

The River Bulbourne

Some time ago a townsman remarked that the nicest thing about the river Bulbourne was its name. He was unnecessarily cynical. Man has done his worst to spoil our local chalk stream, but parts of it are still attractive. Not so attractive, perhaps, as its sister stream, which it joins at Two Waters; but the Gade, in its upper reaches, has never been starved, broken and bent by an upstart canal.

The Bulbourne still adds some scenic interest to Dudswell, Northchurch, Berkhamsted, Bourne End, Winkwell and Boxmoor, and has its place in history as well as in geography. In comparison, the Roman road is a mere infant.

The "freshfish" enjoyed by kings and princes at Berkhamsted Castle came from the Bulbourne. From Norman until quite modern times the stream powered two watermills at Berkhamsted and one at Bourne End. In long, dry summers the millers prayed that the river would not dry up; in very rainy seasons people living in the valley wished the Bulbourne would stay away from their doors.

UNHEALTHY MARSH

In its more capricious moments the Bulbourne sprawled over meadows and created a particularly unhealthy marsh in the heart of Berkhamsted. This nuisance abated when the canal was made at the end of the 18th century.

What was the Bulbourne like before the canal stole most of the water? Wider and deeper than it is today, of course, but we must not imagine that it was a waterway of canal proportions. And where did it rise originally? Could it have been at Bulbourne, three miles beyond the present source? It is curious that this lonely hamlet, on the county boundary between Tring and Ivinghoe, should bear the name of our river if it did not start there.

The hamlet of Bulbourne may be small, but it has a very high opinion of its early history. An ancient and rather libellous jingle tells us that

When Bulbourne was a city
St. Albans was a wood;
Tring was a little place
And never any good.

Early maps are too vague and inaccurate to help us to determine the

river's original source. John Speed shows the Bulbourne starting near Aldbury, and so does a later map-maker, Robert Morden, who marks the spot with the words "Bulborn head." Speed also shows a tributary running into the Bulbourne near Northchurch; as it starts near a badly-sited Wigginton, we need not pursue this particular line.

SEVEN MILES LONG

Pumping, by lowering the water table, has almost certainly shortened the Bulbourne. Today the river rises—when it rises—in a field near the Cow Roast. But it is still nearly seven miles long, falling about 80-ft. before mating with the Gade, then with the Co'ne, and finally adding to the flow of Old Father Thames.

Seldom is the Bulbourne more than 100 yards from its man-made rival, the canal. But even in its upper reaches it is still capable, in very rainy seasons, of making a splash. How surprised we were, some years ago, to find watercress growing near the source, after the bed had been dry and unproductive for many seasons.

Watercress—now we are talking business! Anyone who belittles the Bulbourne should remember that it gave birth to a notable local industry, an industry which will be the subject of a later article in this series.

But we must hasten downstream. The first half-mile brings us to Dudswell, the Bulbourne's first hamlet, with an appropriate watery name. Here, for the first time, the river flows under a road; then, winding slowly o'er the lea, it burrows under New Road, Northchurch, and flows within a few yards of St. Mary's Church.

THE RECTOR'S TROUT

Not so many years ago, a former rector of Northchurch tried to revive the Bulbourne's ancient reputation as a trout stream. There were tasty dinners at the rectory, but others shared the bounty, too, as I learnt from parishioners who "happened" to catch the rector's trout.

Old photographs show a "truly rural" ford in Billet Lane. Horses and carts splashed through the water, timid folk crossed by a plank bridge, and brash youngsters used ancient logs and tree

stumps as stepping stones. At low tide it was possible to leap over the Bulbourne. Today we are scarcely aware of the river's existence; in Billet Lane, as elsewhere, it is now decently bridged, save in St. John's Well Lane, where planks demand one-way traffic.

If you haven't stood on the foot-bridge over the river and cressbeds and tried to catch tadpoles and tiddlers, you haven't sampled one of the most memorable joys of childhood.

THE BLACK DITCH

St. John's Well Lane reminds us of the Bulbourne's first (and now defunct) tributary. It was a very short one. Sparkling water from St. John's spring (a hospital of this name stood nearby in medieval times) flowed down the lane before running into a ditch which started above the four terraced cottages and ran eastward, parallel with the Bulbourne, as far as Mill Street. This was the horrid "Black Ditch" which offended eye and nose before the town possessed a modern drainage system. In later years, as the ditch was filled in, water was diverted to the Bulbourne through a culvert opposite Wood's iron foundry.

St. John's Well was said to yield the town's purest water and was often used to bathe sore eyes. In pagan days, water sprites were worshipped at the well, and at a later date washerwomen were prosecuted for polluting the water. Now the Post Office occupies the site of St. John's Hospital, and there isn't sufficient water to moisten a postage stamp.

In the heart of the town the Bulbourne does not seem to know which way it

wants to go. Various diversions have been made from time to time, and some short arms of the river are now dry ditches. A second tributary, from the Castle moats, ceased to swell the Bulbourne 160 years ago; such water as the Castle can spare now benefits the canal.

TWO WATERMILLS

Now we are near the site of the Upper Mill, one of the two water-mills mentioned in the Domesday Book entry for Berkhamsted. Five courts have been built on the miller's garden, and mighty millstones have found a resting place in the music school forecourt. An inscription in Latin tells us that the old mill stood for a thousand years. The river which turned the wheels flows on, soon to pass under Castle Street, where Leland, a Tudor writer, "passid over the ryver, whereas is a bridge of wood." This was probably the first bridge built over the Bulbourne.

In the valley streets of Berkhamsted, many householders have a river at the bottom of their gardens. Just beyond "Foggy Bottom" the Bulbourne enters the canal for a quarter of a mile and then goes its own way to Lower Mill, or Bank Mill, the second "Domesday" institution. It was closed about sixty years ago.

THE LAST LAP

The river flows beside Bank Mill Lane, soon to enter another watercress belt. With a timid waterfall or two it trails between the canal towpath and the cress beds. Then, beyond Broadway church,

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it regains glorious independence, collecting (in rainy seasons) water from its third tributary, the Bourne Gutter, which gave Bourne End its name.

Now we are beyond the *Review* country. The lower reaches of the Bulbourne belong to Boxmoor, and at Two Waters, the river not only joins but takes the name of the Gade. And now I must return up the Bulbourne valley to collect some information about our local watercress industry.

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