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NEW FACTS ABOUT A KING'S HEAD COOK

John Sayer and His Critics

One of the most interesting characters in local history is John Sayer. Everybody knows his name, for an inscription on the picturesque almshouses in Berkhamsted High Street tells us that they are "The Gift of John Sayer Esqr., 1684." Goodness knows how many children have pestered parents with questions about the spelling of John with an I!

Unfortunately, John Sayer was a much misunderstood man. He has been presented as an enemy of the townspeople who tried to atone for his misdeeds by giving £1,000 for the founding and maintenance of six almshouses for poor widows. This unkind view will, I hope, be corrected by the publication of some facts which, to the best of my knowledge, have never been printed before.

CASTING ASPERSIONS

John Sayer's greatest claim to fame is that he was Charles II's head cook, a description which prompts would-be humorists to ask if he was the royal bottler, too. And the fact that he lived at Berkhamsted Place occasions surprise. How could a head cook, even a King's head cook, afford to live in the largest mansion for miles around? Uncharitable folk have suggested that he may have "cooked" the palace accounts, or obtained fine pickings out of contracts for the supply of food and drink to the Royal Household.

No such aspersions are cast by Cobb in his "History of Berkhamsted," but after relating that the townspeople accused Sayer of interfering with ancient rights and revenues, Cobb comments upon the posthumous gift of £1,000 and adds: "It may be well to mention his charitable bounty here, in order that we may not regard him al-

together in the light of the enemy of the parish."

This backhanded compliment was unworthy of Cobb, and utterly unfair to John Sayer.

SHARING THE KING'S EXILE

In the Civil War, John Sayer was an ardent Royalist. Holding the appointment of head cook, he was among the small band of young men who shared Charles II's exile. It is known that the King, during his long exile, was a poor man, and away from his native land Sayer must have been a poor man, too.

Back in England after the Restoration, Sayer continued to hold the office of head cook, receiving £150 a year, with an additional £40 for livery. (What, I wonder, was the livery of the King's head cook in the 17th century?)

Three pounds a week was a handsome wage in Stuart days, but by no means sufficient to enable a man to live in a mansion. Indeed, Charles II was so dilatory in paying his servants that on several occasions Sayer had to apply for payment of arrears.

AT BERKHAMSTED PLACE

The head cook obviously had other sources of income; though sometimes without wages, he was able to lend money to his employer, the King! I think it can be assumed that Sayer, far from having to work among the steaming pots and pans of the palace kitchens, was little more than a figurehead, holding an office of honour and profit under the Crown which left him free for other activities. How else could he have lived in Berkhamsted, several hours' journey on horseback from London?

Sayer came to Berkhamsted Place towards the end of 1662, shortly after two wings of the mansion (previously, for a short time, the home of Lord Portland) had been destroyed by fire. Sayer apparently already had local associations; not only was his brother, the Rev. Joseph Sayer, rector of Northchurch, but we find the family name in one form or another (Sayer, Sayers, Sares and Sears) in many old local documents.

On succeeding Lord Portland at Berkhamsted Place, Sayer also secured the manorial rights, and it was his interpretation of these rights which upset the parishioners.

PETITION TO THE KING

So incensed were the rector, churchwardens, schoolmasters and other Berkhamsted residents that they petitioned Charles II in the following words:

"That whereas the Church belonging to the said Towne, being an ancient and large fabrique and your Majesties Free Schoole therein situate, have time out of mind enjoyed Market Houses and Balywick, with severall other Revenues

for the upholding of the said Church, maintenance of the Free Schoole, and reliefe of the Poore, for which only a quit rent of 2s. 8d. per annum hath been paid unto your Majesties Predecessors for some hundreds of yeares, as by divers surveyes and records of ye Church clearly and fully appears, The Premises notwithstanding are now and for some years past have been unjustly detained from the said Church, Free Schoole, and Poore, by your Majesties Servant and Cooke John Sayer, Esqr., who doth much trouble your Petitioners with suites in your Majesties name, under pretence of a grant from your Majestie, to the great and singular prejudice of the above-named particulars:

"May it therefore please your Most Excellent Majestie out of your princely care and compassion to refer the grievance either to the Right Honorable the Lord Keeper or some other person or persons of honour, to take some speedy and effectual course for ye redressing of soe scandalous a depreddation."

NEW FACTS

Cobb, after quoting this petition (still preserved in the parish chest) adds: "Such was the Petition to the King. The case was tried in the Court of Exchequer, and by an award of Sir Francis North, dated November 27, 1674, was decided against the inhabitants and in favour of Mr. Sayer."

This bald statement, though admitting that the charge of "scandalous depreddation" was dismissed, does not show why John Sayer was vindicated. As a matter of fact, friction between officers of the manor and the townspeople had existed for a long time; almost a hundred years earlier there was a written agreement (in the year 1584) for "the pacifying of all strifes" which was apparently never acted upon.

A report made to the Treasury by the Surveyor General, Mr. (or Sir) William Harbord, states that many abuses had been committed within the manor and many just rights belonging to the King had been detained by divers inhabitants of the town. The report goes on to say that such benefits as arose, chiefly out of the tolls and profits of the market were so small that Sayer gave them back to the town and to the collector, "the better to preserve peace and amity among his neighbours."

PRESERVING THE KING'S RIGHT

What Cobb did not make clear, and probably did not know, was that Sayer had no pecuniary interest in the matter. The Surveyor states: "I do not find that Sayer makes any clear gain to himself out of the premises, which are chiefly a royalty and of some honour and reputation to him, being lessee of the whole demesnes of the manor."

Sayer was preserving the King's right, and six years later, when the Treasury Warrant was issued for a new lease to him, it was stated: "In the present lease there is a special grant of the old Court House, with all out-houses, yards, gardens, orchards and appurtenances for 31 years from March 25, 1680, at a

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:—

May 26—June 1: Dickman.
June 2—8: Taylor.
June 9—15: Boots.
June 16—22: Pigg.
June 23—29: Dickman.
June 30—July 6: Taylor.
Whit Monday—Taylor.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—
Monday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Tuesday—10 a.m.—7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—Closed.
Thursday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Friday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m.—3 p.m.

(Continued from previous column.)

peppercorn rent, if demanded, the better to preserve the King's right and title thereto, which lessee is to defend at his own cost."

So there we have a new view of John Sayer—not an enemy of the parish, but a man who took actions which he felt obliged to take as the steward of the manor, however little they were to the liking of the townsfolk.

For much of this information I have drawn upon manuscripts prepared by the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow, author of the "History of Berkhamsted Common," whose papers, representing many hours of original research, are now in the possession of the Local History Society.

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