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THE TOWN'S FIRST INHABITANTS

When the Romans Came

"How old is Berkhamsted?" This question was put to me recently by a schoolboy who was seeking material for an essay. He clearly expected a definite answer—preferably a famous date, such as 55 B.C. or A.D. 1066.

It was a very good question, but the answer was necessarily vague. No planners surveyed the Bulbourne valley and said: "This is just the place for a New Town." Nomads came and went, leaving or losing an axe-head or some other stone implement to be turned up, centuries later, by the fork or plough.

The earliest inhabitants of whom we have any record were perhaps those responsible for making the barrows on Dunstable Downs (1900-600 B.C.). Later, from 500 B.C. to A.D. 40, came the Celts and Belgae. They, too, left weapons and implements: a fragment of an iron sword and bronze scabbard were found in waterless beds at Broadway, and a bronze knife and ornamented iron lynch-pin at Wigginton, together with a coin of Cunobelinus (A.D. 10-42). Other Belgic coins have been found at Ashlins, the Cow Roast, on Moneybury Hill (above Aldbury) and at Tring.

AKEMAN STREET

But it was the building of Akeman Street which almost certainly led to the establishment of a permanent population. Later, in Anglo-Saxon days, the district was inhabited by more than a few families in widely-scattered farmsteads. An early township, still very small, came into being in the Bulbourne valley, probably at what we now call Northchurch.

What was Berkhamsted like before the Norman Conquest? Some writers have done their best to give local history a very early start by contending that it was the ancient Roman town of Durocobrivae. This "city of the marshy

stream", said to have been twelve miles from Verulamium, is mentioned in the second Antonine Itinerary, which deals with the journey from Verulamium (St. Albans) to Chester.

But would a Roman have started marching to Chester along Akeman Street, which would have taken him towards Bicester and Bath? Of course not. He would have proceeded along Watling Street, and he would almost certainly have found Durocobrivae where most historians think it stood: just outside the modern town of Dunstable.

DIGGING FOR EVIDENCE

In taking away from Berkhamsted a little Roman glory which the town never possessed, some later writers have gone to the opposite extreme by saying that our town was of no importance whatsoever in Roman days. For example, Mr. R. A. Norris, in his "History of Berkhamsted St. Peter's," says there is practically no evidence of any sort to show that there was ever any Roman settlement here.

Happily, archaeologists often step in where historians fear to tread. Thanks to the spadework of a band of enthusiasts, we know that Berkhamsted, if not important before the Norman Conquest, was certainly not uninhabited. And that is a very proper conclusion: it would be curious indeed if no development at all had followed the making of Akeman Street along the Bulbourne valley, just above the marsh which, centuries later, was drained as the water-level fell.

Many small settlements were scattered along this ancient Roman highway. At Boxmoor, for instance, the building of the railway in 1837 uncovered a Roman burial. Two large green glass vases and a small pitcher were found in the grave. In 1852-3, a well and two villas, one with a hypocaust and a tessellated pavement 16-ft. square, were also found at Boxmoor, with coins dating from the first or fourth centuries A.D.

At Berkhamsted's eastern approaches, ancient coins have been found in the garden of a house in Hillside Gardens and in the River Bulbourne, opposite New Lodge, not far from the ford where Akeman Street crossed the river.

RECENT FINDS

In the town a very interesting discovery was made some three years ago by an enthusiastic amateur archaeologist, Mr. J. A. Patrick. When land was being cleared for a house in Castle Hill Avenue, little more than a stone's throw from the railway station, he discovered many oyster shells (the Romans loved oysters) and brought to light pottery and other Roman remains. This fine piece of detective work was described by Mr. Patrick at a Local History Society meeting.

A few hundred yards farther along the Bulbourne valley, other Roman remains have been discovered. How

many people have heard of the five Samian bowls which were found in 1933 in an angle of the retort-house wall at the gasworks? Two have been preserved and identified as first and second century work.

But do not jump to the conclusion that the gasworks occupies the site of a Roman villa. This narrow strip of land between the canal and railway was almost certainly raised when soil from the canal and the railway tunnel and embankment was tipped on the site in 1800 and 1837. For all we know the railway obliterated for ever a Roman villa.

BY THE CANAL

Further Roman remains have been found on the little triangular field between the railway and the canal opposite St. John's Well Lane. A few years ago Messrs. J. Sayer, A. Burch and T. Gee, three young and very enthusiastic local amateur archaeologists, learned that many pieces of tile and brick, undoubtedly Roman, had been seen lying on the surface of the field. They made excavations to see if anything solid could be found.

Digging a series of 6-ft. square pits, they found, some 2-ft. below the surface of one square, an oyster shell, a few pieces of tile and three small nails. At the bottom of this level was what seemed to be a thin stamped chalk floor. Eventually it was decided that a full-scale investigation would not yield sufficiently interesting results to warrant further expenditure of time and effort.

USED FOR ROAD-MENDING

During or just after the First World War, a field behind the "Old Grey Mare" at Northchurch was ploughed up and a large quantity of Roman bricks, potshards and flints was turned up. According to Mr. E. Popple, these relics were afterwards used to make up the road to Norcott Court! Definite structures have now been destroyed, but it is felt that a certain amount of investigation on this site for small objects might yet prove rewarding. Among the first discoveries on this Northchurch site was a coin of A.D. 270.

Mr. G. H. Whybrow, in his "History of Berkhamsted Common," mentions another site discovered during the First World War. Fragments of Roman pottery were unearthed when the Inns of Court dug trenches at the Northchurch end of the Common. It was thought that these came from the refuse heap of a villa situated outside the boundary of the Common, and there may be some connection between this war-time find and some further discoveries made when alterations were being carried out at Norcott Hill Farm and House in the 1920's.

HOARD OF COINS

We are now moving outside the Berkhamsted district, but mention must be made of the discovery, in 1870, of a hoard of coins, dating from A.D. 50 to 270, on Moneybury Hill, between the Bridgewater Monument and the entrance to Duncombe Terrace. A short distance away, London rover scouts who spent their week-ends in the

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 28—January 3: Figg.
January 4—10: Dickman.
January 11—17: Taylor.
January 18—24: Booth.
January 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:—

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).

log cabin at the entrance to Duncombe Terrace started excavating, in 1937, the remains of a Roman building on the edge of Aldbury Common. They found an 18-ft. length of wall foundation, with returns at either end, a floor, tiles, tesserae, and six coins (A.D. 120-296). This building may have been a Roman temple.

For this information I have largely drawn upon papers prepared by Mr. John Sayer and Mr. Antony Burch, who have spent many arduous hours in the field and have collected information from many sources. The most interesting discovery has not been mentioned—a Roman villa on Berkhamsted Common, near Friethsden Beeches—and I hope to have an opportunity of discussing this further evidence of local Roman occupation in a later number of the Review.

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