

## The Yeomen of Northchurch

LOOKING through our ancient parish registers, we find family names which still appear in local electoral lists. Very few people indeed can claim with accuracy that their ancestors came over with William the Conqueror, but many residents would have little difficulty in compiling family trees showing direct descent from the yeomen of old Berkhamsted and Northchurch.

When Charles II was king, the families of Northchurch bore such names as Holyday, Percefall (Percival), Nash, How, England, Norris, Birch, Sheppard, Fenn (Fenn), Lea, Kempster, Putnam, Pitkin, Sear, Dell, Rolfe, Glenister, Harawell, Puddefoote, Wingfield and Gladman. Most of these names are still current locally, though the spellings may not be quite the same.

### THE FOUNDLINGS

Periodically, of course, old residents moved elsewhere and newcomers settled in Northchurch. Some of the new arrivals were here for a tragically short time, such as the children of the famous Foundling Hospital in London. Some 170 years before that institution was transferred to Ashlyns, foundlings were placed in the care of foster mothers in the country, where the infant mortality rate was just as high as it was in the malodorous streets of London.

An article on the Berkhamsted parish registers (May, 1965) showed that eleven foundlings died in the parish of St. Peter in 1759-60. The Northchurch register contains the following entries:

- 1758. Mary White an infant of the Foundling Hospital.
- 1758. A Male Child of the Foundling Hospital, viz. Israel Hart.
- 1758. Mary Dennis a Foundling.
- 1759. Ambrose Diggs Foundling.
- 1760. A Foundling Child. (No name given.)

### COLOURED PARISHIONERS

In the Berkhamsted register we found the name of just one coloured man: 'Joseph Maritan, a Black'. Presumably he came from Mauritius and was employed as a servant. He died in 1748. Thirty years later there were two negroes in the parish of Northchurch, for we find the following in the list of baptisms:

- 1779. Pero, a Black.
- 1780. Maria John, a Black.

The entries for 1781 include the burial of 'Henry an infant'. Poor little Henry; if he had a family name it was never recorded.

We find several references to the Northchurch workhouse, which was afterwards converted into four cottages and survived near Billet Lane corner until about two years ago. Daniel Deare, Daniel Merlin, Jeremiah Fenn, John Amon and William Wells, all inmates of the workhouse, died in April, 1767, and were undoubtedly victims of one of the many epidemics which swept the parish. Between December, 1796 and March, 1797, five parishioners died of small-pox.

### CHOLERA—AND BRANDY

But the greatest tragedy came in 1832, when, between 22nd September and 10th October, fifteen Northchurch people died of cholera. Subscriptions were invited to relieve distress, and the Countess of Bridgewater, of Ashridge, donated over half of the £115 raised to help the poor. Much of the money was spent on blankets, beds, lime, clothing, shoes, tar barrels, meat and brandy. Brandy, in fact, was the most expensive item of all—£11 14s. 6d.

Grants were also made to improve sanitation. 'A great many drains and cesspools are in a very foul and unhealthy state', the clerk reported.

But Northchurch was still a notoriously insanitary village in 1838. In the month of February alone, eight young Northchurch children died. In the same year, however, there is a reference to Sarah Gower, who lived to the ripe old age of 96. But no one ever beat the record of 105 years, achieved by Mother Clifford who died in 1610.

### THE POOR OF NORTHCHURCH

All that we know of many of the parishioners is that they were 'poor'. The following table, based on the list of burials, tells its own story of dire poverty:

Year	Total No. of deaths	Described as 'Poor'
1785	15	7
1788	16	6
1789	14	7
1790	14	10
1791	14	9
1792	18	12
1793	32	19

To add to this melancholy story, two great enterprises brought sorrow to Northchurch. In four successive years (1805-8), four people were drowned in the newly-opened canal. Later on, the register contains the names of many boatmen and their children who died on or in the canal.

### THE RAILWAY BUILDERS

The building of the London and Birmingham Railway was accompanied by many fatal accidents. Seven men were killed on the line at Berkhamsted. Northchurch, too, was the scene of several fatalities. Two men were killed while working on the line in 1836, and later on the deaths occurred of an excavator, a 'minor' (miner, obviously employed on Northchurch tunnel), and a railway inspector. Yet another workman, Charles Belcher, was killed on the line in 1838; information about him was recently sought by his descendants in New Zealand.

At this period the parish clerk was fond of noting the parishioners' occupations, and we find the following: labourer, plait-dealer, cordwainer, basket-maker, boatman, rope-maker—and gipsy. The death was also recorded of a farmer and publican at Bank Mill. Where was his public-house situated?

### PETER THE WILD BOY

Turning back the pages to the 1785 burials, we find the following entry: 'Peter the Wild Boy, Feb. 27th.'

At this point the list of names is interrupted for what is probably a unique feature in any parish register. It is a long account of Peter's life written by the Rev. T. Bland, 'Head Master of the free School of Berkhamstead, St. Peter's, Herts.'

The character described by Mr. Bland was unique, too. Two articles on Peter the Wild Boy appeared in this series a few years ago, and it is unnecessary to repeat an oft-told story. Mr. Bland, however, was anxious to discredit some of the wild tales which had been told by a number of 18th century writers.

'Yet after all that has been said of him', wrote Mr. Bland, 'he was certainly nothing more than a common Idiot without the Appearance of one . . . That Posterity may not . . . be hereafter misled upon the Subject, this short and true Account of Peter is recorded in the Parish Register by one who constantly resided about 30 years in his Neighbourhood, and had daily Opportunities of seeing and observing him.'

BEORCHAM.



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