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HISTORY OF THE TOWN HALL (4)

The Committee Attacked

(In last month's article 'Beorcham' referred to the opening of the Town Hall and Market House in 1860.)

Rare is the new public building which pleases everybody. A small minority of the townspeople found fault with the site, the building, and the money-raising efforts. Everything the promoters did was wrong, but while the work was in progress they were unruffled by the critics.

What they thought of the spite and venom that were unleashed soon after the opening ceremony can only be imagined. The cheering had scarcely died away when a curious pamphlet was circulated. It was dated August 29, 1860. The printer prudently withheld his name and address, and so did the author. After the lapse of nearly a century we have no means of unmasking the anonymous gentleman, but we may be sure his identity was known to most of the townspeople. Besides holding strong views he obviously had an intimate knowledge of local affairs.

FALSE COLOURS

First, the managing committee came under fire for exceeding the financial limit to which they had originally pledged themselves, particularly for resorting to "a system of begging, toy-selling and Aunt-Sallying, until their patience and the pockets of the public are nearly exhausted."

Then comes a statement that the site selected was "strongly objected to by so many of the old residents of the town, 32 of whom sent a Memorial to Ashridge (who by lease from the Crown are owners), praying the Market House might be re-erected on the old site, in

the best business part of the town, and not where it now stands.

"But the Memorial was not attended to, and one or two individuals, who were determined to carry the Market away from those persons' property, made excuse that they did so 'to get it away from the Public-House' (these being the words of the principal mover); but this proved to have been only a ruse, for it appears that now, before the Market House is open for business, the Committee, or a portion of them, are making arrangements to turn out an old Tenant from the School Property adjoining, of which they are Trustees, the value of which is about £30 per annum, for the purpose of building a Public-House, and it is presumed they have promised a Licence, as they have it in their power to do so.

"This is sailing a little under false colours, and to all honest-minded men must seem unneighbourly to those, whose Property in the locality of the old Market House must be depreciated."

SELF INTEREST

Here we have an admission of self-interest on the part of the objectors, who, it seems, were men with businesses near the "One Bell". They feared that the town centre would move westward with the Town Hall, though events proved they had little or nothing to worry about. The pamphleteer was quite correct, however, in forecasting a new public-house next door to the Town Hall; an old cottage on School property, shown in a photograph of 1860-1, was soon to be replaced by the "White Hart."

Now for some more complaints. The critic of 1860 continued: "With respect to the appearance and position of the new Building, it looks more like a Chapel for any professor of the High Church fraternity, and to have sunk already, like such professors, a foot or two in the ground.

"The cellar dug out for stowing away corn, like the w.c.'s in the centre, is rather out of order. The entrance is very much too far from the road for loading or unloading corn, or for carriages to draw up, and persons to alight, without being exposed on the pathway; on the night of the opening, ladies left a hot-filled room to run about a cold pavement to get to their carriages.

"Had a suitable building been put on the old site, or over the one proposed, adjoining the King's Arms Hotel, carriages could have drawn up to the very door. At the latter place is also a public road, or thoroughfare, leading to meadows, suitable for market purposes."

OUT OF CHARACTER

The "public road or thoroughfare" was Snob's Alley, the entrance to which was a covered gateway which could not

have been used by very large or very tall vehicles. In 1860 there was a continuous row of buildings all the way from Chesham Road to the Red Lion Yard, and if the site suggested had been used for the market house it would have been necessary to pull down a shop abutting on Mr. Noel Sandall's premises many years before it was demolished to permit the making of Prince Edward Street.

Returning once more to the pamphlet, we have this interesting summing-up: "Altogether, the new Building is placed in the worst position for business or convenience; and it is much to be regretted that a few influential people should have succeeded, against the wishes of a large body of inhabitants, in draining their pockets to help them to erect a building quite out of character for the legitimate requirements of a Market House, which, belonging to the 'Duchy,' would have been more satisfactory had it been kept free of Reading Rooms, Police Rooms, and all the other little Rooms that are now attached, and which could have been placed independently, as the property of the Town, where the whole row now stands, or in some other convenient situation where it would be useful and a credit to the inhabitants of Great Berkhamsted."

THE TRUSTEES

The original trustees, in 1860, were Earl Brownlow, the Rev. J. Hutcheson (rector), Mr. R. Algernon Smith-Dorrien, and Mr. Frank John Moore. They were appointed by the subscribers to hold the property in trust for the

benefit of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted St. Peter.

It was laid down that when these trustees were reduced to two, new trustees, who were to be inhabitants of Berkhamsted or Northchurch, were to be appointed at a meeting of subscribers; but if willing to act the three following were always to be appointed: the owner of Ashridge, the Rector of Berkhamsted, and the owner of Haresfoot, the full number of trustees being four.

According to the trust deeds, all moneys received from rents, etc., were to form one general fund and be paid over to the Town Hall Committee and applied in the first place in payment of rates, repairs, insurance and expenses incurred in cleaning and lighting the property, etc.; in the next place, after repayment of a loan, in improving and decorating the property and the purchase of furniture and works of art and instruction, and the ultimate surplus, if any, for the benefit of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted as should be decided by annual or special general meeting.

THE COMMITTEE

The Committee, in 1860, consisted of all subscribers of £100 and upwards and, in addition, twelve members (elected by subscribers) who were inhabitants of Berkhamsted or Northchurch and subscribers of not less than £1. The proviso was made that when these electors were reduced to 50, the electors were to consist of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted and Northchurch who were rated for Poor Rate at £10 and upwards. For

very many years the committee has consisted only of the twelve elected members (in addition to the trustees, who are empowered to attend). Four members retire annually in rotation, and are, of course, eligible for re-election. An annual general meeting of electors is laid down in the trusts, and a special general meeting may be called by any ten inhabitants entitled to vote by applying to the committee and stating in writing the object of the meeting.

The trust deeds are extremely interesting, and Berkhamsted is unusual, if not unique, in possessing a Town Hall which is not directly controlled by the local authority. The method of electing the committee has from time to time been criticised and even described as undemocratic, but today very few householders indeed are debarred from voting by the "rated at £10 and upwards" regulation.

A suggestion that the Town Hall and Market House should be handed over to the Urban District Council was made as early as 1913, when a committee was appointed by the Council to examine the trust deeds.

'BEORCHAM'

(To be concluded)

Early in the New Year it is hoped to reprint this series of articles in booklet form, with illustrations. 'Beorcham' trusts that his attention will be drawn immediately to any errors or omissions which have occurred in these articles.

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