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BERKHAMSTED'S ANCIENT MONUMENT

The Story of the Castle

Famous for its history, and well worth seeing for its earthworks, Berkhamsted Castle attracted 5,200 visitors in 1959. The following article (to be continued in next month's *Review*) is taken from "A Short History of Berkhamsted" which will be published by "Beorcham" later this year.

Every day railway passengers glimpse the mighty earthworks, ruined walls and green turf of Berkhamsted Castle. They survey the scene from a high embankment built on part of the outer defences, an embankment which unfortunately hides a view of the Castle from the old town which grew up outside the moats.

Most Berkhamstedians are proud of this ancient monument, though we seldom go there save to attend a fete or to accompany week-end guests who wish to see the sights of the town.

Until thirty years ago the outer earthworks were a children's playground, a lovers' trysting place, and a favourite promenade of older folk. In hard winters skating on the moats attracted hundreds of people.

A POPULAR RESORT

Tall trees and dense undergrowth covered the earthworks, poor quality watercress grew in the shallow water, ivy clung to the masonry. The Castle seemed so romantic in those days, especially to boys with bows and arrows who imagined they were defending the stronghold for the Black Prince.

But the Black Prince would have recognised more easily the earthworks as they are today. Since taking over the site on behalf of the Duchy of Cornwall, H.M. Office of Works has cleared much of the timber. The moats are hygienic, the walls are protected from further decay, and the turf has never looked lovelier.

After crossing the modern causeway to the keeper's lodge and paying a modest entrance fee, visitors are often disappointed by the scanty remains. All that survives of the stonework are stretches of flint walling, in some places 20 ft. high. Even now they give an impression of strength, though one ruined wall looks very much like another. Gone are the great painted hall, the three-storeyed tower, the chapel, various chambers, stables, gateways and bridges. The original main entrance, incidentally, faced Castle Street.

TOWER HILL

It is rewarding to climb the motte,

popularly called Tower Hill, though today we see only the foundations of the circular keep. Here, high above the last ditch, at the ultimate point of retreat, are remains of a fireplace and a staircase. A beleaguered garrison would have been tormented by the sight of the encircling water, so near and yet so far from the keep. That was why they sank a well through the man-made mount; it was beautifully lined with stone, as we see to this day.

From this 45 ft. high viewpoint we survey the handiwork of men who slaved, slithered and sweated in the marsh to create one of the most interesting earthwork systems in the country. It is perhaps easier to think of these humble toilers, whose work survives, than to conjure up visions of the kings, queens, princes, archbishops, great nobles and judges who once lived in the vanished buildings.

The Castle was built in an unhealthy marsh that was often wrapped in fog or mist, and in summer plagued by insects. Springs fed the moats, but stagnation and evil smells were inevitable. Strategically the site had no great value, though the water defences were generally good. But even in early days, long before pumping lowered the water table, the springs dried up occasionally and grass grew in the ditches. At least five grants were made to individuals for cutting the grass. Additional supplies of water may have been obtained by damming the Bulbourne, but there is no evidence to support a theory that a stream flowed through the Park, entering the moats from the north.

THE CASTLE'S ORIGIN

The massive earthen bastions on the north and east side of the outer earthworks are said to have been thrown up to create platforms from which missiles were hurled against the Castle in the siege of 1216. But would it have been possible to build these bastions in fourteen short December days? And would the garrison have allowed the work to proceed unhindered?

How old is the Castle? This is a more important question. Nothing visible



An artist's impression of Berkhamsted Castle in 1787

today can be attributed to a pre-Norman stronghold at which William the Conqueror, having crossed the Thames at Wallingford and ridden through the Chiltern gap, received the offer of the English Crown. Some historians believe, however, that it was on the site of the Castle where William met the Saxon nobles.

The earthworks we see today were probably started in the latter part of the 11th century, during the tenure of Robert, Count of Mortain, who was granted Berkhamsted, with many other

estates, by William I, his half-brother.

RAZED AND REBUILT

This earth-walled, stockaded Castle was razed when Robert Mortain's son William rebelled against Henry I and lost his estates. The Castle was rebuilt in stone, and the oldest masonry now surviving is thought to date from 1155-65, when Thomas à Becket held the Castle as Chancellor. Building on a considerable scale took place at this time; carriage of stone cost £5 7s. 7d., then a large sum, and £8 was spent on two lime kilns. One of the charges made

against Thomas à Becket when he fell from royal favour was that he spent too much on Berkhamsted Castle; a century later documents still mentioned "Sir Thomas's Chamber."

Within the great curtain walls, bulging with half-round towers, were motley buildings. All were constantly in need of repair. In the unsettled state of the country towards the end of John's reign an order was given to strengthen the fortifications with timber, and shortly after the King's death the defences were put to the test.

Prince Louis, the French Dauphin, hoped to gain the Crown of England by leading the barons to victory against the King. But the garrison raised the drawbridge and, led by a German, resisted assaults led by a Frenchman. The barons, encamped on Whitehill, used mangonels to hurl stones against the Castle. During a fortnight's siege the garrison made spirited sallies, seizing chariots and provisions, carrying off a banner, throwing the camp into confusion at dinner time, and disarming the barons as they sat at table.

On the fifteenth day the defenders surrendered and were spared their lives, goods and houses. In the end their cause triumphed, for the Frenchman was driven from the land and Henry III sat firmly on the throne.

The war-damaged Castle was repaired and improved. In 1254 Richard, Earl of Cornwall, built a three-storeyed tower, covered with lead. A later document (1269) refers to the chamber of the King and Queen, the chapel of the Queen, and the chamber of the nurse.

"BEORCHAM"
(To be continued).

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