

The Town's First Merchants

THE EARLIEST of the town's charters, granted by Henry II in 1156, declared that the men and merchants of Berkhamsted were to be free of all tolls and duties wherever they travelled in England, Normandy, Aquitaine and Anjou.

This privilege, alas, has been obsolete for hundreds of years. If a customs officer asks if you have anything to declare, and you declare that you are a Berkhamsted man free of all tolls and duties, he will probably want to examine your head as well as your suitcase.

Our earliest merchants, I imagine, would have found the charter more helpful had Flanders been included in the duty-free area. Centuries ago Berkhamsted was the home of men who traded in wool and had agencies in Bruges, where the weavers had a high regard for raw materials from England. In due course Flemish weavers were induced to settle in this country and pass on their knowledge to English craftsmen.

BERKHAMSTED EXPORTERS

Many wool merchants were pious, generous men, and they may have been responsible in part for the building of St. Peter's, an astonishingly large church for so small a town. But it would be presumptuous to call it a 'wool church' such as those fine Cotswold and East Anglian buildings which were richly endowed by men who traded in wool.

That local men journeyed abroad is proved by a letter from the King to various merchants living at Bruges. Dated May, 1332, it includes the names of John le Fuller, John Gentilcorps, Ralph de Cheddington and William le Shepard, all men of Berkhamsted with business interests in Flanders. Another member of the Gentilcorps family, Thomas, was one of three men elected to represent the borough of Berkhamsted in the Council held at Westminster in 1338.

John le Fuller and William le Shepard must have been prosperous men. In September, 1332, they lent the King £246 17s. 1d. and £94 2s. 2d. respectively. These were probably forced loans, a not uncommon method of raising money at that time. Fuller and Shepard were appointed receivers of wool in

the county of Hertfordshire in 1341, but had yet to recover the money they had lent to the King in 1332.

Then, in May, 1345, William le Shepard obtained a writ from the King authorising him to collect £16 9s 2½d. from dues in the port of London, the balance of the loan of £94 2s. 2d. having already been collected at Southampton. No interest was paid on this long-term loan!

CAPTURED CARGO

In August, 1351, William le Shepard lent another £40 to the King, and it was arranged that he should recover the money 'out of the issues of the customs and subsidies of wool, hides and wool-fells which he shall export in such ports as he shall select . . .'

Another Berkhamsted exporter, Adam Puff, had a worrying time in 1316. Off the Isle of Thanet, the Admiral of Calais attacked and captured a London ship, *La Petite Bayarde*, belonging to John Prior and destined for Antwerp with a cargo of wool worth £1,200. The largest individual owner was Adam Puff, who had on board 21 serplers of wool valued at £210.

Many attempts were made to obtain satisfaction for this outrage from the King of France, but he failed to keep his promise to compensate the English merchants. In June, 1318, the King of England retaliated by commanding his sheriffs to seize the goods of French merchants in English ports—to the value of £600 in London, £400 in Southampton, £200 in Yarmouth, and £133 6s. 8d. in Ipswich.

RETALIATION

This action shocked the French merchants, notably those of Amiens, whose goods were seized in the port of London. They protested to their King, and on the strength of his promise to pay compensation, the King of England, on August 16, 1318, ordered the sheriffs to release the goods already seized. But full satisfaction was not forthcoming, and in January, 1319, the sheriffs of London were again ordered to seize the goods of French merchants to the value of £402 11s. 10d. As it happened, they still had in their hands goods to the value of £197 8s. 2d., which they

had taken the previous year and not released—proof that the French promises were not taken seriously.

Finally, the Bishop of Winchester was ordered, in August, 1320, to complete the whole business by seizing French goods to the value of £303 6s. 8d. at St. Giles' Fair, Oxford, and £400 at Southampton.

KEEPING UP THE STANDARD

In the reign of Richard II there was a subsidy of fourpence per broadcloth. Every piece was inspected by the alnager, an official who examined and measured the cloth and, if it was up to standard, affixed his seal. It was illegal to sell unsealed cloth, and defective and short-length pieces were confiscated. A Hertford clothier was fined for selling a 'frieze cloth' that was 1-lb. under the recognised weight.

Prices appear to have been rather high. For example, six yards of red cloth were sold at St. Albans in 1423 for 5s. Although tenpence a yard now seems ridiculously cheap, wages of 2d. or 3d. a day were then customary.

In the year 1387, thirteen Berkhamsted producers qualified for the broadcloth subsidy of fourpence, compared with 27 producers at St. Albans and five at Hertford. St. Albans was obviously the wool centre of Hertfordshire, and the industry was well established there—and doubtless in Berkhamsted, too—by the end of the 12th century. Compared with some other counties, however, production was not on a large scale in Hertfordshire.

BURIED IN WOOL

Our Hemel Hempstead neighbours, in 1290, possessed a fulling-mill, and as late as 1580 we have evidence that there were two fulling-mills under one roof in that town. The name John le Fuller, already mentioned as one of the Berkhamsted merchants with an agency in Flanders, suggests that there may also have been a fulling-mill at Berkhamsted.

It is believed that by early Tudor days the industry had ceased to exist in Berkhamsted.

The churchwardens' accounts contain many statements such as 'All buried in wool and so certified at the time'—a reminder of an Act of Parliament which from 1678 until 1815 made it illegal to bury a body unless it was wrapped in wool. But this order came far too late to benefit local wool producers, and today we have to travel some forty miles to the nearest wool town, Witney.

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