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The Road the Romans Made

Recently, at the end of a talk on local history, a questioner asked what people, events or institutions had had the greatest influence on the development of Berkhamsted.

A tricky question! The schools, our industries, private and council estates—all have helped to shape Berkhamsted and determine the character of its people.

But is it not significant that the Berkhamsted we know today—a thriving town instead of a sleepy hollow—is little more than a century old? It was the railway (and, to a smaller degree, the canal thirty years earlier) which awakened the town and encouraged the setting up of chemical works and other industries. It was the railway which helped the schools to grow in size and fame: good schools, a country town, and a season ticket made an irresistible combination, and kept builders busy on the larger type of house from mid-Victorian times onward.

A NEW SERIES

It therefore seems to me that our communications have had the greatest influence on the development of Berkhamsted. First the road to "open up" the valley; then the canal, the railway, and now once more the road to encourage more and more "dormitory" residents.

As county and local history books have little to say about our roads, canal and railway, I thought it would be useful to devote a series of articles to the history of local communications. Readers with very long memories may be aware that I am drawing extensively upon some articles which appeared in the *Review* soon after the war; but use will be made, too, of considerable

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additional information which has been collected from time to time.

AKEMAN STREET

It always gives me a thrill to recall that our High Street is part of the Akeman Street of Roman times. It may not be easy to conjure up visions of Roman legionaries penetrating Chiltern forests and trying to force their town dwellers' civilisation upon raw, reluctant, and highly individualistic islanders; but the Romans did at least give Britain good roads. It was not their fault that the islanders failed to keep up the good work; hundreds and hundreds of years elapsed before we were able to build roads as good as the original Akeman Street.

This Roman highway ran from Colchester to Verulamium (St. Albans), veered westward via Berkhamsted and Aylesbury to Alcester (near Bicester) and then curved southward over the Cotswolds to Cirencester and Bath.

ROMAN LEGACY

St. Albans has every right to be proud of the remains at Verulamium. We, in turn, should thank the Romans for a legacy of greater utility: a straight High Street. We have been luckier than Tring, which preferred a curving, hilly High Street to the Roman "short cut" through what is now Tring Park. (Tring's so-called Akeman Street, by the way is not part of the Roman highway; it merely links the original Akeman Street with the High Street.)

East of Berkhamsted, Akeman Street is believed to have followed the north bank of the Bulbourne, passing along what is now Bank Mill Lane to Winkwell, Heath Park, Nash Mills, and Kings Langley Station. Many Roman remains have been found beside this valley road. The present main road through Bourne End and Apsley is considered too erratic to be of Roman origin; it was probably made because the lower road on the opposite side of the river was subject to flooding.

ROBBERS!

The Romans departed, and their roads were neglected. For centuries travellers had to dodge deep ruts and quagmires, and so prevalent were robbers—especially in our Chiltern beechwoods—that in the 13th century landowners were ordered to cut down trees to prevent the concealment of robbers near the main roads.

The name Shootersway (in early documents spelt "Sugarsway") is said to have its origin in a Saxon word meaning "Robbers' way." Here we have a very early example of a "by-pass," for this ancient byway ran parallel with the main road, though on considerably higher ground, all the way

from New Ground to Bourne End. Today we have a good road from New Ground to the top of Chesham Road, but the remainder of "Robbers' way" is a track through Sandpit Green and Long Green to what is still known as "Sugar Lane."

There was little wheeled traffic in medieval days; a few carriers' carts to supplement pack-horses, and an occasional litter for sick persons. The ordinary traveller went on foot or on horseback. Signposts were unknown, and many a hapless traveller lost his way.

IN THE PIT

Many, too, lost their lives. For instance, a Leighton Buzzard glover, in 1499, rode over to Aylesbury to sell his gloves in the Christmas market, but fell into a huge pit on entering the town. Both man and horse were drowned in water that was 8-ft. deep—on the public highway! The man who dug the pit was charged with the glover's murder, but was acquitted on pleading that the clay he needed could be found only on the road.

Our own local records refer to obstructions and nuisances on the King's highway; none had such serious consequences as the Aylesbury disaster, though the men responsible were not treated so liberally by the justices!

COMPULSORY LABOUR

By Elizabeth's reign increasing use was made of coaches, despite the shocking state of the roads. It was too early to derive much benefit from recent legislation which made each parish liable for the upkeep of its main road. Few people were less popular than the two parochial surveyors of highways whose duty was to keep the main road repaired by compulsory labour. Able-bodied men were required to work without payment six days a year on the road. This duty was largely evaded, and in lieu of forced labour, rates were levied for the upkeep of the roads.

Incidentally, a document in the possession of the County Record Office, Hertford, gives a list of persons in Northchurch liable to do statute duty for repairing the highways in 1786; at that time all occupiers of property worth £50 had to send a cart with three horses and two men for two days, or pay 4s. 6d. a day.

SPARROWS HERNE

Promise of improved road conditions came in 1663, when the first Turnpike Act was passed, authorising the Justices of the Peace of Hertford, Cambridge and Huntingdon to levy tolls upon road users for the maintenance of highways, the tolls to be collected at bars, or turnpikes. The very first toll-bar was in fact set up in Hertfordshire, at Wadesmill.

Private enterprise took over the roads, and in this district we had the Sparrows Herne Trust in control of the road from Stanmore, through Watford, Berkhamsted and Tring, to Aylesbury.

(To be continued).

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:—

February 26—March 3: Figg.
March 4—10: Dickman.
March 11—17: Taylors.
March 18—24: Boots.
March 25—31: 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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