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THE TOWN'S 'MOST AMBITIOUS' 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HOME

## The Red House

SO MANY old buildings in Berkhamsted High Street have been given new frontages that it is refreshing to find a few houses which look much the same today as they did generations ago.

A good example is the Red House, so named from the red bricks which look almost too new to date from the 18th century. In the course of conversion from private house to hotel, and then to offices and flats, many internal changes have been made, but the exterior is unaltered. The handsome porch with Ionic columns and pediment, and the large Venetian window above the porch, have been admired since the coaching days.

### FARMYARD SCENE

The Red House (a near neighbour of Egerton House and the Old Manor House, described in earlier articles) was built at a time when Berkhamsted was a town in name and a village in character. It was still possible for farmers to have a High Street address. There was a farmyard within a hundred yards of St. Peter's Church, and people buying bread at a baker's shop at the corner of Rectory Lane often heard the sound of flails from a threshing barn on the opposite side of the lane.

The baker's shop, long since replaced by the White House, must have looked small against the new, massive Red House. But in those days rich men and poor men were often next-door neighbours. Some wealthy folk sought isolation in the country, but there was much to be said for living in the town itself, even if (as at Egerton House) the drawing room faced a row of mean cottages. No so-called better class street or quarter existed, and we can be sure the builder of the Red House quite happily filled the gap between genteel terraced houses and the little baker's shop.

### GEORGE NUGENT

But who built the Red House? We do not know. As so often happens, all the early deeds have been lost. A pity; it would be pleasant to salute the man who (to quote Nikolaus Pevsner's Hertfordshire volume in *The Buildings of England* series) provided the most ambitious 18th century house in the town.

The present owners, Mr. and Mrs. E. R. Margetts, believe that it is of

earlier origin. Ancient oak beams have been found, and large tree trunks support part of the house. Whether these old timbers belonged to an earlier house on the site, or were taken from a building elsewhere, we are never likely to know.

One of the earliest occupants was a clergyman of great generosity, the Rev. George Nugent. From 1791 until his death in 1830 he was rector of Bygrave, a tiny parish near Baldock, but it seems that he never resided at Bygrave and made Berkhamsted his home town. Here he served as parish clerk, presided at the select vestry, and was one of the first supporters of the West Herts Infirmary at Hemel Hempstead. He is best remembered for his gift of £1,000 for building the workhouse which formerly stood at Kitsbury Road corner and was known as Nugent House.

Moving on to the year 1841, the tithe map comes to our aid. The Red House was then owned by James Field, a Quaker; the baker's shop next door was occupied by Mary Sutton; and the meadow behind the property, now part of the Red House garden, was owned by Frederick Miller, of the Manor House.

### A NOTORIOUS TENANT

James Field had the misfortune to let his house to John Tawell, a plausible scoundrel who had just come to Berkhamsted and married a widow, Mrs. Cutforth, who kept a private school for girls in the town.

Living in good style at the Red House, John Tawell was highly respected by the townspeople. At his invitation he presided, in his own drawing room, over the first meeting called to discuss the founding of a Mechanics' Institute in Berkhamsted.

His fellow committee-men were soon to learn that Tawell was a humbug—and a murderer. He poisoned his former lover at Salt Hill, near Slough, and became doubly notorious as the first murderer to be caught through the medium of the electric telegraph. He was hanged at Aylesbury in 1845.

But let us forget John Tawell. He was at the Red House for a very short time, and every subsequent owner or

tenant must have been heartily tired of hearing his name. (In a later article I shall saddle the Rural District Council with Tawell, for he was also associated with Boxwell House, now the offices of the council.)

James Field soon parted with the Red House, selling it to another Quaker, Joseph Robinson. A wealthy iron-founder from the Midlands, he married Hannah Graham in 1843, and in seventeen years they had thirteen children. On Hannah's death in 1860 at the age of 38, her mother came to Berkhamsted to help look after the large family. It was probably about this time when Joseph Robinson pulled down the baker's shop and built the White House; there are signs of an opening between the two houses, which have identical floor levels. One of Joseph Robinson's two surviving grandchildren, Miss McKeone, remembers being told that Granny Graham lived in the White House with the boys, while the girls lived in the Red House.

### COLD BATHS AT MIDNIGHT

Miss McKeone further states that her grandfather was supposed to have been the first person in Berkhamsted to have an internal piped water supply. This was from rainwater collected from the roof and stored in wells under each house. He had a bath of cold water left ready each night, and if he could not sleep he took a cold bath. During alterations a large water tank was found, the sides of which were made of thick slate joined with red lead.

In the White House, a very large strongroom was found, with the ceiling

made of thick slabs of York stone, presumably built to Mr. Robinson's order. As befitted an ironfounder's home, many fine specimens of wrought and cast ironwork were found in the house.

Joseph Robinson does not appear to have taken an active part in local affairs, though with a gift of £150 he was one of the most generous subscribers to the Town Hall building fund. Among his employees was James Gravestock, who worked in the Red House garden for fifty years and for another thirteen years in the Manor House garden.

### LATER HISTORY

Some years after the death of his wife, Joseph Robinson moved to London. He died in 1883, and about this time the Red House and the White House were separated. Joseph and several members of his family were buried at Berkhamsted in the Friends' burial ground.

After the Robinsons departed, the Red House was owned or tenanted by William Paxton, brother of Sir Joseph Paxton, who designed the vast glass building for the Great Exhibition of 1851. "Paxton's Glasshouse," as it was nicknamed, was later moved from Hyde Park to Sydenham and named the Crystal Palace. William, our local Paxton, was Lord Brownlow's land agent at the time of the Common enclosure. Paxton Road, between George Street and Ellesmere Road, was named after him.

In the late 1880s, the Red House was bought by Mrs. Elizabeth Proctor. In 1897-8 it passed to Canon Norman, of Durham Cathedral, a noted marine

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biologist. Stirring days of the first World War, when the Inns of Court O.T.C. "occupied" Berkhamsted, will be recalled by the name of the Commanding Officer, Lieut.-Colonel F. H. L. Errington, C.B., who lived at the Red House for many years and was followed by his son, Mr. Ralph E. Errington.

In 1946 the Red House was converted into a private hotel; then, a few years ago, it was further converted into flats and offices. To the present owners, Mr and Mrs. Margetts, I am indebted for much of the information given in this article. 'BEORCHAM'

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