still grows abundantly. But no versifier of today comments on "the furze in flower with splendour untold" as did a former Nettleden vicar, who recalled a tradition to the effect that Linnaeus, the great Swedish naturalist, knelt down to thank God for the beauty of the Common.

## 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:—

November 27—December 3: Boots.  
December 4—10: Figg.  
December 11—17: Dickman  
December 18—24: Taylors  
Christmas Day: Figg.  
December 26: Dickman  
December 27—31: Boots.

### 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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