

Strange Tales from the Registers

ON NOVEMBER 3, 1538, William Johnson and Ales (Alice) Myles were married at Berkhamsted St. Peter's. We have no special reason for recalling them beyond the fact that their names head the list of thousands upon thousands of people whose baptisms, marriages and burials are recorded in the parish registers.

Starting in the reign of Henry VIII, these registers are widely acknowledged to be of special interest and importance. Damp, theft and neglect have robbed many parishes of early documents, but ours are in excellent condition. The records are complete save for the years of the Civil War and Commonwealth, and some shorter periods when the parish clerk seems to have been negligent.

FAMILIAR NAMES

The quality of penmanship is not always good, but few entries are likely to baffle anyone who has had at least a little practice in reading old documents. 'Ann a Count of' isn't the way we write 'An account of' nowadays, but we know what the clerk means. What does it matter if he spells Henry 'Henery' or soldier 'solger'? We recognise the occupations of the shewmaker, apothery, exise ofoser, and basckett maker, but may have to think twice before turning 'doyir' into dyer. And how refreshing it is to find someone officially called a 'mountybanck' way back in 1719!

Right from the start we find surnames which are still familiar in Berkhamsted. Grover, Field, Norwood, Hannell, Gibbs, Herne, Hawes, Dean, Martin, Holloway, Saltmarsh, Birch, Preston, Percival, Kibble, Halsey, Sear, Seabrook and Mead appear among the 16th century entries.

GENTRY AND PAUPERS

We find the names of nearly all our old friends from the local history books—the Murrays, the Axtells, the Sayers, the Cowpers. We meet tinkers and tailors, gentry and paupers, benefactors and murderers, infants and old 'boddies'—every parishioner in fact, who was baptised, married or buried at Berkhamsted in the past 427 years.

We can almost hear the bells pealing right royally and picture the ringers quaffing their free gift of a 'barrel of beare' on reading this joyful entry:

'1660 Ann. Regis. The happie yeare of King Charles the Seconds restauration to his Government.'

Berkhamsted had its tragedies, too. Some entries are so macabre (a widow who was burnt alive, a man who was 'buried but yet alyve') that it would be easy to produce a highly sensational article based on the registers. A sudden sequence of burials almost certainly betokens plague, and it seems that whole families were wiped out. For instance, four members of the Papper family (father, mother, son and daughter) died within a fortnight in August, 1605.

The number of infant burials was fantastically high. But not all the children were Berkhamsted-born. In 1759 and 1760 eleven foundlings were buried—children who were brought to foster-mothers in Berkhamsted over 170 years before Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital was transferred to Ashlyns.

ANCIENT TRAGEDIES

Here are some of the more interesting entries from the register of burials, with a few comments in parentheses:

- 1583—A poor woman from hunger.
 - 1598—John Wynche (?) executed for murdering of Jhon Bristowe. (Bristowe buried previous year.)
 - 1609—Sir Adolphus Carye Knight, a most loveinge benefactoure to ye poore of this Towne was buryed. (Sir Adolphus was first tenant of Berkhamsted Place.)
 - 1623—Joanne ye wife of Arthur Norkott (murthered).
 - 1629—Robert Wood, who died of the obstruction of his (gullet? gut?) through eating of bread.
 - 1634—John Murray, gent. A glory to himself by learning. (Tenant of Berkhamsted Place.)
 - 1635—Richard ye sonne of Robert Bayly drowned in Brickiln Green Pond. (Marginal note: There hath been two drowned in it.)
 - 1635—Susan Wheeler supposed to poyson hirselfe.
- BURIED ALIVE ?**
- 1638—Willyam Gooderidge, buryed but yet alyve. (What does this really mean?)
 - 1639—Henrye Keene, a peculiar with Randall.
 - 1639—Jhon Raneage (?) falling sicknesse.

- 1640—Aurelia, daughter of Mullyn the surgeon.
- 1665—Robert Toofield buried, poysoned by his wife, burnt alive at Hertford.
- 1668—Francis Weathered Esq., Controller of his Majesties workes. (Lived at Ashlyns.)
- 1672—Richard Pools, horse courser.
- 1674—John Newman the Crier buried.
- 1681—Edward Ludlow the hatter buried.
- 1681—Thomas Parslo, Sir William Drake's man, buried.
- 1682—Christopher Woodhouse, Dokter, buried. (Last mayor of Berkhamsted, famous for curing bewitched persons. Two of his sons—buried in 1723 and 1726—were also doctors.)
- 1698—Ann Downes the daughter of Mary Downes was buried by ye officers of ye parish.
- 1701—Mr. Gregory ye Elder of Freesden was buried, yeoman. (One of many entries from Frithsden.)

AN ANCIENT 'BODDY'


- 1701—Goodwife Hudnall was buried, an anshant (ancient) boddy.
- 1701—Ould Goodwife Bates of Freesden was buried.
- 1701—Phobey Bishop was buried a single boddy.
- 1704—Mr. Francis Kellet of the Inward Tempell buried. (Lived at Egerton House.)
- 1707—Edward Somier, Esq. was buried in linnen, informashion being given before a Justus. (The law required burial in wool.)
- 1713—John Bonning which formerly lived at ye Stone Wall —? of this parish buried.
- 1714—Frances Webb, a weoffer (weaver).
- 1719—Benjamin Treacher a miller was buried who was killed by a fall from an hors.
- 1719—Francis Edge a young man who was killed by a fall from an Horse was buried from Esq. Penns of Penn in the county of Bucks. (An employee of the famous family, founders of Pennsylvania.)
- 1720—Henry Hitchcock of the parish of Hempstead who died in the bayliff's house was buried.

THE ANABAPTIST

- 1720—George Toping a Grooser (grocer) was buried, an Anabaptist.
- 1726—Mary Foster, a poor woman.
- 1730—Thos. Wilkinson a sargent in the ffirst Rigmont of foot Gardes. (Regiment of Foot Guards.)

'BEORCHAM'

(To be continued)



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