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PROGRAMME FOR SEPTEMBER

3rd—Sausage Sizzle.

10th—Gardening.

17th—Wood Chopping.

24th—Bee in Bonnet (at Room).

A. J. CRUICKSHANK

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WHEN NORTHCHURCH HAD ITS OWN WORKHOUSE

Curious Finds in an Old Cottage

OUR SERIES of articles on old local mansions is being interrupted this month for a very good reason. Some of our smaller houses have interesting stories to tell, too, and before we are robbed of yet another piece of old Berkhamsted I wish to call attention to the row of four half-timbered cottages near Billet Lane (Nos. 77-80 Gossoms End).

These good-looking cottages—I cannot call them pretty—have obviously seen better days. Now they are empty, unloved, and sitting targets for youngsters who enjoy breaking windows. Yet the cottages still have sturdy and rather splendid dignity. We shall miss them when they have gone.

Four bold gables, interesting windows and centuries-old timbers face the High Street, partnered by a black barn which, as long as I can remember, has appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

From Billet Lane, where distance lends a little enchantment to the back-yard scene, we catch glimpses of a great roof which is almost worthy of a manor house. As with so many veterans, the building has been much altered since the vast framework of good British oak was thrown up, probably in the 16th century.

A VALUELESS LIST

Thirteen years ago the cottages were thought worthy of inclusion in the supplementary list of buildings of special architectural or historical interest. Also listed were six old cottages at Northchurch and two public-houses (the One Bell and the Crooked Billet) which have already been pulled down, as well as other cottages which await a like fate. The supplementary list offered no protection.

Families who moved out a short time ago may not have been so enamoured of the cottages as artists and photographers who were interested only in the exterior. Some of the rooms, though damp and lacking many conveniences, are quite large.

Had the cottages not lined a busy main road in urgent need of widening, they would surely have been bought at a high price by an enthusiast prepared to spend an even larger sum on their conversion into a fine country house.

But the site—quite a large one, for it also includes two derelict brick cottages at the corner of Billet Lane—is due to be redeveloped, and flats will probably replace the work of bygone centuries.

At the moment I am still seeking an expert's opinion on some unusual exterior features. Paying a recent visit, I climbed the stairs of No. 78 to a back bedroom with a ceiling decorated in the centre by a plaster reproduction of the crest familiarly known as the Prince of Wales's feathers. It is roughly the size of a page of the *Review*. A short distance away there is a large bulge which suggests the former existence of another ceiling decoration.

MODIFIED DESIGN

As the plaster cast does not tally with modern versions of the Prince of Wales's crest, Mr. P. C. Osborn kindly took a photograph of it, to enable me to obtain advice at the College of Arms. There I was shown a 17th century drawing which has much in common with the design from Berkhamsted, though the "Ich dien" motto is lacking. This does not necessarily mean that the cast dates from the 17th century; it could well have been the work of an enthusiastic amateur who for practical reasons modified the design.

Loyalists everywhere have paid tribute to the Prince of Wales, but there was an especial reason for doing so at Northchurch. From early times the King or some other member of the Royal Family has held the advowson and gift of St. Mary's, and to this day the advowson remains vested in the Duchy of Cornwall.

ALL ROUND THE ROOM

Just as interesting as the crest is the plasterwork round the walls just below the ceiling, carrying what I presume to be a strawberry design. This is found in the front and back bedrooms, but not on the dividing walls, thereby suggesting that originally there was one large room.

Who provided the decorations—and when? Scientific tests should determine the date. I sincerely hope that it will be

possible to save the crest and part of the frieze.

What is the history of the cottages? Early documentary evidence is lacking. A 16th century origin has been suggested, and it is certain that the great timbers, best seen in the attics, are of great age. Some ancient wattle-and-daub survives, as well as very old bricks. But much of the brickwork, especially at the back of the house, is fairly modern.

WORKHOUSE DAYS

It may surprise you to know that at one time the four half-timbered cottages were used as the workhouse of the parish of Northchurch, while the two brick cottages with long front gardens served as the workhouse hospital.

I cannot imagine that any of the buildings were erected for these purposes. But needy folk were certainly housed there in the early parts of the 19th century. In fact, it was with some reluctance that the people of Northchurch allowed the inmates to be transferred to the "new" workhouse opened in Berkhamsted nearly 130 years ago. Similarly, there was great indignation when the demand for centralisation caused the Berkhamsted institution (Nugent House) to be closed a century later. The inmates were transferred to Hemel Hempstead.

PARISH PROPERTY

On June 18, 1832, a meeting held at Northchurch rejected by 17 votes to 15 a proposal to move the poor of the parish to Berkhamsted. Six weeks later, at a larger meeting, the transfer was approved by 33 votes to 26. Northchurch

was required to pay the cost of maintaining its own parishioners, plus sixpence a week per head for clothing, rent, wear and tear.

When the four cottages which comprised the workhouse were vacated, they were offered to the Rector of Northchurch for use as a schoolroom. Some years later, in 1845, sanction was sought from the Poor Law Commissioners to sell "the cottages and gardens late occupied as the workhouse of this parish", but they remained in the possession of the parish of Northchurch, and were let to various tenants. At the present time, negotiations are proceeding for the sale of the property from Northchurch Parish Council to Berkhamsted Urban District Council.

AN OLD FARMHOUSE

The hospital was presumably closed at the same time as the workhouse. In its last year it must have been very busy. Cholera was prevalent at Northchurch in 1832; extra nurses were engaged at 3s. 6d. a day, and subscriptions were invited to relieve distress. Much of the £115 raised was spent on improving sanitary conditions.

If you are not acquainted with the doomed cottages, please pay a visit as soon as you can. Changes take place so rapidly nowadays that familiar frontages and even whole buildings disappear in a matter of days. Recently, for instance, the south side of Gossoms End lost several cottages, one of which was probably the oldest in the district. This was the half-timbered little house which was thought to have been a 16th century farmhouse. "BEORCHAM"

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An ex gratia payment of £50 is proposed to be made to an outgoing tenant of a Berkhamsted Council house in respect of certain additions and improvements he has carried out in the house during his tenancy. To an incoming tenant it is intended to raise the rent by 5s. per week. Both proposals are subject to Ministry approval.

One councillor remarked that the increase was "a bit stiff" seeing that it was 26% per annum on the outlay. He wouldn't mind a few transactions at that rate!

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