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HISTORY OF THE TOWN HALL (3)

The Burning of the Market House

(In last month's issue 'Beorcham' related the early history of the old Market House, which stood at the top of Water Lane until 1854).

Old engravings do not suggest that the building was unsightly. "Quaint" would have been a kinder, more appropriate name. Indeed, the market house, if standing today, would be a minor tourist attraction, its photograph appearing in books and calendars and—who knows?—on railway posters.

It is difficult to understand why so many townspeople were ashamed of a building which was obviously a fitting neighbour to the "One Bell" and a half-timbered house which formerly occupied the Court Theatre site. But perhaps the market house was in an advanced state of decay and not nearly so smart and tidy as the engravings suggest. Incidentally, the building was destroyed some years before the town's first photographers were active; the earliest known photographs of local scenes date from 1860-1.

A model of the market house, fashioned from cork by a long-departed relative of the writer, is of some interest. Despised when it was a family heirloom, this model is now preserved at Berkhamsted School.

LONG MEMORIES

Many years have elapsed since old inhabitants could speak with first-hand knowledge of the market house. Twenty-five years ago, however, I interviewed Mrs. Charles Osborn on her 94th birthday and heard her describe it as a "crazy" old building under which she had bought cakes, sweets and fruit from the stalls of two Chesham traders, Mrs.

Dormer and Mr. Stone. She recalled that at one end of the building were steps leading to the upper chamber, where sacks of grain were stored before being sold in the market.

Mrs. Osborn said market days were great occasions when she was a girl. Stall-holders and buyers flocked in from all parts of the district, lining the High Street with their wagons and gigs. And at any time of the week old cronies loved to loiter and gossip beneath the upper chamber.

THE STOCKS

There was another feature of interest: the town stocks were set up outside the market house. Here the parish constable received a fee of one shilling every time he placed a "drunk" or some other petty offender in a place of conspicuous safety. By early Victorian times the stocks were used, unofficially, only when boys entered or left the Bourne charity school. This old school tradition delighted passers-by, if not the victims.

One man who deserved to be put in the stocks was a busybody who was not content to call the market house an eyesore. He tried to bring it to the ground, and succeeded only in making himself a figure of ridicule. Henry Nash tells the story in *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (1890): "He was accustomed to the use of the saw, and this he vigorously applied to some of the posts that supported the fabric. But eventually he had to abandon the task; he had not carefully considered the labour involved in cutting through some twenty oak posts filled with nails, the accumulation of ages."

THE NIGHT OF THE FIRE

But there was another and easier way of getting rid of the building—by fire. No one knows how the market house came to be reduced to ashes, but tongues wagged knowingly, or at least suspiciously, long after that hectic night of August 23, 1854, when distant viewers thought the whole town was ablaze. The upper chamber crashed among the stout posts which had supported it for over two centuries and a half, spraying sparks over neighbouring houses. The "One Bell" was lucky to escape destruction.

Having expressed strong views on the alleged eyesore, a prominent townsman was glad to have a perfect alibi: business had detained him many miles from Berkhamsted on the night of the fire. Other residents were suspected of arson, but the culprit, if there was one, was never found. It is reasonable to suggest that an accidental fire in a building of

this character was highly improbable in the middle of the night.

Before the debris had been cleared away, townspeople started discussing the question of replacing the market house. On October 20, 1854, only two months after the fire, a public meeting was held at the King's Arms Hotel, and it was agreed "to ask the concurrence of the Trustees of Ashridge Property in the construction of a Market House suitable to the increasing prosperity of the Town."

REBUILDING PLANS

No great headway was made until another public meeting was held on February 26, 1856. The following resolution was passed: "That it is the opinion of this meeting that a sum of money would be subscribed by the inhabitants of this Town, etc., towards making, over the Market House, Rooms for Magistrates' Meetings, Lectures, Mechanics' Institutes, etc., etc., provided that the owners and lessees would furnish a convenient plan and give them pecuniary assistance guaranteeing the use thereof to the Town for a period of 99 years at a Peppercorn Rent to be vested in the Churchwardens and Overseers for the time being. Proposed and carried that General Finch, Mr. Moore and the Rector be appointed a Committee to convey the above resolutions to the Duchy of Cornwall and the Guardians of Earl Brownlow."

As has already been stated, the trustees (owners of Ashridge) were lessees of the original market house, which was part of the possessions of the Duchy of Cornwall. They were bound by covenant to reinstate the building. After a conference with Lord Brownlow and his advisers, it was arranged that, in lieu of rebuilding the market house, his Lordship would subscribe £500 towards any larger scheme that might be agreed upon. And so, after many meetings, it was resolved to embark upon a threefold plan to provide a market house, town hall, and rooms for the Mechanics' Institute.

THE NEW SITE

A contemporary writer claimed that opposition to rebuilding on the old site was unanimous. That was not so. A pamphlet published shortly after the town hall was opened, to which reference will be made later, shows that the scheme adopted was savagely criticised.

The new site was obtained at a cost of £825 by William Hazell, the town's leading grocer. He played a great part in local affairs, held the office of surveyor, and was chief promoter of the Gas and Water Companies. If Hazell is remembered today, however, it is because he was lampooned by *Punch* for siding with Lord Brownlow in the enclosure of Berkhamsted Common.

The townspeople responded generously to an appeal for subscriptions. In addition to the £500 given by Lord Brownlow, Lady Marion Alford gave £200; the Hon. General Finch £400; Col. and Mrs. Smith-Dorrien £150; Mr. Joseph Robinson £150; Messrs. Thomas Curtis, Frank John Moore and Thomas

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:—

November 1-7: Figg.

November 8-14: Dickman.

November 15-21: Taylors.

November 22-28: Boots.

November 29-December 5: 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 p.m.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous columns).

Whateley £100 each. There were also 147 subscribers whose gifts ranged from £1 to £50. Altogether, voluntary subscriptions amounted to £2,610.

The building cost £3,291, and an additional sum was required to furnish the rooms. The deficit was met partly by a bazaar in the Castle grounds which raised £575, partly by a loan without security, and partly by debentures.

Work on the building started in 1859, and the opening ceremony took place in August, 1860, almost exactly six years after the old market house was burnt down.

'BEORCHAM'

(To be continued)

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