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In the Heart of the Town

Speculation about the future of the Court Theatre has awakened many memories of early days of the cinema in Berkhamsted.

Older folk often chuckle about "The Gem," still standing in all its corrugated iron glory in Cowper Road, and now used as a warehouse for gas appliances. The pay-box is still there, though nearly fifty years have elapsed since anyone paid a few coppers to see what were appropriately called "the flickers." The single projector was apt to break down, and on many occasions the admission price was refunded.

Next came the Berkhamsted Picture Playhouse in Prince Edward Street. We thought it a very sumptuous place, and the pianist and violinist had to work hard to compete with our applause as pictures of Tommies in the trenches came on the screen. The Picture Playhouse (now the King's Hall) functioned until a Thursday evening in March, 1917; two days later the Court Theatre opened its doors.

OPENING NIGHT

As a small boy I had a front seat at the opening performance, and was so thrilled by the magnificent surroundings to worry about the newly whitewashed screen, which was still damp and grey.

Those were the days! We paid 2½d. to attend the Saturday matinee, and the price sometimes included an orange or a bag of sweets. It was the age of slapstick comedy and thrilling serials. To see how the hero escaped from crocodiles or how the heroine was rescued when an express train was only half a yard away, we had to pay 2½d. the following Saturday.

But enough of these trifling reminiscences. As a local historian I should devote my space to the building which preceded the Court Theatre and to the oddly assorted houses, shops and factories which formerly stood in the heart of the town.

Before the "Court" was built the site was partly occupied by a half-timbered building, probably a contemporary of the Court House at the other end of Back Lane. For years it was a shop kept by "Go-ey" Adams, one of many tradesmen who were known to everybody by nicknames, complimentary and otherwise.

This half-timbered building was also used as a brushworks by Mr. Stafford.

The centre of the town was then largely industrial; opposite, on the present Woolworth site, was Locke and Smith's brewery, and the gasworks were not far away, at the bottom of the Wilderness.

A former Salvation Army barracks, reached by a flight of wooden steps, vanished with "Go-ey" Adams' shop.

Back Lane was a busy little thoroughfare, and people constantly passed along the narrow alley which links the lane with the High Street, between the butcher's and the confectioner's shops.

IN THE WILDERNESS

The Wilderness, between Back Lane and Mill Street, is now a forsaken road. Hundreds of townspeople have never seen it. A couple of generations ago children were warned never to go there, for it was considered a very "rough" quarter. At one end of the lane were stables and slaughterhouses; halfway down the lane, opposite slum cottages, was a little burial ground; and at the junction with Mill Street were the flames, smoke and fumes of the gasworks. Ignorant gossipers were sure the gasholder would one day explode and "blow up Berkhamsted"; if that prediction did not make listeners quake with fright, bloodcurdling tales were told of body-snatchers who haunted the Wilderness at night.

It may not be widely known that the smallest of the three gasholders off Billet Lane was transferred from the Wilderness, or that Adelbert House, at the corner of Mill Street, was formerly the office and home of the manager of the Gas Company. School workshops were built on the old gasworks site.

A FORMER CHAPEL

Most of the old properties in the Wilderness have vanished. Water Lane, too, has changed. Once it was known as Watery Lane, a name which could not have appealed to owners of the brewery which flourished until nearly fifty years ago. The brewery buildings, afterwards used by Kepston's, were largely destroyed in one of the town's worst fires thirty years ago.

Water Lane was also the home of Berkhamsted's first Nonconformist meeting house. The Baptists had met for worship, in barns or in private houses, as long ago as 1640, but it was not until 1722 that they built their first meeting

house. It stood a few yards west of Adelbert House, and was a very plain, austere building. It was in regular use until the Claremont Church was built at Raven's Lane corner in 1864.

From both Water Lane and the Wilderness we reach Mill Street, a side street as old as, and formerly second in importance to, Castle Street. Since the early 1920s it has lost a number of old cottages and gained handsome new School buildings.

MEMORIAL TO A MILL

Historically, the only serious loss was that of the old watermill, the last of a series of mills which had occupied the same site since Norman times. It was one of the two local mills mentioned in Domesday Book. Here Mr. George Cook and his son kept alive an ancient industry and a grand tradition. Corn arrived by the wagon-load and sometimes in small sacks brought by humble gleaners.

Fives courts were built on the miller's garden, and the millstones were given an honourable resting place in the Music School forecourt. Opposite, as a memorial to the mill, a low, half-circular wall bears a tablet with an inscription in Latin. A translation is as follows:

Here for a thousand years the old Mills stood

And gave us bread;

Here now our School in rival Motherhood

Feeds minds instead.

And now the mill has lost its old neighbour, the "Edward VI" public-house, once known as the "Clown and

Sausages." It had been a private house since 1922. Last year the second public-house in Mill Street, the "Fish," closed its doors. We must expect further changes in this old side-street, now graced by some of the most modern school buildings in the land. The "wast plott or moore lying by the river near the Upper Mill," to quote a document of 1616, can never be built upon.

When the "new" railway station was built in 1874, Water Lane and Mill Street provided a popular short-cut for residents living west of Castle Street. Plans were made in 1883 to construct a foot-path from Water Lane to the station, with a footbridge over the Bulbourne and the canal; but later on a more ambitious proposal, which led to the building of Lower King's Road, found favour.

"A SHORT HISTORY OF BERKHAMSTED"

This book, containing much information from the 240 articles contributed to the *Parochial Review* by "Beorcham," will be published in a few days' time. A popular edition in art covers will be available at local book-sellers and newsagents, price 5s. 6d. (not 5s., as previously announced).

The book, printed by the Clunbury Press, is published by the author, Mr. P. C. Birtchnell, 195 High Street, Berkhamsted, to whom trade inquiries should be addressed.

A cloth-bound edition will be available later, at 8s. per copy.

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WANTED URGENTLY

Two urgent needs for the Berkhamsted and district Moral Welfare Worker (Sister Shaw) are (1) a portable typewriter and a carpet (9 ft. x 12 ft.) for the office (to deaden sound for the occupants of the flat below).

The Committee of the Association hope that as a result of this announcement either or both items might be given, or made available at a low cost. Offers would be thankfully received by the hon-secretary, Mrs. Ian Schiller, 'Woodland House,' Frithenden Copse, Berkhamsted, telephone Berkhamsted 92.

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