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THE CHANGING FACE OF BERKHAMSTED

Some Bygone Mansions

EGERTON HOUSE, the subject of two recent articles, was but one of a number of old houses which, in modern times, have either been demolished or used for purposes far removed from the builders' original intentions.

Recently, the east end of the Manor House—the only part which was not converted into shops and flats a few years ago—was pulled down. On the opposite side of the High Street, the Red House ("the most ambitious 18th century house in the town", according to Pevsner's Hertfordshire volume in *The Buildings of England* series) is now used as offices.

ALL IN A LIFETIME

Boxwell House is the Rural District Council's "civic centre". Ashlyns Hall is a home for elderly people. Haresfoot has been largely destroyed. Berkhamsted Place, Lagley and many smaller houses have been converted into flats. Berkhamsted Hall, Northchurch Hall, Millfield and Highfield House have completely disappeared. Not far beyond our parish boundaries, Ashridge House and Pendley Manor are colleges.

These changes have taken place within the lifetime of middle-aged townspeople. When I was a boy, a dozen or more mansions were still maintained in the traditional way, each occupied by one family with its private army of servants. The houses seemed as enduring as the Town Hall—even that may be rebuilt in due course!—and the occupants automatically qualified for inclusion among the "gentry". To step inside their homes was an honour to which few of us could aspire, though garden fetes gave everybody an opportunity of seeing the lawns and gardens.

DOMESTIC LIFE

A change of ownership of any large house was the talk of the town. We hoped newcomers would be as good as their predecessors. We hoped the old domestic staff would be retained.

In the early years of the 20th century there was still no serious shortage of domestic workers. Large mansions with correspondingly large quarters for the staff were still being built. One was Netherfield, now used as offices. Another, facing the Common, was Britwell, built for Sir John Evans.

Afterwards named Berkhamsted Hill, it is now occupied by the Cooper Technical Bureau.

In Victorian days more people were employed as domestic servants than in any single local industry, agriculture not excepted. I have heard it said that there were more servants at Ashridge House than employees in William Cooper's chemical works.

A butler, footman, coachman, groom, housekeeper, cook, nurse, dairymaid, kitchen-maid, two laundry-maids and two housemaids ministered to the needs of Sir Thomas Halsey, M.P., his wife and one small son at Berkhamsted Hall. I take this information from the 1851 census returns, which further show that Haresfoot had a domestic staff of twelve, while eight servants looked after Colonel (afterwards General) John Finch, his wife and an orphan who was staying at Berkhamsted Place on the night of the census. Nearby, at Castle Hill Farm—by no means a large house—Noah Newman employed five servants.

SEVENTEEN BEDROOMS

Let us now start on a tour of the district, noting the changes which have overtaken some of our old, large houses, and pausing to recall some vanished landmarks.

Entering Berkhamsted from the east, the first building we saw on the left-hand side of the High Street was The Hall. It stood about 100 yards east of Swing Gate Lane corner, and nearby were the dairy, stables and other outbuildings. The highway was not so wide as it is today, and on the north side, opposite the main entrance, there was a gravelled crescent for carriages to turn round.

That kindly writer of Victorian reminiscences, Henry Nash, was surprisingly scathing when he referred to The Hall as "plain but massive, presenting no special attraction beyond the suggestion of plenty within."

From the High Street, the plastered walls looked dull and almost forbidding, an impression which was heightened by the high wall which surrounded the grounds. But from spacious lawns one saw the handsome, creeper-clad south front. Turning round, there was a view of walled gardens, orchards and

unspoiled parkland ascending the hillside towards Long Green.

The Hall consisted of entrance and lounge halls, study, morning room, dining and drawing rooms, billiards room, seventeen bed and dressing rooms, and three bathrooms. The Georgian house was said to have stood on older foundations, and there was a tradition that the cellars were used as a prison for Royalists captured in the Civil War.

THE LONELY HOUSE

Swing Gate Lane was very narrow, with just one house, the flint building which looks older than its years against so many modern neighbours. It was the home of the head gardener of The Hall. The head coachman and bailiff lived in two cottages which, in an altered form, survive as a cafe and a private house on the east side of Little Bridge Road.

The Hall had several owners, one of whom is said to have objected to Job East's sawmill on the site now occupied by Callaghan's Garage and hastened its removal to Gossoms End. Old Berkhamstedians associate Captain Constable Curtis with The Hall; not-so-old residents remember it as the home of Mr. Edward Greene. The names of these two gentlemen live on in Curtis Way and Greene Walk. Towards the end of its long life, The Hall housed the preparatory department of Berkhamsted School. Then, before the second World War, the mansion was pulled down.

The break-up of the large estate started over forty years ago, when fields west of Swing Gate Lane were sold to the Urban Council for the town's first council housing estate. Later, the

Hall Park Estate was developed east of the mansion. It may not be widely known that the still unoccupied site at the east corner of Swing Gate Lane was expected to be used for shops and a cinema, or for a block of flats.

The passing of another and much smaller mansion, Highfield House, enabled the Council to extend its housing estate to Three Close Lane.

Highfield House stood above the old part of Highfield Road, at the top of which was the tradesman's entrance. The main carriage drive was from Three Close Lane, just above the footpath which links that lane with Victoria Road. Both Victoria Road and Highfield Road were culs-de-sac, and their extension was made possible when Highfield House and its many outbuildings were pulled down a few years before the second World War. The last occupant was Mr. J. Whittall, who had been there long enough for the meadow now occupied by prefabricated houses to be called Whittall's Meadow.

INFORMATION WANTED

Unfortunately, little is known of the history of Highfield House. It was not a particularly old building, though we find the name Heifield in a 16th century document.

In the next article we shall pay our respects to some old houses in the High Street which have changed their status. If you have any personal reminiscences or interesting information about the Red House, the Manor House, Boxwell House or any other old properties, I shall be pleased to hear from you.

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A visitor at the recent dinner of the Artisan's Section of the Berkhamsted Golf Club was Captain R. D. Robertson, who received a very hearty welcome from all present, including the then Club captain, Mr. Hugh Gardner.

Since leaving Berkhamsted some years ago, Captain Robertson, who was popular both in the Club and in the town, has been living in Sussex.

Newly-elected as captain of the Berkhamsted Golf Club is Mr. J. F. V. Harvey.

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