

The Pilkington Manor

A SHORT TIME ago Berkhamsted High Street lost another of its old landmarks: the east end of the Manor House. Looking stern and cold in a dull coat of cement, it did not seem to enjoy rubbing shoulders with the much larger part of the house which was converted into shops and flats several years ago. All the same, I rather liked its air of defiance and determination to stay old. But now this strange architectural partnership of old grey stucco and modern red brick has been dissolved, and already a new building is taking the place of the old.

The Manor House (often called Pilkington's) was of uncertain age. It must have been built in the 18th century, though some features may have been of earlier date. A smaller house was standing on the site in 1616 and probably for many years before then.

Who were the Pilkingtons? I have searched local registers without finding a single mention of the family. The earliest known owner of the house was Francis Barker, a man of substance who was a chief burgess in 1628 and almost certainly the father of two men who gained higher honours in the Borough of Berkhamsted. John Barker was bailiff in 1646, and William Barker followed him into the mayoral chair in 1647.

THE HONOUR AND MANOR

Pilkington's was never the great manor house of Berkhamsted. This distinction belonged first to the Castle and then to Berkhamsted Place. But within the Honour and Manor of Berkhamsted, embracing the two parishes of Berkhamsted and Northchurch, were the small ancient manors of Durrants, Norcott, Maudelyns and Rossway, all four being in the much larger parish of Northchurch.

In addition, to quote John Norden and Edward Salter's Survey of 1616, there were several "ancient capitall messuages" which were "conceived by some of the owners thereof to be manors and to have divers quit rents belonging to them." These were the Rectory of Northchurch and three "capitall messuages": Champions ("in the Southend of Barkhamsted St. Peter's"), in the tenure of James Mayne; Pilkington's, in the tenure of Francis

Barker; and Coombes, in the tenure of William Hodson.

Quoting again from the survey of 1616, here is an extract from the list of freeholders who paid rent to Prince Charles for property "lyeing within the several manors of the Burrough and Hallimote":

FRANCIS BARKER Gent likewise holdeth to him & his Heirs by the Tenure and Service aforesaid One antient capital Messuage or Mansion House called Pilkington's in Barkhamsted St. Peter's wherein the said Francis now inhabiteth together with the Court Yard & all other Yards Gardens Orchards and Pound Yard thereunto adjoining or belonging. The Quit Rent per ann. 1s. 4d.

THE MANOR HOUSE VAULT

Francis Barker held several other properties, including the Upper Butt-field (Tompkins' Meadow) and the Prince's Arms.

The absence of old deeds makes it difficult to trace the history of the Pilkington Manor, which extended from the High Street to Whitehill and from Castle Street to Raven's Lane. It is interesting to know that in St. Peter's Church, beneath St. Catherine's Chapel, there is a vault, long since sealed up, which belonged to Pilkington's.

From memorial tablets in St. Peter's Church we learn the names of two early 19th century owners of the manor house, both of whom were buried in the vault. One was John Kirkman, brewer, of St. Giles in the Fields, who died in 1803. He was followed by Charles Gordon (d. 1829), "of Braco, Island of Jamaica, and of this place." He is said to have made a fortune in Jamaica at the height of the black slave traffic.

"LIKE A NUNNERY"

R. A. Norris, in *Berkhamsted St. Peter*, states that Charles Gordon was the last owner of the manor house, "before the property was broken up."

Gordon may have parted with some of the land, but the estate was still considerable when Frederick Miller, some of whose descendants are still living in the town, purchased Pilkington's in early Victorian times.

Henry Nash, in *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (1890), states: "This

[manor] house now consists of several dwellings, but originally was only one, and was enclosed within high walls and entered through massive gates, giving it the appearance of a nunnery... Chapel Street and several streets leading therefrom formed part of the estate, a large portion of which was enclosed within high walls, effectually securing privacy and excluding the vulgar gaze of the public. This estate was purchased by the late Mr. Frederick Miller, to whom the town is indebted for many of the improvements and conveniences which the opening up of this estate now affords."

Frederick Miller was proud of Pilkington's, particularly of the walled garden which stretched as far as the marsh in the valley. There he had a fine ornamental lake, large enough for a boat if not for serious boating. I have seen an aged photograph showing Frederick, or some other jolly Miller, reclining in a boat on the lake.

WILLIAM COOPER'S PURCHASE

Not the least of Mr. Miller's possessions, incidentally, was a pass to travel on the railway at any time without payment, a concession granted because the line, like the canal, ran through his estate.

Frederick Miller thought very hard before parting with any part of the estate. Then, in 1852, after a sleepless night, he decided that the time to sell had arrived, and signed the conveyances before breakfast. He might have delayed the sale had he known that Chapel Street, Bridge Street, Manor Street and Raven's Lane would be developed to meet

the town's first big demand for homes for factory workers.

Among early purchasers was a man who was to become our leading industrialist, William Cooper. Needing a factory instead of a workshop to manufacture sheep dip, he bought meadowland in Raven's Lane from Frederick Miller. Thus, Cooper's works and offices stand on part of the Pilkington estate. The land must now be worth many, many times the price William Cooper paid for it in 1853. It was £140.

Frederick Miller was a great benefactor of his church, the Congregational, which stands on Pilkington land. Three cottages in Castle Street were built by Mr. Miller and given to his church. He was buried in the little graveyard attached to the Congregational Church.

RECENT HISTORY

By mid-Victorian times the great days of the manor house as a home for one family were almost over, though until the end of the 19th century some members of the Miller family were still living there. Manor Croft was built in grounds which were still spacious but destined to become almost completely surrounded by houses. Long before the century was out builders had been busy in Chapel Street and Manor Street, and as memories of the manor house grow dim I suppose people will wonder how Manor Street received its name.

The east side of Castle Street, of course, had been lined with houses for centuries, but always there was a gap for carriages to enter the manor house grounds. The coach-house survived—admittedly in a very rickety state—until

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a short time ago. It stood near the newsagent's shop, which, I understand, was originally the head-gardener's or head-coachman's cottage.

The large white house in the High Street, now Mr. J. Hutton's antique shop, is said to have been built as the dower house of the manor. Its age is uncertain, but it probably dates from early years of the 19th century. It was the home, in the mid-1930s, of Major R. B. Stephenson, a collateral descendant of George and Robert Stephenson, the great railway engineers.

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