

Berkhamsted's Lost Chances

A FEW MONTHS before Armistice Day, 1918, the people of Berkhamsted were invited to take a peep into the future. Most of them were too preoccupied with war-time cares to give much thought to a Brave New Berkhamsted, but when the boys came marching home there was time to praise and criticise a scheme which was designed to clean up and transform the area between the railway station and High Street.

Wealthy residents offered to give valuable land and provide a technical school and infants' welfare centre. The Wilderness slums were to be swept away, Water Lane widened throughout its length, and the ancient Moor trebled in size. To complete the scheme, the townspeople were asked to raise £9,000. Today a similar scheme would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. The recent widening of the upper part of Water Lane alone cost over £6,000.

THE FIRST OFFER

Our story starts in July, 1918, when Mr. Edward Greene, of The Hall (the bygone mansion with parkland and fields which now form the Hall Park Estate) purchased the derelict brewery in Water Lane and some adjacent premises for about £4,000. He offered to give part of this property to the town and the remainder to Berkhamsted School as part of a Town Improvement Scheme which he submitted to the Urban Council. The Council appointed a special committee representative of the various interests and promptly received a favourable report.

Then, on January 22nd, 1919, a public meeting was held to consider the question of a war memorial, and it was agreed that the best memorial would be the fulfilment of Mr. Greene's scheme.

AMBITIOUS PLANS

The committee previously appointed by the Council was strengthened, and a second public meeting was called on 16th June, 1919. The main recommendations of the committee may be summarised as follows:

1. Extension of the Moor to include the whole area between the canal, Mill Street, Lower King's Road and what is now called Greene Field Road. (This road was then privately owned, and as part of the proposed improvement

scheme the Council offered to take it over and extend it to Mill Street.)

2. Erection of a war memorial on the extended recreation ground, possibly taking the form of a bridge over the Bulbourne.

3. Demolition of the old brewery (the site now occupied by Sketchley, Woolworth and part of the car park), to be used for public buildings.

4. Demolition of the slum area between the Wilderness and Water Lane, leaving an open space.

5. Acquisition and demolition of the brewery stores, stables and Adelbert House, the sites to be added to the recreation ground, and the preservation of the wharf near the station as an open space.

GENEROUS OFFERS

In accordance with his original memorandum, Mr. Greene was prepared to give the brewery site, two cottages and a shed in the Wilderness. Earl Brownlow was ready to grant a 999 years' lease of the meadow adjoining the Moor, and to sell the freehold of the brewery stores and Adelbert House.

Mr. and Mrs. Berlein, of Cross Oak, offered to provide an infants' welfare centre in Water Lane in memory of two sons killed in the war; Sir Richard Cooper wished to build a technical school or some other memorial to his father, also in Water Lane; Mr. David Pike offered to buy and present to the town the old Baptist burial ground for use as an open space in memory of a son killed in the war.

In addition, the Urban Council was willing to purchase and demolish slum property in the Wilderness, convert the site into an open space, and make up and take over the private road beside the Bulbourne.

FAILING ENTHUSIASM

With offers from five donors worth many thousands of pounds and the Council's promise of support up to a penny rate, the committee appealed to the general public for £9,000 to complete the scheme and 'make this memorial one of the noblest in the country, and one which will permanently benefit the town and add to its beauty.'

Messrs. G. Loosley and Son printed, free of charge, an appeal booklet which

included a plan based on an aerial photograph. It shows a much widened Water Lane with public buildings on the west side; a tree-lined lawn in the Wilderness; new school buildings lining the east side of Mill Street; a fine boulevard from the top of Mill Street to Lower King's Road; a large recreation ground with shady paths and a fine bridge in the middle.

Yes, a noble scheme, but it did not appeal to everybody. Besides, £9,000 was a lot of money to raise in 1919. Enthusiasm gradually evaporated and no action was taken. This was a double tragedy; a scheme of permanent value was irretrievably lost, and so was the chance of easing the unemployment problem in the slump which followed the war. The town finally subscribed for a war memorial which stood at the top of Water Lane until it was removed to the churchyard.

COUNCIL AND CASTLE

When the improvement scheme was first discussed, Earl Brownlow offered his support but thought that the Moor and the adjoining meadow should be used as a building site. He recommended the Castle arena as a recreation ground, and it is interesting to note that the Duchy of Cornwall simultaneously offered a 31 years' lease of the Castle—the longest period permitted under the Duchy Management Acts—to the Urban Council. Earl Brownlow was prepared to give the town strips of land around the Castle if the Council took over its management. The Prince of Wales, stated the Duchy of Cornwall, wished the Castle and grounds to be maintained for the inhabitants of Berkhamsted and neighbourhood.

But what would be the cost to the Council? The gift horse was looked in the mouth. The Duchy, asked to send their chief steward to discuss the matter, declined with an assurance that the expense of maintaining the Castle would not be burdensome.

And there, it seems, the matter ended. The Council could have been the proud lessees of an important historical site and a wonderful addition to the town's few easily-accessible open spaces. But Opportunity seldom knocks twice, even on the doors of Council offices.

A few years later the Council could have acquired the manorial rights of Berkhamsted Common as well as the town's ancient market rights. Once again the city fathers missed the boat.

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