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THE TOWN HALL AND MARKET HOUSE

Our Ancient Market

One hundred years ago the people of Berkhamsted watched and cheered as workmen demolished two old cottages in the High Street. A central site (not quite so central then as it is now) was cleared, and within a few months arose a building in the approved "Municipal Gothic" style of the period.

It had much in common with other public buildings of Victorian days: town halls, schools, and St. Pancras Station, with ecclesiastical windows and arches and sturdy chimneys. It was, in fact, Berkhamsted Town Hall and Market House.

There was no overhanging clock at first, but everything came in good time—even a drinking fountain and horse-trough, which, at the opening ceremony, was proclaimed as an aid to temperance in hard-drinking Berkhamsted.

The Town Hall was born of need, ambition, generosity, and civic pride. Its architecture may be mocked, but it is a familiar bit of old Berkhamsted which has something of the fussy charm of the period. I am more than a little fond of it.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Let us go back a century to a Berkhamsted which was far different in appearance and outlook from the town we know today. The High Street had lost its picturesque "coaching days" traffic, but more and more carts and wagons and gigs clattered over a roadway bordered by tall trees, good inns, quaint shops, and houses of every period from Tudor to Victorian.

The casual visitor found it a sleepy little town, though down in the valley there was activity around the railway station and canal wharves, which in those days served Chesham as well as Berkhamsted. Timber merchants were adopting steam power, and new industries (notably Mr. William Cooper's

chemical works) were taking workers off the land, though Berkhamsted was still largely agricultural. As the season ticket era had yet to arrive, few people anticipated rapid growth as a residential town, but already the Grammar School was attracting young families to the town. Gradually, gardens and fields off the High Street were making way for roads and houses.

NO MARKET HOUSE

Many shopkeepers hoped and believed the town would become a large industrial centre. There were so many signs of progress. We even had our streets lighted by gas, "just like London". And to people living in neighbouring villages Berkhamsted was indeed a little London, with a rising number of good shops and, biggest attraction of all, a market.

But Berkhamsted, in 1859, had been without a market house for five years. It was destroyed by fire in August, 1854. The loss of this building did not, of course, stop the market being held, but the absence of a market house was a blow to civic pride.

Even more serious was the lack of a good hall for meetings. Until a century ago Berkhamstedians had to be content with the Court House and the largest rooms available at inns and public-houses. Sometimes they were able to meet at the Grammar School or at the Church and Board Schools. But nowhere was it possible for a large number of people to meet in comfort, despite an 18th century writer's reference to "splendid assemblies."

THREE-FOLD PLAN

At this period, too, a progressive educational institution was hampered by restricted accommodation. The Mechanics' Institute, founded in Berkhamsted in 1843, had its first reading room on a site now occupied by part of Messrs. Sharland's store. As membership grew, moves were made to what was afterwards the Gardeners' Arms in Castle Street and later to a room in Mr. William Nash's yard, now occupied by the Civic Centre. And still the Institute needed larger premises.

So, in the late 'fifties, Berkhamsted wanted a market house, a town hall, and an adequate home for the Institute. To provide these three in one building

and, at a later date, their own Sessions Hall, which still bears its tell-tale name.

But the Town Hall was not to enjoy a monopoly for ever. Other large halls were built, and the police court was transferred to the Civic Centre. Although the Town Hall and Sessions Hall are still used for many gatherings—and they were never more useful than during the two World Wars—the years have taken their toll and the condition of the building now leaves much to be desired.

Conscious of their limited financial resources, the Town Hall and Market Rights Committee recently asked the Urban District Council to take over the management of the building. Thus a new and important chapter is about to be written in the history of the Town Hall.

A SUNDAY MARKET

Let us now untangle the threads of past history and go back to the early days of the market, which flourished four centuries before the first market house was built and more than six centuries before funds were raised for the Town Hall.

The market is even older than our parish church. As early as 1216 a decision was taken to change market day from Sunday to Monday. Was this greater respect for the Sabbath inspired by the building of the church? We know that our first rector was instituted in 1222.

Royal favours were bestowed upon Berkhamsted market. Edward IV, in his charter, decreed that no other market was to be set up in any village within eleven miles of Berkhamsted. James I, in his charter, granted the town an additional market day and two new annual fairs.

IN DECLINE

But privilege and prosperity did not always go hand in hand. When the Castle ceased to be a royal residence, towards the end of the 15th century, the trade of the town declined, and it appears that Berkhamsted's loss was a gain for the markets of Tring, Chesham and Hemel Hempstead.

Norden's Survey of 1616 tells us that the fair on St. James's Day was "much lesser than in former time"; the seven-day fair in May had been discontinued; and the weekly market (still held on Monday) was "almost quite overthrown". The "profits of the toll of the market and fayre" were meagre, the Survey stating: "Wee esteem them to be worth but £5 per annum and not much more . . . by reason of the Castle being decayed and . . . the inhabitants . . . not so plentifully

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6—7 p.m.) 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:—

August 30—September 5: Boots.
September 6—12: Figg.
September 13—19: Dickman
September 20—26: Taylors
September 27—October 3: Boots.

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 p.m.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous column.)

quarters and sometimes 250 or more quarters of all manner of grain, and a good store of cattle there every market day."

SHABBY—AND DECAYED

That was the melancholy situation in 1616. Hopes of recovering Berkhamsted's former trading importance were dashed less raised by James I's charter, for the burgesses were privileged to "keep a market on Thursday in every year besides ye ancient markett kept on Munday", and two new fairs, one on Shrove Munday and ye other on Whitsun Munday in every year besides ye ancient faire on St. James's Day."

* BEORCH

(To be continued)

W. W.

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ST. JAMES'S