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GLIMPSSES OF VICTORIAN BERKHAMSTED

## Not So Very Long Ago

I have just been dipping into some recent acquisitions of the Local History Society, which, for those who like such terms, may be described as "Victoriana." A sale catalogue of 1872 and a bound volume of the Berkhamsted Parish Magazine for 1886 are neither ancient nor important, but they have homely interest and, in a small way, supplement our knowledge of Victorian Berkhamsted.

How many people, for instance, know that Chapel Street Infants' School was burnt down in 1886? I, for one, was unaware of this happening until I read an account of it in the faded pages of a 70-years-old Parish Magazine.

### REBUILT IN A MONTH

The blaze started in an adjoining shed owned by Mr. Simmonds, a plumber, and from his "inflammable goods" the flames "crept underneath the rafters and spread the whole length of the school. The roof soon fell in with a great crash, and the walls only were left standing. The fire brigade used every effort to get the fire under, and were successful in preventing it spreading any further."

The date of the blaze was 12th August, and some of the holiday-making children doubtless considered it ill-timed. The insurance claim was made out and settled promptly, and within a month the school was completely rebuilt and re-opened. As the editor of the Parish Magazine commented, "We can only trust that such a catastrophe may not occur again."

Pride in the church schools prompted remarks which a tactful editor would have left unsaid. Odious were comparisons made between the church and board schools. During the year ending February 28, 1886, the expenses of Berkhamsted Board School (now Park View School) were £747, an average of

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Est. 1826

£2 17s. 6d. for each of the 260 scholars. For the Church of England schools (Court House, Chapel Street and Gossoms End) the total cost in the same period was £778, an average of £1 16s. 8d. for each of the 424 children.

"We make these remarks in no spirit of hostility," added the writer. He did, however, insist that the National Schools gave the more satisfactory results, were saving the parish a large expense, and had every claim to the liberal support of all fair-minded people.

### SEWING CLASS FOR BOYS

Certainly the National Schools had good reports from the inspector, with reservations. The boys' singing was better than in the previous year, though there was a great tendency to lose pitch in the singing exercises. The girls were "in very good order," but worked out sums in a rather confused and untidy manner. Blinds were wanted in the classrooms. At Gossoms End Infants' School, the boys' sewing was "very fair."

But black marks were given to Potten End School in 1886. Writing, spelling and arithmetic, especially of the boys, were bad; there was a great want of life and intelligence in the oral answering; and mental arithmetic and grammar were very poor indeed.

Incidentally, attendances at the Church Sunday Schools were good; at any rate, the annual treats were well patronised. Five hundred boys and girls had their treat at The Hall, and 250 infants were entertained at the Rectory, where "the little ones seemed to be, with a few temporary exceptions, perfectly happy."

### GENERAL FINCH'S HOUSE

Now we go back a few more years—to 1872. General the Hon. John Finch, "squire" of Berkhamsted and a generous donor to local good causes, had died at Berkhamsted Place, and the "magnificent contents of the mansion" were sold by auction.

The 48-page catalogue shows that the General lived in style and slept in comfort. His handsome iron canopy bedstead stood on castors, with figured head and foot and couronne, and embroidered muslin furniture. But overhead (in Attic No. 3) the maids had stumpy sacking-bottom bedsteads.

What was described as "a small cellar of wines" included 13 dozen bottles of fine old port, 7 dozen bottles of sherry, and 6 dozen bottles of claret, as well as champagne and fine old brandy. Beer was brewed on the premises, and in the cellar was a 40-ft. oak beer stand.

It was a typical Victorian home, with needlework-top ottomans, gilt and china candelabra, "numerous elegant fancy articles," handsome specimens of framed needlework, and 1,200 volumes of well-bound books.

Judging from the contents of the drawing room, the General was fond

of chess, draughts, loo, backgammon, rotary gammon, bezique, solitaire, and games called homeward bound and the boundary line. A marginal note shows that £8 was paid for a papier-maché box with box of miniature playing cards, merelles box and board, and box of spellicians.

After the thousand-and-one household items—ranging from a grand piano to a skin foot-muff—came the carriages and carts. A single-seated Brougham fetched 41 gns., a pair-horse Barouche 40 gns., a market cart £1 11s. and a light donkey wagon £3.

Interesting, yes—and a little sad, I think, for a fine old mansion, the pride and joy of General Finch, was stripped of its treasures in less than a week. But the great days of Berkhamsted Place were not over, for after the General came Lady Sarah Spencer, who entertained both George V when he was Duke of York, and Mr. Gladstone.

### EGERTON HOUSE

Another Victorian souvenir brings me to Egerton House, which was sold by auction at the King's Arms Hotel on September 3, 1895. The outsize "particulars of sale" booklet is embellished on the front page by a photograph of the mansion in all its Elizabethan glory. Though only a few feet from the High Street, it had a secluded air, hidden behind evergreens and a smart fence. Between footpath and road were a little grassy bank and a flight of five well-worn stone steps.

Let the printed page recapture the past. The entrance hall had a large arched chimney corner, fireplace, oak floor and beamed ceiling, and two stone-mullioned windows. Doorways leading to the various rooms and passages were all decorated with carved oak figured mouldings. To the right, the dining room; to the left the drawing room; and other doors and passages led to the billiards room and the conservatory. There were two staircases to the attics (four bedrooms and four store or box rooms).

### VICTORIAN RENTS

The stabling was good, the garden was large. And nearby was Egerton Cottage, much larger than most passers-by imagined, with three sitting rooms; four large bedrooms, servants' bedroom and box room, and a coach house approached from Rectory Lane.

And today? Nothing remains of Egerton House and Egerton Cottage but memories and pictures and an auctioneer's eulogy. It became a sadly neglected property, and was simply not worth saving when the time came, in 1937, to build the Rex Cinema in its place.

Just one more reminder of Victorian Berkhamsted. When Egerton House was auctioned in 1895, two Castle Street properties also came in the market. A shop with kitchen, sitting room, four bedrooms, garden, out-houses, stabling and a 8-bushel oven was rented at £18 per annum. Another shop, with sitting room, kitchen, six bedrooms, cart shed and stable, was rented at £21 per annum. Those were the days! '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:—

January 1-7: Figg.  
January 8-14: Dickman  
January 15-21: Taylors  
January 22-28: Boots.  
January 29-February 4: 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., 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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