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The Black Prince's Home

(Last month "Beorcham" related the early history of Berkhamsted Castle.)

In 1269 various repairs were made to the barbican, and the lead of the great tower and turret above the sally port was renewed.

Reports of serious dilapidations came in 1327. A great part of the stone barbican was "thrown down" and two wooden bridges were ruinous. The curtain wall and ten turrets needed repair. Houses with tiled roofs within the arena were in a bad state. Nine years later the great tower was split in two places and needed a new roof. In 1361 the Castle was put in order for a very important prisoner-of-war, King John of France.

HOME OF ROYALTY

The Castle, strong yet constantly in need of repair, lasted for four centuries. It sheltered many of the greatest personages of the land; if any famous man of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did not visit Berkhamsted, he was at least aware of the importance of the Castle.

Many grants of the honour, manor and castle were made to favourite courtiers; but there were long and short periods when members of the Royal Family, and sometimes the entire Royal Family, were in residence. Three kings granted charters to the little town beyond the Castle walls, and both the Black Prince and Edward IV's mother, Cicely Duchess of York, were here long enough to be closely identified with the town.

Of the courtiers we have good reason to remember Geoffrey Fitz Piers for founding two hospitals in the town, and Edmund Earl of Cornwall for founding Ashridge Monastery. Fitz Piers was one of the Great Barons who paid £100 a year for the Castle in King John's reign; Edmund was the son of Richard Earl of Cornwall (afterwards King of the Romans), to whom the Castle was given by his half-brother Henry III.

THE DUCHY OF CORNWALL

Edmund died without issue, and the Castle passed to the notorious Piers Gaveston, who was married at Berkhamsted. He is said to have played pitch-and-toss with the King on Berkhamsted Common! After a few months he lost Berkhamsted Castle, and a few

years later he lost his head. He, too, had been created Earl of Cornwall, and a few years after his death the title was once again revived for John of Eltham (brother of Edward III), who held the Castle until his death in 1336.

From early Norman times Berkhamsted had been associated with the Earldom of Cornwall. Now it was to become one of the possessions of the Duchy of Cornwall. In 1336 Prince Edward, the young son of Edward III, was created the first Duke of Cornwall, and was granted Berkhamsted (with other estates) "to hold to him and the heirs of him and the eldest sons of the heirs of the kings of England and the dukes of the said place for ever."

The first duke is better known as the Black Prince, and for all his faults we remember him with affection, for Berkhamsted was his favourite home. Of all the great personages who lived at the Castle, none was better known to the townspeople than the Black Prince.

THE PRINCE'S HENCHMEN

From Berkhamsted he took seven "picked men"—probably youths like himself, who had practised archery in Butts Meadow—to fight the French at Crécy. His marshal was Henry de Berkhamstead, whose perquisites included the right to have all the litter when the Castle was spring-cleaned and all the manure from the stables. Another of the prince's henchmen was Sir John Raven, who lived on Whitehill and is represented as a figure in armour in St. Peter's Church.

To his father's displeasure the Black Prince married his cousin Joan (the Fair Maid of Kent), and the honeymoon was spent at Berkhamsted. Here the couple entertained the whole Royal Family for five days, so the King could not have been wholly dismayed by the marriage.

The prince returned again and again to Berkhamsted, and each time his retainers were a little more alarmed by changes in his appearance and manner. He became harsh, prematurely aged, and obviously ill. At the age of 46 he left Berkhamsted for the last time and died after a painful journey to Westminster. His bequests included "our

great table of gold and silver, all full of precious reliques," to the high altar of Ashridge.

During the reign of Richard II, son of the Black Prince, Geoffrey Chaucer was clerk of the works, but as this was one of many similar appointments we cannot be sure that he ever came to Berkhamsted.

CICELY OF YORK

Last of our royal residents was Cicely Duchess of York, who was granted the Castle by her son Edward IV in 1469. This remarkable lady, grand-daughter of John of Gaunt, united by her marriage with Richard Duke of York the rival houses of Lancaster and York. She lived to see four of her descendants crowned—her sons Edward IV and Richard III, her grand-daughter Elizabeth (Queen of Henry VII), and her grandson Edward V. And four of her descendants came to untimely deaths; the Duke of Clarence, drowned in a butt of wine; Richard III, who fell on Bosworth Field; and her grandsons Edward and Richard, who were smothered in their beds at the Tower.

"Orders and Rules of the Princess Cecill" tell us that she rose at seven and attended one religious service after another, with intervals for private prayer, meals, and "honest myrthe" with her gentlewomen before retiring "by eights of the clocke." Four times a year proclamation was to be made "about Berkhamsted in market townes to understand whether the purveyors, cators and other make true paymente of my ladyes money or not, and also to

understand by the same whether my ladyes servants make true payment of their owne debts or not; and if any default be founde, a remedy to be had forthwith for a recompense."

One of her servants was the father of John Incent, founder of Berkhamsted School.

Cicely died in 1495. The servants departed, and no one took their place. The wind whistled over the curtain walls and soon the roofs started caving in. It was a ghostly place, no longer visited by great personages but by builders who helped themselves to the masonry and timbers, rapidly hastening the decay of a famous royal residence. By the time Leland came to Berkhamsted, some forty years after the Castle was abandoned, it was "much in ruine."

LATER HISTORY

Later centuries were unkind to the Castle. No one thought of preserving it as an ancient monument until it was too late to identify even the sites of the different buildings, though it is generally agreed that the important royal chambers and the chapel were on the west side. An early 19th century visitor wrote: "Parts are covered with underwood, in many places so thick as to be impassable. The inner court is now an orchard; the outer court is cultivated as a farm; and a small cottage, with a few outbuildings, now occupy a portion of the ground occupied by Princes and Sovereigns."

During the first World War the Castle grounds were used as a gunnery school by the Inns of Court O.T.C. In the

second World War several famous statues from the streets of London were evacuated to the Castle.

In 1922 and 1931 successful historical pageants were staged in the grounds, and it would be appropriate to repeat the performances in 1966 to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the surrender at Berkhamsted of the English Crown to William the Conqueror.

Some interesting discoveries were made when H.M. Office of Works took over the site in 1930. Six years later the then Prince of Wales (now the Duke of Windsor) visited the Castle, the first Duke of Cornwall to see his manor of Berkhamsted since 1616.

"BEORCHAM"

(This and the preceding article will appear in "A Short History of Berkhamsted," to be published by "Beorcham" later this year. The author will appreciate criticisms and corrections at this stage.)

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