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HISTORY OF THE TOWN HALL (5)

In Victorian Days

As early minute books have been lost, we know little of the affairs of the Town Hall Committee in Victorian days. One imagines there were few major crises. Anyone who hoped to attract a large audience automatically booked the Town Hall—there was no other large hall for miles around—and this monopoly must have helped the committee's finances. Profits were sufficient to permit the original debentures to be redeemed from time to time; the final repayment was made in 1887.

Not that the days of borrowing were over. In 1888 the committee purchased two shops on the west side of the Town Hall, and ground at the rear of the hall on which the Sessions Hall (and the Institute recreation rooms below) were built in 1890. The cost was met by issuing debentures to the total amount of £2,100, which were repaid when the shops were sold by public auction a few years ago, the balance being added to the Town Hall funds.

The 70-years-old Sessions Hall retains its name, though it has not been used for magistrates' courts since the Civic Centre was opened in 1938.

THE TOWN HALL CLOCK

Only slight alterations were made to the rear of the main building when the Sessions Hall was added, and the façade of the Town Hall was unchanged until a gable was added to support one of Berkhamsted's most familiar sights, the Town Hall clock. It was erected by public subscription as a memorial to Thomas Read, a prominent local businessman, who served for many years as honorary surveyor. He died in 1897.

It may not be widely known that the cost of maintaining the clock is borne

not by the Town Hall Committee, but by the Urban District Council, as custodians on behalf of the town.

LOOKING BACK

How fascinating it would be if photographs were available of even a few of the thousands of events which were held in the Town and Sessions Hall in Victorian days!

Perhaps the next best thing is to climb into the tiny gallery of the Town Hall, opposite the ornate mantelpiece with the town's coat of arms and the inscription: "This hall was erected AD 1859." (It was opened in 1860). Here one may sit and, perhaps, imagine the splendour of bygone hunt balls, the jollity of public banquets, the rowdiness of political meetings, the earnestness of "penny readings" and spelling bees, and, in the adjacent hall, the horrors of police court cases at which a ten-years-old girl could be sent to St. Albans gaol for ten days and then to a reformatory for five years, for stealing a piece of suet.

But let us think of happier things. There was life—night-life, too—in Berkhamsted when 200 inhabitants danced "with spirit" to the music of Coote and Tinney's Band from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. What a wonderful name for a band-leader: Tinney!

DINNERS AND PLAYS

And how pleasant it is to pick up a faded menu card and think of the sumptuous dinners given at the Town Hall by the Cooper family to their employees at the chemical works. This was the bill of fare in 1895: roast turkey, goose, chicken, pork, veal, beef, sucking pigs; plum pudding, rhubarb tart, apple tart, mince pies, blancmange, tippy cake, jellies; cheese, celery; dessert. Who could have failed to go home happy and patriotic after Mr. C. J. Gilbert had sung "Dear Homeland" and a hundred and more voices had chorused "God Save the Queen"?

Then there were performances by the old Berkhamsted Drama Company, of which Major Foster, the brewer, was president, and Sergeant-Major Ballam the acting manager. "Meg's Diversion" (a drama in two acts) and "Leave it to Me" (a farce in one act) were as good as a London show. The local critics said so as they waited for "carriages at 10.30."

LARGE AUDIENCES

It was as easy to pack the Town Hall for a lecture as it was for a play or concert. The committee of the Berkhamsted (Mechanics') Institute—tenants of the Town Hall Committee for nearly a century—knew this when they exercised their right to use the Town Hall several times a year without extra charge.

They paid George Grossmith three and-a-half guineas for a lecture and reading from "David Copperfield" in 1863. By 1890 they were able to offer Sir Robert Ball, the astronomer and mathematician, a fee of 10 guineas for a lecture. "Penny readings" regularly attracted over 300 people, and even a spelling bee was capable of producing a profit of £8 10s. in 1876.

EXHIBITIONS

But the Institute's greatest effort in those days was the promotion of trade and art exhibitions. In 1863, "works of art, objects of science, articles of curiosity and productions of local manufacture" were seen by 2,500 people. Later, the whole of the Town Hall building, including the market house, was needed to accommodate the exhibits. Every encouragement was given to amateur artists and craftsmen, and prizes and medals were awarded on a lavish scale.

At the exhibition of 1886, opened by Earl Brownlow and lasting for ten days, electric light was brought into practical use for the first time in Berkhamsted, to the amazement of 5,000 visitors. But many years were to elapse before the Town Hall was regularly lit by electricity.

The last exhibition, held in 1896 and opened by the Marchioness of Salisbury, wife of the Prime Minister, resulted in a deficit of £1 2s. 1d. Perhaps that was why no further exhibitions were promoted by the Institute.

IN MODERN TIMES

In the Twentieth Century the Town Hall and neighbouring rooms have been the scene of activities no Victorian

could have envisaged: classrooms for evacuated children, synagogue, British Restaurant, food office, public library, and parcels sorting office for the Post Office. And, of course, hundreds and hundreds of meetings, concerts, dances. Not so many, perhaps, as in late Victorian days, for other large halls are now available in the town.

That is one of the reasons why the Town Hall Committee has had doubts and misgivings in recent years. The income is no longer sufficient to maintain the ageing premises in good order. A great deal of money was spent on a new floor for dancing, but few people want to dance in the Town Hall. A new stage was provided at considerable cost, but few people want to act in the Town Hall.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE

And now there is renewed talk of handing over the Town Hall to the Urban District Council. In the past this suggestion has come from townspeople who thought the Town Hall should be controlled by the Council. What is new is the fact that the Town Hall Committee itself has made overtures to the Council.

What should be done? The writer is concerned here only with history and ventures no personal opinion. It is interesting, however, to note that the current controversy is an instance of history repeating itself, for a transfer to the local authority was doubtless in the minds of the Urban District Council when, in 1913, they received a report from a committee appointed to examine the trust deeds of the Town Hall.

Forty-seven years ago their conclusions were that the trust was being

administered in conformity with the scheme laid down. They realized that the Town Hall could not be handed over to any other authority except by a new trustee deed, which would probably have to receive the approval of the Charity Commissioners and the Courts after a strong expression of opinion by a general meeting of electors and trustees. The Council established, too, that those really possessing "rights" were "the ratepayers of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, rated for Poor Rate at £10 and upwards, and their 'right' is substantially a right to appoint, from among themselves, a committee of twelve to administer the Town Hall property for the benefit of the inhabitants of Berkhamsted St. Peter."

Whatever happens in the near or distant future, it may be appropriate to end our survey by quoting these words of Henry Nash, written in 1889: "It would be difficult to estimate the real benefit which this building has conferred upon the town during the 29 years that it has been in use. One cannot but feel grateful to those liberal-minded men who, seeing a great want exist, provided for it, and secured it to the town for ever."

* BEORCHAM *

Unemployment statistics presented to the Berkhamsted Council showed that on 9th December there were 41 men and women registered in the Berkhamsted and Tring areas, compared with 59 in November and 73 at the corresponding date last year.

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