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A MID-VICTORIAN NIGHT'S DREAM

The People's Park

A document recently given to the Local History Society throws new light on a fantastic Victorian dream which never came true. It shows in detail the "People's Park" Berkhamsted would have owned had the inhabitants ceded their common rights to Lord Brownlow over ninety years ago.

Imagine the Bulbourne valley with bathing and boating lakes, picnic grounds, sports fields, flower beds, gymnasium, shrubbery, maze, and goodness knows how many other amenities. Alexander F. Painter, whose elaborate plan bears the date February 7, 1865, forgot nothing—not even a clock tower and grottoes.

ENCLOSING THE COMMON
Two years before Mr. Painter put pen to paper, Lord Brownlow's trustees bought for £144,546 the whole of the Duchy of Cornwall's Berkhamsted property, except the Castle. It was not long before the new lord of the manor started acts of aggression which culminated in the enclosure of large stretches of Berkhamsted Common.

Many commoners protested, but the trustees were determined to enclose the Common. To make a "just and liberal compensation" for the commoners' outstanding claims, Lord Brownlow's steward informed the inhabitants that he was willing to give land somewhere near the town for the purpose of recreation, provided that it was on the west side of the railway and "be generally acquiesced in."

A well-attended vestry meeting favoured the idea. It was decided that the most eligible site for a recreation ground was the land between the railway and the river Bulbourne, and a committee was appointed.

This committee wrote to Lord Brownlow, praying that he would "comply with the views of the Vestry

and of the tenants of the manor generally." They were confident that under the superintendence of proper trustees, the proposed recreation ground would be "a permanent source of health and enjoyment to the present and future inhabitants of the increasing town of Berkhamstead, as well as a lasting memorial of your lordship's desire to promote the morality, health and prosperity of the town." Accompanying the letter was a document, signed by 186 persons, containing an undertaking to accept the land in lieu of common rights.

One by one the smaller commoners agreed to sell their rights, and Earl Brownlow signed an indenture of conveyance of the 43 acres for the purpose of a recreation ground. This was to be held for six months, and if in that time insufficient signatures had been obtained from commoners willing to forgo their rights, the indenture was to be handed back to Earl Brownlow and cancelled.

OFFER WITHDRAWN

Many people considered that a recreation ground in the town was worth more than a common a mile away. One man was so certain that the recreation ground scheme would go through that, when offering thirteen plots in Park Street for sale by auction, he stated in the prospectus: "The Park Street is set out 30-ft. wide and is intended to conduct and open on to the New Recreation Ground and the Berkhamsted People's Park."

But 1866 was an even more important date than 1066 in local history. Lord Brownlow did not succeed in enclosing Berkhamsted Common, and so the recreation ground offer was withdrawn.

That does not alter the fact that the scheme was of intense local interest. So, to avoid writing in the past tense, let it be supposed that Mr. Painter's plans were adopted, and that we are making a tour of the recreation ground from end to end.

First, we must forget the present railway station and Lower King's Road. Neither existed at the time of the plan. The railway station was near the "Crystal Palace" public-house, and there was no road over the canal between Castle Street and Crooked Billet Lane.

TOUR OF INSPECTION

We start our walk in Castle Street, where Mr. Painter (on paper, of course!) has demolished the watermill and built a little road between Castle Street and Mill Street, with six houses on either side.

Arriving in Mill Street, we enter the recreation ground between an entrance lodge and refreshment rooms.

Paths wind here, there and everywhere, but all converge on a drinking fountain. On the right, we skirt the croquet lawn to inspect flower beds near the Castle Hotel; then, near the

canal, we see the gymnasium and bowling green. (This land is still an open space—the Moor.)

Next, we pass a lawn (purely decorative), a "lawn billiards ground" (where men play with outside cues and balls on closely shaved turf), and then lose ourselves in the Berkhamsted Maze, near the canal locks.

SAILING AND SKATING

The low land near the Bulbourne (undisturbed by Lower King's Road) is a skating and boating lake, with a small island. The lake is big enough for a boat in full sail, for Mr. Painter shows one on his plan. A smaller lake, beside the Bulbourne, is reserved for bathing.

Returning to Mill Street, we see the flower show ground (Mr. Painter supplies two marquees) and a shrubbery near the junction of Mill Street and the Wilderness, doubtless perfumed by the old gasworks and the brewery, which stood nearby.

Now it's time to visit that part of the recreation ground between the canal and the railway. Two paths from the station approach, one beside the canal, the other beside the railway, enclose a cricket ground with a difference: it has grottoes! (It is now the Sports Ground, sans grottoes.) Beyond, tapering between canal and railway as far as Crooked Billet Lane, are picnic grounds, positively free from gas fumes.

FOOTBRIDGE OVER CANAL

There are two ways to the land between the canal and the Bulbourne: Crooked Billet lane, and a footbridge over the canal 150 yards east of St. John's Well Lane.

We will choose Crooked Billet Lane, for here, just beside the Bulbourne, we have a main entrance to the recreation ground. It is as impressive as that in Mill Street, with lodge and refreshment rooms.

Stretching from Crooked Billet Lane to the upper lock is another cricket ground, again with grottoes. Next, from the upper lock to Park Street, we find a park and archery grounds. From Park Street to St. John's Well Lane, a quiet ground on the left and a practice ground for boys on the right. (This land is now largely devoted to watercress beds.)

CLOCK TOWER, TOO

Only a very narrow strip of land remains. East of St. John's Well Lane we have a drill ground, mound, and clock tower.

But we must not forget the waterfalls. Six were planned to help the Bulbourne descend from Crooked Billet Lane to Mill Street.

Dreams, idle dreams! I feel rather sorry for Mr. Painter: he worked hard, and his scheme came to nothing.

And so we say farewell to the "People's Park," designed to promote the morality, health and prosperity of the town and, of course, keep the people away from Berkhamsted Common.

'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:—

February 24—March 2: Figg.
March 3—5: Dickman.
March 10—15: Taylors.
March 17—23: Hoops.
March 24—30: Figg.
March 31—April 6: Dickman.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—
Mon., Tues., Thurs., & 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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