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THE LIGHTER SIDE OF LOCAL HISTORY

Some Victorian Gossip

Last month's article, containing quotations from an 18th century diary, prompted a reader to say it would be "wonderful" to find a diary describing the homely, everyday happenings of Berkhamsted in the 19th century, too.

I agree. Any new source of information is welcome. But so far as the 19th century is concerned, we really cannot grumble about existing supplies. The local Press was functioning, and personal and sometimes very candid impressions of the town and its people appeared in books and magazines. Adding to the vast store of information in my files are reports of interviews with dozens of old residents.

GENTRY AND TRADESFOLK

The best account of local life in early and mid-Victorian days is given in Henry Nash's "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" (1890). Another good source is "Trifles and Travels," by Arthur Keyser. Perhaps you have never heard of this book? It was written by a distinguished diplomat some forty years ago, and his opening chapter takes us back to Berkhamsted in the 1870s.

Every summer, Arthur Keyser spent his school holidays at his parents' home, Kingshill. In the winter the family took a furnished house in Eaton Square. The Keyzers belonged to the gentry, a word which has almost gone out of circulation, and they knew all the best people: William Longman, the publisher, at Ashlyns, the Smith-Dorriens at Haresfoot, the Brownlows at Ashridge, and the Marquis of Hamilton at Berkhamsted Place.

A BROADSIDE FROM THE RECTOR

Young Keyser made friends with the tradespeople, too: "dear stout Mrs. Timson at the cake shop," Mr. Ripon, the chemist, "small, spruce and spry, who always seemed shaped like a note of interrogation as we entered the shop," and Mrs. Greedy, who kept a stationer's shop. Mrs. Greedy's shop was recognised as "Church" in opposition to another stationer's, which was "Nonconformist." The same distinction "applied to all other retail establishments in the town, there being duplicates of each."

Mr. Keyser recalls that shoppers were as eager to meet friends as to make purchases, returning home with all the

local gossip. And what a town Berkhamsted was for gossip! When the rector (the Rev. J. W. Cobb) dissolved the ladies' choir and installed boys in their place, little else was discussed over the tea-tables. The climax came when the square shook his fist in Mr. Cobb's face—in the High Street, too!

At this point I must interrupt Mr. Keyser's memoirs to recall a remarkable document of the period. It is a printed folder entitled "A letter from the Rector to the Parishioners of Berkhamsted," signed by Mr. Cobb and dated 1880.

For weeks ugly rumours had been rife about the morals of two perfectly innocent parishioners. Mr. Cobb, who for years had attacked idle gossipers, went to the extraordinary length of using the printed word to tell everybody about "a sin so outrageous that I feel it my duty as your pastor to take more than ordinary notice of it." He did not mince words. Slanderous tales had been "bandied about in every hole and corner of the parish," he wrote. "What is our apparent religious energy and life if this is to be the outcome and the end of it?"

THE BUTLER'S WHISKERS

I don't suppose Berkhamsted was worse than any other town or village for gossip. Much of it was innocent and highly diverting. For instance, Mr. Keyser quotes a story which gave the whole town a laugh. It concerns the butler at Haresfoot, who, when told that the Prince of Wales had called for lunch, advised his informant to "tell it to the Marines." But it was perfectly true, "Teddy" (afterwards Edward VII), "being thrown out during a run with the local hounds, asked his equerry if there was a friend in the neighbourhood, and was told that Algy Smith-Dorrien in the 10th Hussars lived at Haresfoot close by." When convinced of the genuineness of the call upon his services, the butler rose to the occasion, as did Miss Marion Smith-Dorrien, who was hostess in the absence of her parents.

The Haresfoot butler figured in another good story. One day a paraffin lamp crashed down on the billiards table, and he tried to blow out the flames, thereby setting his whiskers on fire. The whiskers were his pride and joy, and their value was recognised by

the insurance company. Not only was Col. Smith-Dorrien's billiards table replaced, but the butler was given £5 compensation for the partial destruction of his whiskers.

THE DRINKING FOUNTAIN

Much of the gossip of Berkhamsted was concerned with the hard drinking of some of its inhabitants. There was indeed need for temperance reformers in those days, and they had the support of George Cruickshank, the noted black and white artist, who occasionally visited Berkhamsted. In my files I recently came across a cutting from the long-defunct evening newspaper, the *Echo*, which contained an article stating that Cruickshank was asked what he thought of Berkhamsted. "Sir," the artist thundered, "there are far too many public-houses here." The writer of the article pleaded that Berkhamsted, being on a main road, was bound to provide refreshments for travellers.

It is interesting to recall that Queen Victoria's jubilee in 1887 was celebrated by the unveiling of a drinking fountain and horse trough outside the Town Hall. The ceremony was performed by Dr. Bartrum, who said he regarded the fountain as "an indication of a tendency to temperance in Berkhamsted." Thereupon he sampled the water.

"COCK-HAT" SUNDAY

Dr. Bartrum, a very worthy headmaster of Berkhamsted School, figures in many anecdotes. A writer in *The Berkhamstedian* recalled, many years ago, how easy it was to get orders for books, etc., initialled by Dr. Bartrum.

His signature "E.B." looked the same either way up, and canny lads would write a short list of their wants on a long strip of paper, have it initialled by the Head, and then cut off the original list, turning the slip the other way up and adding items which Dr. Bartrum would doubtless not have authorised!

I cannot help thinking that life was just a little more amusing when the School celebrated "Cock-hat" Sunday. Everybody, the Head included, marched to church with his hat on one side. Then, on Oak Apple Day, any boy who failed to put a sprig of oak in his button-hole was liable to be beaten by a bunch of nettles.

A CLEAN PAIR OF HEELS

From local papers and other printed and written sources come trifling but amusing stories of long ago. One tale concerns a navy who was engaged on the railway when the number of tracks was increased to four. He ordered a pair of expensive boots, made to his own specification, from two different boot-makers in the town. After a week or so he sent a boy to one cobbler for the right boot, and to the second cobbler for the left boot. Neither tradesman thought he was taking chances by sending out odd boots "on approval," but the navy had the last laugh, and decamped with a fine pair of boots.

A final tit-bit from my "Victoriana" file. Over a hundred years ago (this information came from an elderly man who spent his boyhood at Ley Hill) it was customary for a "reader" to visit certain homes, by request, with the

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weekly newspaper. Menfolk would take it in turns, once a week, to open their doors to neighbours, who, at the cost of a penny per head, sat on the settles alongside the fire, smoking their pipes and listening to the reader giving forth the news from his newspaper. He also undertook to write letters and read correspondence for the villagers.

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