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BERKHAMSTED FOOTBALLERS OF 1685

Ancient Sports & Pastimes

(CONTINUED)

Anyone who tries to trace the growth of popular sports in the district is bound to be frustrated by the scarcity of pre-20th century records, and overwhelmed by the millions upon millions of words which have filled the sports pages of local papers in the past fifty or sixty years.

Pick up early copies of the *Berkhamsted Times* and you will be lucky indeed to find even a few lines devoted to sport. Yet the *Times* first appeared in the 1870s, exciting years when interest in cricket and football grew apace. Clubs were being formed in almost every town and village, wagnettes were regularly hired to take teams to neighbouring towns, and far-sighted people were beginning to talk of leagues and trophies. But many of those clubs were short-lived or amalgamated with other clubs, and few early minute books and other records survive.

FOOTBALL PENALTY

Football has a long history; an early and very brutal form of the game was frowned upon by Edward II, and was forbidden under pain of imprisonment in the reign of Elizabeth I. But boys and young men were always ready to flout authority for the sake of an afternoon's sport, and the only time when football lost popularity was in the middle of the 17th century. Puritan frowns were apparently more powerful deterrents than threats of imprisonment.

In 1685, some Berkhamsted footballers were brought before the justices—not for playing the game, but for meeting with an allegedly ulterior motive. They were accused of aiding and abetting the Monmouth Rebellion! Thomas Wells reported that William Norman and Joseph Mills, with two

other Berkhamsted men, "came over to him and askt him to play at football, but that was not the business; 'twas to goe and be 'listed for the Duke of Monmouth." The accused men were bound over, some in £50, others in £100.

SIX FORWARDS

In the first half of the 19th century, football was regularly played at public schools. Rules were flexible; teams varied in size, and some curious mixtures of rugby and soccer persisted even after the Football Association had drawn up its code in 1863.

In 1880 the senior boys of Berkhamsted School (then a "soccer" school) played with six forwards (two centres) and only two half-backs. This side regularly met other Hertfordshire teams, including Watford Rovers, the amateur ancestors of the present professional club. A reporter described the games as "rough, but not foul."

Ex-public schoolboys played a prominent part in the formation of clubs up and down the country a century ago. One of the earliest clubs started in Hertfordshire was at Apsley, in 1860.

I have not been able to ascertain the date when Berkhamsted first had what could be called a "town" club. The directory of 1890 refers to Berkhamsted Football Club, but the 1893 edition mentions only the Sunnyside Football Club—a formidable side which prospered under the presidency of the Rev. G. H. Siddans. Three years later, Berkhamsted Football Club appears once more in the directory, with another clergyman as president—the Rector, the Rev. A. Johnson.

CRICKET ON THE COMMON

Like football, cricket has been played for centuries. In the latter part of the 18th century, a Hertfordshire and Essex side played England—and lost. Locally, the first reference to cricket appears on a poster advertising a two-day holiday fair on Berkhamsted Common in 1819: "Cricketing as usual. Wickets pitched at 11 o'clock."

"As usual" shows that this annual match, probably between married and single men, was an old institution even in 1819. But it was only part of a fair with many other attractions, and in a dull spell spectators could go for donkey rides or climb greasy poles for legs of mutton.

Later, in mid-Victorian times, the most important match of the year took place in the Castle grounds, between married and single members of the Mechanics' Institute. A *Backs Herald* report of the 1856 match, preserved in the Institute billiards room, shows that single men were heavily defeated.

I have not been able to ascertain the date of the foundation of Berkhamsted Cricket Club. It was flourishing in Victorian days, but the minute books

date back only to 1896. That brings us to comparatively modern times, and I sincerely hope that an enthusiast will go through the records and write a detailed history of local cricket.

GOLF IN THE PARK

Golf does not present so many difficulties to the local historian as cricket and football.

The "royal and ancient" game was unknown in Berkhamsted until the 1880s, when Mr. G. H. Gowring, who had developed a passion for golf at Eastbourne, joined the staff of Berkhamsted School. A walk over the springy turf of Berkhamsted Common was sufficient to put ideas into his head, and he promptly obtained from Earl Brownlow permission to clear sufficient gorse to make a 9-hole course.

It was not a grand affair, but adequate for Gowring and his colleagues. By 1890 there were sufficient members to form a club, and Earl Brownlow showed practical interest by confirming the permission he had already given, and by agreeing to a nominal rent of 10s. a year. He also presented members with a small piece of land on the edge of the Common as a site for the club house.

An objection to the Common course at that time was its distance from the town. And so another 9-hole course was laid out in Berkhamsted Park, between the Castle and the Common, with a hut for members in the Castle grounds.

The new course was unpopular, and soon it was abandoned altogether. The hut in the Castle grounds was transferred to the Common, serving first as a club house and then as a workshop for the professional and caddy master.

MODEL COURSE

Extensions and improvements to the original course on Berkhamsted Common were largely the work of the late Mr. C. J. Gilbert, whose great opportunity came half a century ago, after a fire had destroyed many acres of gorse. It was then possible, without the expense of clearing dense undergrowth, to go ahead with Mr. Gilbert's scheme for an 18-hole course, and his ideas proved so successful that they were copied in many other parts of the country.

Besides introducing notable innovations in golf course design, Mr. Gilbert was largely responsible for Berkhamsted Golf Club being among the first to form an artisans' section.

In its early days the Golf Club had to contend with much criticism, mainly on the score that there had been interference with ancient but admittedly vague common rights. News that the Golf Club had purchased the freehold of 600 acres of Berkhamsted Common from the Ashridge Trustees caused another wave of indignation in 1923, but fears then expressed concerning the possible effect of the transaction upon the public's enjoyment of the Common have proved groundless.

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 27—February 2: Flegg.
February 3—9: Dickman.
February 10—16: Taylor.
February 17—23: Booths.
February 24—March 2: Flegg.

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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