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HOW BERKHAMSTED LOST A FAMOUS HOUSE

Cowper's Birthplace

The other day I visited for the first time what is sometimes considered the finest literary museum in the country. It is Cowper's House at Olney, now a museum filled from kitchen to attic with relics of the Berkhamsted-born poet.

I wonder how many Berkhamstedians have visited Olney? Very few, I imagine, for the curator told me that he receives fewer than 1,000 visitors a year. Olney, a pleasant little town near Newport Pagnell, is perhaps better known to the general public for its Shrove Tuesday pancake race, now an international affair. If you go to the Cowper Museum you can see the ancient bell which is rung to start the race.

But it is frivolous to mention such a trifle when a dozen rooms, the garden and the summer-house tell the Cowper story. Almost everything belonging to the poet is there, including the family Bible which for thirty years was kept at Berkhamsted rectory. Not that there are many reminders of the poet's home town; only his boyhood was spent at Berkhamsted, and Olney, where he wrote many of his poems, hymns and letters, provides most of the exhibits.

"JOHN GILPIN"

It is a great experience—one which, I think, every Berkhamstedian should share—to stand in the parlour where Cowper wrote "The Task" and "God moves in a mysterious way." Then there is the bedroom in which "John Gilpin," "Oh, for a closer walk with God," and "Toll for the brave" were composed. Visitors can see the port-hole through which the poet's hares were admitted to their gambols on the carpet, and the summer-house which Cowper called his "verse manufactory."

To my mind, it is one of the town's greatest tragedies that a similar museum

does not exist in Berkhamsted. The rectory in which the poet was born obviously would not have held so much interest as the house at Olney, but if it had been preserved and turned into a museum it would now be the pride of Berkhamsted. It would also be a major tourist attraction in a town which has surprisingly little to show of its long, exciting history.

THE OLD RECTORY

I shall always regard John Crofts, rector of Berkhamsted from 1810 to 1851, as a vandal for having pulled down Cowper's rectory. He need not have done so. Crofts' rectory was not built on the same site. Yet every stick and stone of the poet's birthplace was removed, and today the original site is occupied by a brand-new rectory, while the house that Crofts built still stands higher up the hill.

Even without tangible reminders of the poet, Berkhamsted still attracts his admirers from all over the world. I often receive calls from Americans who have studied Cowper's life and works, and are keen to learn if published information about his early life in Berkhamsted can be supplemented. They are invariably shocked to learn that nothing at all remains of the house which William Cowper preferred to a palace.

All we have to show are old prints depicting a long, rambling building, broad lawns, an attractive background of trees, and a rickety wooden fence separating the rectory garden from a field which, more than a century ago, was consecrated as a cemetery.

A TRAGIC FAMILY

John Cowper, the poet's father, was instituted rector of Berkhamsted in 1722. He and his wife, Anne, had more than their share of sorrow. Five children died in infancy, and the final tragedy came in 1737, when Anne Cowper died shortly after the birth of the seventh child, John, the only one besides William who grew to manhood.

William was then six years old. He had attended a small private school in the High Street, and his father would doubtless have sent him to the Grammar School had he greater confidence in the headmaster. But at that time the Grammar School, like many similar foundations elsewhere, was grossly mismanaged.

John Cowper brought matters to a head by organising a petition to the Courts of Chancery, and it was not his fault that the sole effect of the petition was to benefit lawyers at the expense of the town. Berkhamsted had to wait many years until Augustus Smith ended the Grammar School scandal.

What a pity, though, that William Cowper was not able to enjoy home life for a few more years. His father made an unhappy choice in sending a sensitive, physically weak lad to Dr. Pitman's boarding school at Markyate. There

he was the constant victim of leg-pulls and horse-play. He was so scared of a senior boy, a notorious bully, that he came to know him better by his shoe-buckles than by any other part of his dress.

For four years he endured the miseries of Markyate; then, at the age of ten, he was sent to Westminster School, where Warren Hastings was among his schoolfellows.

Periodically William Cowper visited Berkhamsted. The last occasion was in 1759, three years after the death of his father.

To a friend he wrote: "There was neither tree, nor gate, nor stile in all that country to which I did not feel a relation, and the house itself I preferred to a palace. I was sent for from London to attend him in his last illness, and he died just before I arrived. Then and not till then I felt for the first time that I and my native place were disunited for ever. I sighed a long adieu to fields and woods from which I once thought I never should be parted, and was at no time so sensible of their beauties as just when I left them all behind to return no more."

GARDNER ROBIN

But Cowper did not forget Berkhamsted. He ever cherished memories of the rectory, the garden, the fields around, and, above all, his happy home life. He wrote these lines on receiving a portrait of his mother:

Where once we dwelt, our name is heard no more,

Children not thine have trod my nursery floor;

And where the gard'ner Robin, day by day,

Drew me to school along the public way,

Delighted with my hauble coach, and wrapp'd

In scarlet mantle warm and velvet cap,

'Tis now become a history little known

That once we call'd the past'ral house our own.

"Robin" was the nickname of Robert Pope, the rector's gardener. The school Cowper attended, like his birthplace, has vanished. But it is not true that his name is "heard no more." Southey, in his "Life of Cowper," wrote that "this little town will be more known in after ages as the birthplace of Cowper than for its associations with so many historical personages who figured in the tragedies of old." This may have been an exaggeration, but the Rev. John Cobb, author of "The History of Berkhamsted," did much to arouse interest in the poet's local associations nearly a century ago, providing a marble slab to mark the site of "Cowper's well" in the rectory garden (now the well and slab, too, have vanished!) and raising funds for the beautiful Cowper window in St. Peter's Church.

At the same time the Mechanics' Institute commissioned a copy of a famous portrait of the poet, and this still hangs in the reading room.

Though we may deplore the lack of Cowper "relics" in Berkhamsted, one building he knew and loved still stands

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:—

December 1—7: Figg.
December 8—14: Dickman.
December 15—21: T aylors.
December 22—28: Boots.
December 29—January 4: Figg.
Christmas Day: Dickman.
Boxing Day: Figg.

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.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous column.)

in all its glory—St. Peter's Church. There he was baptised; indeed, the only reference to him in local parish records appears in the Register of Baptisms: "1731, Dec. ye 13, Willm ye son of John Cowper, D.D., rector of this Parish, and Anne his wife, was baptised."

In the church he buried his mother, grandmother, and five of his brothers and sisters. Perhaps one of the most interesting monuments is that which bears Lady Walsingham's tribute to Anne Cowper, "the best of mothers and the kindest wife," ending with the lines:

Whoe'er thou art, that dost this grave draw near,

Oh! stay a while, and shed a friendly tear;

These lines, though weak, are as herself sincere.

A simple epitaph; but William Cowper endorsed those sentiments in some of his finest lines.

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