

THE KING'S WAY TO THE CASTLE—1

Berkhamsted's Royal Road

IT IS STRANGE to think that a new road which took much of the trade and traffic away from Castle Street was called Lower King's Road. The one street in Berkhamsted with definite royal connections is Castle Street, for kings, queens and princes—and great nobles, statesmen, bishops and ambassadors—regularly rode up and down this historic quarter-mile when it was virtually a private drive to the Castle.

Castle Street was our first important branch road, and for hundreds of years visiting writers described Berkhamsted as a town consisting of two streets, High Street and Castle Street. John Leland set this fashion in descriptive writing in the reign of Henry VIII, referring to Castle Street as the 'sumwhat lesser strete . . . where the ryver rennith.' As late as 1931 the author of 'A Pilgrimage in Hertfordshire' said that Berkhamsted consisted of the High Street and Castle Street, 'with numerous lesser ways.'

PLACE IN HISTORY

Castle Street has a very special claim to local fame. Much of the town's history has been made by the people who have lived, worshipped, taught, studied, traded and played in this ancient street.

Normans rode down a grass track, splashed through the Bulbourne and squelched through a marsh to reach the drawbridge. Castle Street did indeed lead direct to the Castle in those early days. The walls and towers and shell-keep were visible from the High Street, for the only intervening buildings were little tenements of wood and thatch. Similarly, when St. Peter's Church was built in the early 13th century, it could be seen in all its glory from the Castle. The very site of the church was determined by the king's byway, crowned at either end by imposing piles of flint and freestone.

CHANGING FORTUNES

Then, as now, Castle Street was constantly shedding old buildings and gaining new and larger ones. The street was destined to lose and regain importance. It ceased to be a royal road towards the end of the 15th century, but half a century after the walls of the deserted Castle were left to crumble, a handsome foundation brought learning and new dignity to the street. It was

John Incent's 'fair large school of brick and freestone,' and the Dean of St. Paul's himself stayed there from time to time.

Substantial houses were already replacing mean little tenements occupied by the lord of the manor's servants, and it was in one of these houses where another distinguished divine made his home. He was Thomas Waterhouse, last rector of Ashridge Monastery, who was 'driven out on St. Leonard's Day' with a pension of £100 a year and fifty loads of wood. Waterhouse often worshipped at St. Peter's, to which he bequeathed his vestment of crimson velvet.

FIRST PRIZES!

Castle Street continued to be the birthplace of good causes and bold enterprises. The Congregational Church started in a private house and moved in turn to larger buildings, always in the same street. Primitive Methodists held their first services in Castle Street. Roman Catholics met there for worship until about 60 years ago.

When the canal was made, the town's first wharf was in Castle Street. When the railway was built, the town's first station was in Castle Street. A newspaper, the *West Herts Post*, was born there.

Before Lower King's Road was made in 1885, Castle Street was a shopping centre second only to the High Street. Today, curtained shop windows tell the story of abandoned counters and tills.

PAWNSHOP—AND PUBS

The town's one and only pawnshop was in Castle Street. In neighbouring shops and yards, our grandfathers could buy anything from a brush or a wooden bowl to a tombstone or a canal barge—and see them all made on the premises. They could see a travelling menagerie in what was afterwards a timber yard, or watch football and cricket on a playing field now smothered with modern additions to Berkhamsted School. Bargees could be heard lustily coaxing their horses over Castle Street bridge—a rare bridge indeed with its special track for horses.

In early Victorian times there were seven public-houses in Castle Street. Now, with the closing of the Railway Tavern, there are but two.

The Castle Hotel was built in the style of many another railway hotel to capture the trade of men who were deserting coaches for trains. In fact, it made the best of both transport worlds, beckoning to travellers as they left the station and providing good stabling behind the hotel. One does not need to be ancient to recall the days when horses were perpetually clattering in and out of the yard.

ST. GEORGE'S

Since some of the street's oldest teeth were drawn two years ago, an empty site has made us wonder how all those 'sunken' half-timbered cottages were squeezed into so small an area. A picturesque link with the past has gone, but the Bulbourne (the canal permitting) goes on for ever, almost forgotten now that we no longer cross it by 'a bridge of wood.'

Just south of the river is a fairly modern house with an unusual history. It is now called St. George's, but many of us remember the days when it flaunted a fine carved sign depicting St. George and the Dragon. Not that it was a public-house in the alcoholic sense. It was a temperance hotel and coffee tavern, kept for many years by Mr. Topp, who offered good, clean beds for a shilling a night, sold fruit syrups at a penny a glass, guaranteed 'comfort, cleanliness and civility', and unsuccessfully tried to woo Berkhamstedians from public-houses by brewing excellent coffee.

EARLY PRE-FAB

But Mr. Topp did at least attract the drum and fife band for their weekly practices, leaving the town's brass bands to rehearse, perhaps with more spirit, at the Five Bells and the Red Lion.

As was recently mentioned in the *Review*, St. George's is a translation from the French. In Victorian days Lord Brownlow visited an exhibition in Paris and was attracted by a house of unusual design. It was partly pre-fabricated, and his lordship ordered a duplicate to replace two tumbledown half-timbered cottages in Castle Street. The signboard previously mentioned was carved by one of his Ashridge craftsmen.

Both Lord and Lady Brownlow were delighted that the early pre-fab should be used as a temperance hotel, following the failure of a parochial effort to provide 'a public house without intoxicating drink' in the High Street in 1874.

'BEORCHAM'

(To be continued.)



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