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"MODERN COMFORTS" ARE REALLY MODERN!

Government by Vestry

Few people realise how modern are many of the public services we now take for granted.

Men alive today can remember a Berkhamsted without main drainage or sewerage. Until the Great Berkhamstead Water Works Company was formed in 1864 we had no piped water; at first this was supplied to a very small number of houses, and taste was the accepted method of testing the purity of the well water used by many inhabitants. Lack of water often hampered the fire brigade, whose small manual engine was kept in St. Peter's Church. (Thirty years ago we were still using a horse-drawn fire engine.)

Until the Gas Company was formed in 1849 we had no street lamps. Even in broad daylight it was unpleasant to cross a High Street into which sewage flowed from badly constructed cesspits and manure heaps.

ONE FULL-TIME OFFICIAL

To keep law and order two ratepayers served as parish constables in the early part of the 19th century. Like other unpaid, part-time officials they were appointed annually. The only full-time official in the town, until relatively modern times, was the workhouse master.

We must not judge the past by present standards. Berkhamsted was no worse than any other town, and it always had its full share of public-spirited residents.

After losing its borough status early in the reign of Charles II, Berkhamsted was administered by the Vestry, the only popular assembly, other than the House of Commons and borough councils, with authority to impose taxation. All ratepayers had the right to participate in parochial business, a right accompanied by the duty to serve as churchwardens, constables, overseers of the poor, and surveyors of highways.

STURDILY INDEPENDENT

Local records suggest that the Berkhamsted Vestry was cautious yet kindly, honest and sturdily independent. When the squire was thought to have exceeded his powers, the "city fathers" protested to the King. When the master of the Grammar School neglected his duties, the Vestry took legal action.

From Elizabethan times the parish was compelled by Parliament to maintain the aged and incapacitated poor and to

provide work for unemployed able-bodied men. Here, as elsewhere, overseers of the poor collected the poor rate and relieved the poor at their own discretion. A workhouse had to be provided, and for many years it was a wretched, straw-thatched hovel, on the site of Park View School. In addition, old cottages were acquired to shelter pauper families. Many poor people lived in Ragged Row, at the bottom of Kitsbury Road, and one family lived rent-free in a cottage which actually adjoined St. Peter's Church, on the site of the present war memorial. Originally the parish clerk's house, it was demolished in 1826 "to open up the west entrance to the church."

THE WORKHOUSE

Many pages could be written about the workhouse, its masters, and its inmates. There was a time when 300 poor persons wore "P.B." (Poor of Berkhamsted) badges; when the overseers decreed that not more than six children were to be apprenticed to each chimney sweep; when they declined a sea captain's offer to take unwanted boys to America at a cost of £5 each; when a young girl was loaned 6s., "to be returned out of her wages" when she required "cloathes" to go out to service.

Full of interesting items, too, is the constables' "book of accmpts." for the years 1748-1819: a gift of 8d. to "an old soldier 91 years of age"; 3s. 6d. to John Pudd for "whipping a man at the stocks" in 1815; 2s. 6d. for "taking Rowland and sitting up with him all night at Kings Arms"; 1s. 8d. for "serving five summons on persons for short weight."

Early in the 19th century the so-called "Open Vestry" was still all-powerful. Then, in 1819, came the Select Vestry, with power to elect a committee to administer Poor Law.

GEORGE NUGENT'S GIFT

In the lean, bitter years which followed the Napoleonic Wars the Vestry was not too preoccupied with out-relief to overlook the need for a new workhouse. In 1824 they favoured building on Berkhamsted Common, next door to the pest house, but nothing came of this plan. Seven years later more determined efforts were made and a workhouse financed largely by the £1,000 gift of a

retired clergyman, George Nugent, was built on the land previously occupied by Ragged Row.

This workhouse was intended to serve Berkhamsted only, but after the administration of poor relief was transferred to boards of guardians in 1834, the new building was used for the poor of a number of parishes, or "union." It stood for 100 years, and towards the end of its life was known as Nugent House. A few years before the second World War the huge, gaunt building was pulled down and replaced by flats and shops.

In 1824 Vestry decided that overseers of the poor should also be stone-wardens, with the duty of maintaining footpaths in good condition. At the same time three tradesmen were appointed "to value the houses, wharves and buildings of every description to secure a more equal assessment thereof to the parochial taxes." Another entry of this period tells us that parishioners were liable to be prosecuted if they continued to "throw slops and other nuisances on the footpaths or roads."

THE PEST HOUSE

It was not surprising that infectious diseases were rife. Every parish had its pest house; the one on the Common, near Potten End, was built in 1773. As late as 1856 it was let on condition that the tenant received any case of infectious disease "that the parish, or a medical practitioner, may think fit to send thither."

From time to time the Vestry was shorn of its functions, and towards the

end of its life as a non-ecclesiastical unit it was outdated and unenterprising, hampered by limited powers and by self-styled economists who, even in late Victorian times, violently opposed expenditure on modern sewerage and drainage.

To keep down the rates appeals were often made for voluntary subscriptions to finance new services. This expedient was adopted in 1788, when the cost of a new fire engine (£58 15s.) was oversubscribed by £6. Our first street lamps—posts, brackets and piping were provided by public subscriptions and it was merely necessary to pay for gas and maintenance out of the rates. (Originally we had 33 street lamps; now we have over 600.) More striking examples of public generosity were the raising of thousands of pounds for the Town Hall and for the making of a new road to the railway station, Lower King's Road. Not a penny was charged to ratepayers.

THE URBAN COUNCIL

In 1898 the Vestry was replaced by the Urban District Council. Mr. David Osborn, the first chairman, headed the poll with 346 votes. The electorate was small, and 169 votes sufficed to gain a seat for the twelfth man, Mr. W. Chilton, who narrowly escaped being among the four unsuccessful candidates. The first council meeting was held in the Workhouse, and the general district rate of 3s. 6d. in the £ for the half-year was thought so excessive that a ratepayers' association was hastily formed.

Yet only a very mean ratepayer could have complained that salaries were

extravagant. The clerk and rate collector each received £50 per annum, and £73 was paid to Mr. Adey for combining the duties of sanitary inspector, surveyor, and inspector of dairies and canal boats.

In 1898 the urban district consisted of 1,035 acres and the population was about 5,000. The boundaries were twice extended: in 1909, when Sunnyside was absorbed, and in 1935, when a large part of Northchurch came under the control of the Urban Council. On each occasion the number of councillors was increased by three, to make the present total of eighteen. The area of the district is now 1,982 acres, the population is over 12,000, and the rateable value is over £200,000.

"BERCHAM"

Musical Successes

Associated Board Piano exams:—Grade I, Jennifer Harvey, 31 Meadow Road and Colin Bayliss, 10 North Road. Grade II, Mary Collier, 31 Bridgewater Road. Theory of Music: Grade I, Margaret Hamilton, 14 Bridgewater Road, with 96 marks out of 99. Grade IV, Heather Riley, 21 Ashllys Road, with 93 out of 99.

In the Children Festival Competitive Piano Classes, Gillian Lancaster, 38 Kings Road, was the winner in the 13-15 age group, in which there were 18 competitors. Pupils of Mabel A. Marriott, L.R.A.M.

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