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BERKHAMSTED'S FINEST VIEW

The Parish Church Tower

THE OTHER EVENING I mounted more than a hundred narrow stone and wooden steps to enjoy Berkhamsted's finest view.

It is a view I first sampled many years ago. Every year, on the anniversary of Thomas Bourne's birth (December 16, 1656), children who had won Bourne scholarships were invited to look down on the town from the top of St. Peter's Church tower. This exciting journey into outer space made us the envy of other children, to whom we waved in a superior way. Mr. Edward Popple was there to give us a summit talking-to if we started shouting or leaning too far over the battlements, and he must have felt relieved when the party returned safe and sound, no one having fallen overboard and dented the roof of the nave.

AMONG THE RINGERS

This is a bird's eye view which never loses its appeal, though on the rare occasions when I scramble to the top I wonder how St. Peter's Band struggled up the spiral staircase with bulky instruments—in the dark, too—to play "O come, all ye faithful" on Christmas Day. This fine old Berkhamsted custom, like the Bourne scholars' expedition, was allowed to lapse many years ago.

The bells were ringing (it was practice night) when I made my recent ascent. Forty-odd steps and a low doorway brought me to the ringing chamber, where, under the expert guidance of Mr. Herbert Porrett, eight young parishioners were pulling the ropes. The chamber is surprisingly large; it can also be very noisy, and as lip-reading was none too successful Mr. Porrett and I set off to climb the remaining 63 steps to the top of the tower.

THREE-AND-A-HALF TONS

On the way we stepped into the belfry. In a way it looks like a workshop run by automatons. There is just room to walk round the bells as they swing with the easy movement and perfect rhythm of ballet dancers. Not that I have ever seen ballet dancers weighing anything between a quarter and three quarters of a ton. The eight bells, altogether weighing nearly 3½ tons, have called generations of Berkhamstedians to prayer, but here the noise

was absolutely deafening and we soon continued our journey to the top.

A new lead roof has made the tower absolutely watertight, but the great wooden cross is still encased in ancient lead on which dozens of boys (and perhaps a few grown-ups) have tried their hand at engraving. I will not make present-day graffiti blush by quoting their names and initials, but Car. Collins and Wm. Patterson will not mind my mentioning the excellence of their lettering. They passed this way in 1827.

NOT THE TALLEST BUILDING

St. Peter's Church is not the highest building in Berkhamsted—the Baptist Church spire is about 5-ft. taller—but as the top of the spire can presumably only be reached by a steeplejack I would rather stand and gaze in safety on the church tower. I would not like to mount the stair turret in the south-east corner in a strong gale, however.

As on mountain tops, it is the view that matters. You cannot see the whole town, for it has grown so much in recent times. But there are red, brown, grey and blue rooftops below us, hundreds of trees to keep the houses company, and pleasant hills on all sides to prove that this is indeed a valley town. The nicest thing of all is to watch the traffic go by without the accompanying roar. It is almost a silent world.

East, west, north, south—I cannot be sure which is the best view. West, perhaps. The High Street looks impossibly wide, just as though the main street in old Amersham has strayed over to Berkhamsted. Another surprise is to find the street rather less level and straight than our everyday, pedestrian view suggests. Though large shops and houses in the High Street look small, the Town Hall clock stands out like a harvest moon.

"TOY TOWN" APPEARANCE

The old inns between Chesham Road and Prince Edward Street have a "Toy Town" look. The familiar facades hide buildings of great depth, and beyond them we see a "pocket handkerchief" lawn which in reality is Butts Meadow. The reverse view of the church from the meadow is perhaps the only one which

shows the tower in all its massive vigour.

The shops may be dwarfed, but St. John's and Incents, the school houses in Chesham Road, look gigantic. Behind the houses opposite the church we see spacious gardens, the new and the old rectory come into view, and tall trees bordering the High Street look fresh and young (as indeed they are) against the ancient yew below the stair turret.

Away to the east, over the roof and grounds of the old Manor House, Cooper's upper and lower works appear to be grouped together. Key's huge sheds by the canal seem to loom larger than life. Far away, lovely and looking rather lonely, St. Michael's, Sunnyside, has the bearing of an ancient village church. We are scarcely aware of the railway dividing the Castle from the town, though from our high battlements the moats, ruined walls and Tower Hill, which lost its tower a long time ago, look anything but formidable. Beyond the Castle, the park sweeps up to the Common, and gorse, fern and trees line the horizon. It is almost an unspoilt view. But how long will it last, I wonder?

BUILT IN TUDOR TIMES

No less fascinating is the view of Berkhamsted School. Here we see everything, or almost everything, from Dean Incent's Tudor building just across the churchyard to Newcroft. It is almost a township in itself.

Thank you, John and Alice Phillip, for providing all these wonderful views of Berkhamsted. It is a pity we do not know more about this estimable couple who, according to tradition, built the tower, or at least its upper stages, in

the reign of Henry VIII. This was the last addition to the building which was begun early in the 13th century, and I wish we knew how our church looked before Tudor times. Was there originally a very low tower, graced perhaps by a spire? No one will ever be able to answer this question, and we would not even associate the present tower with "John Phyllyp and Alice his wyffe" but for a worn inscription bearing their names on external stonework.

Now it is time to descend the narrow steps, stopping once more to look at the bells and the clock, with its massive weights and a pendulum twice the height of a man. The ringers have left, and the only noise in the belfry is that of the steady tick-tock of the clock which has been with us for over 120 years.

THE OLD WEATHERCOCK

Before leaving the church, I renewed acquaintance with an old fellow who spent countless years on the tower. As one of the few whistling weathercocks in this country, he perched on the great wooden cross and continued to tell us which way the wind was blowing long after he had been shot. Yes, someone once fired a bullet at the old fellow, either in anger—for he once whistled as he worked—or in fun; certainly not a very good sense of fun. Later on the reeds were plugged to silence him, and now he has been grounded.

At the moment this handsome bird reposes on the window sill near the vestry. I will have a little more to say about him (and the history of the clock and bells) in next month's *Review*.

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