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Royal Observer Corps "At Home"

The local Post of the Royal Observer Corps is holding an "At Home" and film show on Tuesday evening, 30th October at the Gossoms End Scout Headquarters. First film at 8 o'clock.

Anybody who is interested in learning more of the Corps' work and activities is most cordially invited.

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THE RURAL COUNCIL'S HISTORIC HOME

The Story of Boxwell House

BOXWELL HOUSE has made a very nice urban home for the Berkhamsted Rural District Council. The drawing room, dining room and bedrooms are now offices. Only one structural change has been made, fortunately without spoiling the appearance or character of the house. A room has been discreetly extended to provide a council chamber of such charm and intimacy that one cannot imagine the councillors ever indulging in acrimonious argument.

Nikolaus Pevsner, in the Hertfordshire volume of his *Buildings of England* series, found the west end of Berkhamsted High Street beginning "in an informal village way with only a few individual houses worth noting." The first of the few is Boxwell House, described as a "broad three-bay design of c. 1700."

Mr. Pevsner did not step inside to see the entrance hall and its fine oak paneling. This is old and invites close inspection, otherwise some inlaid work in the top panels may be missed. Stairs with a pronounced list to starboard lead to a long first-floor corridor and light, airy rooms. Massive beams in the attic provide a last reminder that we are in an old house, a house which has been treated with respect and affection by its many owners.

MENTIONED IN 1565

The first reference to Boxwell House—exactly the same spelling as we use today—appears in a document of 1565.

Nothing in the present house can be traced back to this date, and in 1700 or thereabouts there must have been a complete rebuilding. The earliest available deed (1757) refers to a settlement of 1743 concerning the house, garden and three acres of arable land. Boxwells, as the house was then called, was for some years divided into "two messuages, formerly one," but by 1757, when it was again occupied by one family, it was conveyed by Joseph and Elizabeth Knowles to the Misses Winifred and Ann Noyes, from whom it passed by will to the Rev. T. H. Noyes. In 1809 Mr. Noyes sold Boxwell House to Thomas Woodman, of New-ground, Tring, and in 1840 it passed to the Rev. James Cauffield Browne, one of whose great-granddaughters is still living in Berkhamsted.

Mr. Browne lived at Boxwell House

with his wife and nine daughters. He was curate of St. Peter's, and it is doubtful whether his parishioners knew that at the age of eighteen he had eloped with a charming young lady named Isabella. The runaway marriage was condoned by Isabella's father but not by her mother, though many a Victorian mama would have swooned with delight at the thought of having a son-in-law who was the grandson of Lord Kilmaine. It was the generous allowance of a rich father-in-law which helped Mr. Browne to live in better style than most curates. At Boxwell House he had as an impressive a home as the Rev. John Crofts in his new rectory.

NO SUNDAY TRADING

Mr. Browne was a strict Sabbatarian. Striding down the High Street to the Parish Church on Sunday morning, he did not merely frown upon cottagers who tried to earn a few coppers by selling their garden produce. He knocked cabbages off window-sills and sent them spinning into the gutter.

Despite such activities, he was a popular curate. A contemporary said he was "open, candid and genial, ready at all times to meet friend and foe with a smile." He won the respect of the wild, hard-drinking men who built the railway, and when it was known that he would conduct the funeral of one of the navvies, the whole labour force, between 300 and 400 strong, donned clean white slops and attended the service.

The owner of Boxwell House had an eye to business, too. Augustus Smith had just revived Berkhamsted School, and Mr. Browne built the houses opposite the school entrance, hoping that they would be used as boarding houses or as homes for the masters. This venture resulted in heavy financial loss.

LINK WITH JOHN TAWELL

From Berkhamsted, Mr. Browne moved to Compton Martin, Somerset, where he had the path to the rectory widened so that his nine children could walk abreast. Afterwards, he was vicar of Dudley, Worcs., for thirty years.

On December 26th, 1843, Mr. Browne sold Boxwell House to John Tawell, whose name appeared in a recent article on the Red House, where he lived. Tawell, you may remember, was

of medieval times were still visible. Then, in 1879, the greater part of the Boxwell estate came in the market, some eleven years after the sale of the Kitts End Bury (Kitsbury) estate had permitted the first housing developments in that part of the town.

That was the law, but Tawell's next-of-kin were not left penniless. On December 20th, 1847, a warrant from Queen Victoria granted "lands escheated to the Crown by the conviction for felony of John Tawell for the benefit of his widow and family." Thus, we find a deed dated March 29th, 1848, between William Tawell and William Beaven transferring Boxwell House to Sarah Littleboy.

We have no evidence that John Tawell ever lived at Boxwell House, which has no skeletons in any of its numerous cupboards.

The new owner of Boxwell House, Mrs. Littleboy, was a rich and influential Quaker. A book giving some history of the Littleboy family, though consisting largely of letters of a deeply religious character, was printed for private circulation many years ago, and to my regret the only known copy in Berkhamsted was lost when its owner died some time ago.

VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENT

Until mid-Victorian times the land on both sides of Boxwell Road (which then existed as a short, gated drive to a paddock) formed the small Boxwell estate. Behind the house, garden and stables were nurseries and meadowland. Halfway up the hill, across what is now Boxwell Road, there was a gravel pit. From the bedroom windows one could see (above a rough track called Greenway Lane, now Charles Street) a large tract known as Doctors Commons, where terraces of the great open fields

of medieval times were still visible.

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The sale prospectus stated that the proposed new road was "on the preferable side of the High Street." The vendors stressed that the railway station was near at hand, "from whence London may be reached in 51 minutes." The prospectus used the spelling "Boxwells Road," but the "s" was dropped when the road was made.

MONK'S HOUSE AND COTTAGE

Let us now cross the road to visit two small cottages which arouse much interest, mainly because they have unusual names. Monk's House and Monk's Cottage—the latter is by far the older of the two—were both built long before the highway and footpath were raised.

It is sometimes thought that these cottages had some association with a monastery next door. The building which once occupied the Post Office site was not a monastery, but a hospital. However, it was supervised by the Monastery of St. Thomas the Martyr of Acon, London, so the names of Monk's House and Monk's Cottage may not be inapt.

It could well be that a house on the site of the present cottages was used by visiting monks from London. Another possibility is that monks from Ashridge, some of whom continued to live in the district after the dissolution

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of the monasteries, made their homes here.

But these are mere speculations. I have a hunch that the names Monk's House and Monk's Cottage are not nearly so old as the bricks and timber.

One of the two cottages was once a greengrocery and fish shop kept by a Mr. Griffin—a rare instance of a shop in the High Street reverting to a private house. Usually it is the other way round.

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