

## The American Berkhamsted

A SHORT TIME AGO I fulfilled an old ambition by visiting an American township named Barkhamsted. Perhaps you have never heard of it? The name appears only on large scale maps. To give you a clue, Barkhamsted is in Connecticut, some 23 miles west of the state capital, Hartford.

The long arm of coincidence stretches right across the Atlantic, for Barkhamsted and Hartford, New England, are exactly the same distance apart as the two English towns from which their names were taken.

Seven hours by jet to New York, three and half hours by 'Greyhound' bus to the small town of Winsted, and I was within walking distance of Barkhamsted. Not that anybody walks in the United States. Two local historians, Mr. R. B. Jones and Mr. R. Ward, were there to greet me as I stepped off the bus, and Anglo-American talks started as we drove along Main Street.

### LOCAL FAMILY LINKS

How different from the roaring excitement of New York! No skyscrapers, no gigantic stores, no subway. Winsted is gracious and spacious, with tree-lined streets, pleasant houses (many of them of white painted timber), and shady lawns and gardens. I felt that I had been there before, an impression due to early study of the American way of life in the cinema.

In one of Winsted's oldest and loveliest homes, Roderick Bissell Jones talked to me about his family tree, which has its roots in our Berkhamsted. Among his ancestors were three William Pitkins, the first of whom was a chief Burgess and churchwarden of St. Peter's in 1622 and 1627. His son, the second William Pitkin, became master of Berkhamsted School. The third-generation William emigrated to New England, and was appointed Attorney General of Connecticut by Charles II in 1664.

### BARKHAMSTED SCHOOL

My host's friend, Robert Ward, also has Pitkin blood in his veins. He is descended from Martha, sister of the William Pitkin who braved the Atlantic crossing over 300 years ago.

But on with the travelogue. As we left Winsted my host stopped the car while I photographed a sign proclaiming 'Barkhamsted, incorporated 1779. Town

Line.' This refers to the town boundary.

But where was the town? As we drove along a fine highway through beautiful forests, I saw chipmunks, grey squirrels, and robins twice as large as ours. A hefty iron bridge carried us over a branch of the Farmington river. In clearings here and there I saw houses and farms, but signs of activity were few until, in a valley, we stopped outside a large wooden building.

It was Barkhamsted School. The stars and stripes waved to young Barkhamstedians as they played baseball, and a yellow school bus with 'Barkhamsted' painted all along the side was a reminder that this was a rural community, with 1,400 people scattered over thirty square miles.

### JUST LIKE THE CHILTERNERS!

As we climbed a high granite ridge I discovered that America, too, is proud of its old coaching inns. Roderick Jones made sure that I had a typical New England lunch at 'The Coach and Four'—clam chowder, turkey pie, and blueberry pie. Oh, yes, ice water and coffee, too. This was America!

Next, a visit to Barkhamsted Compensation Reservoir, looking like a mountain lake in a deep valley surrounded by forests of oak, maple, beech and dogwood. Water is stored here for the town of Hartford, but after four years of drought sandbanks have risen above the blue water.

In another Barkhamsted valley I saw a chair factory. How like the Chilterns—hills, woods, chairs and all! Near the small factory were an old inn and several houses, perhaps the largest group of buildings in the township.

### FIRST SETTLER

Here and there builders are busy, for Barkhamsted has been 'discovered' by commuters, some of whom work in Hartford, one of the world's greatest insurance centres. The population of Barkhamsted is beginning to rise, but it is still less than it was 130 years ago, when farmers left the rocky hills for the productive plains of the Middle West.

It was in 1746 when the first settler, Pelatiah Allen, cleared and cultivated his land in summer and went hunting and trapping in winter. When Indians were on the warpath, he fled from his

log cabin to a fort in a neighbouring town. He was the only inhabitant until 1759; twelve years later there were 27 families in Barkhamsted, and by 1830 the population had risen to 1,700.

During the War of Independence, there was great bitterness between Republicans and so-called Tories who wished to remain loyal to the King. Several families moved to Canada to stay under British rule. One royalist who stayed in Barkhamsted, with the strange name of Consider Tiffany, was confined to his farm for fifteen months.

In 1929, the 150th anniversary of the incorporation of Barkhamsted was marked by celebrations at which references were made to the English Berkhamsted. Here is a verse from a poem which was recited on that occasion:

They named the town Barkhamsted,  
For the town across the foam  
Brought memories of the motherland—  
Fair England, their dear home.

These friendly, hands-across-the-sea sentiments were expressed by an American lady, and her poem was published in a book to which I, as a youth of nineteen, contributed an article on 'The English Berkhamsted'. The possibility of going to Barkhamsted was then far beyond my dreams.

### PITKIN STREET

I wish there had been time to visit the churches of Barkhamsted and meet more of the people. But soon it was time for Mr. Jones to drive me to Hartford, where one of the oldest streets of the town is named Pitkin Street. It was almost certainly a Pitkin who gave Barkhamsted its name, years before anyone lived there. The spelling, with an 'a', perpetuates the 17th century pronunciation, which is rendered 'Barkhamsted,' stressing the middle syllable.

I just had to see the famous North Church at Boston, and then journeyed on to Montreal via St. Albans, in the state of Vermont. The driver of the long-distance bus saw the joke when I suggested a 200 miles' detour to Dudswell and Tring, in the province of Quebec. Like their English namesakes, they are a few miles apart.

On returning home, I had the pleasure of supplying some historical information to an American lady whose ancestors include Edmund Rice, a Berkhamsted man who, like William Pitkin, emigrated to America 300 years ago. My visitor told me that she was thinking of leaving New York for a home in Connecticut. Among the places under consideration is—Barkhamsted!

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