

Lord Brownlow's Enclosure

THIS IS THE CENTENARY YEAR of one of the great events of local history. In a few hours before dawn on 7th March, 1866, month-old railings which had enclosed the central part of Berkhamsted Common were reduced to scrap iron.

The broad facts of this dramatic raid on behalf of the commoners are well known, and the full story is admirably told in the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow's *History of Berkhamsted*, published in 1934 and already rare.

Everybody in Berkhamsted knows that the hero of the fight for the Common was Augustus Smith. The landowner, Lord Brownlow, is regarded as the villain of the piece. Some people have possibly pictured him as the evil man of some Victorian melodrama, twirling a black moustache and brandishing a horse-whip.

EARLY ENCLOSURES

In fact, his lordship was a quiet, gentle young man who inherited the Bridgewater millions but never enjoyed good health. His doting mother, Lady Marian Alford, was undoubtedly the power behind the Ashridge throne. When references are made to the ill advice that Lord Brownlow received on the Common enclosure, Lady Marion is singled out as the ill-adviser-in-chief.

Not that the enclosure of 1866 was the first of its kind. Early in the 17th century Coldharbour Farm and 300 acres of land were filched from the Common and never restored. Then, in Charles I's reign, a third of the Common was enclosed, corresponding almost exactly to the 1866 enclosure. This land was recovered after a spirited fight, but yet another abortive enclosure was made during the Protectorate.

FAMILY HISTORY

It seems that there was no further trouble until Victorian times, when, to quote the centenary booklet recently published by the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, over 614,000 acres of commons in various parts of the country were enclosed between 1845 and 1864.

This society has always looked upon the fight for Berkhamsted Common as one of its first and greatest triumphs; it was one of the founders of the society,

Lord Eversley, who induced Augustus Smith to take up the cause.

Now for a little Brownlow family history. In 1853, when John William Spencer, the second Earl Brownlow, inherited a huge fortune, he was eleven years old. His mother, ever anxious about his weak constitution, often took him with her to Mentone and Madeira. According to Bernard Falk's *The Bridgewater Millions*, her extravagance was such that to ensure a constant supply of tender mutton for her invalid boy in Madeira, she imported a flock of Southdown sheep together with a shepherd to look after 'the poor dears.'

STRANGE REQUESTS

But back to the less sunny clime of Ashridge and Berkhamsted. Lady Marion claimed that in 1854 a deputation from Berkhamsted consulted her on the desirability 'of cultivating the Commons of Berkhamsted and Northchurch.' She could not consent to the 'disfigurement of the beautiful Frith' during her son's minority.

Four years later Lady Marion claimed that, in accordance with the expressed wishes of the people of Berkhamsted, a scheme was suggested for the Common to be divided into three equal parts, on the assertion that one third belonged to the Duchy of Cornwall, one third to Ashridge, and one third to the commoners. George Whybrow commented that it was inconceivable that the townspeople could have expressed such wishes.

Then came the year 1860, when Lady Marion understood that the Prince Consort would consider selling the Duchy of Cornwall's local estates to the owner of Ashridge. She asked her son if he would prefer a large sum in the bank, on coming of age, or that the savings of his minority should be spent in securing the Commons and farms between Ashridge and Berkhamsted.

EXPENSIVE PURCHASE

His lordship preferred the land, and the whole of the Berkhamsted property, including all the manorial rights and profits but excluding the Castle, was sold to Lord Brownlow's trustees for £144,546. The purchase was completed in 1863, when Lord Brownlow came of age.

Lady Marion claimed to know it as a

fact that two or more persons wished to buy the Duchy property in the hope of making a large profit by cutting up the Park and demesne lands for building plots. George Whybrow casts doubts on the existence of those speculators. However, if Lady Marion had not acquired the Park over 100 years ago it *could* have been built on in Victorian days. There were, in fact, no developments on the north side of the town until fairly modern times, and every time I walk over the Park or view it from New Road (which, with other roads to and across the Common, was made by Earl Brownlow in 1865), I say: 'Thank you, Lady Marion.'

With the extension of his property Earl Brownlow became one of the biggest lords of the manor in the country. And it was not long before some acts of aggression were committed on the Common by digging trenches across green drives. The conflict with Augustus Smith started when he remonstrated with Lord Brownlow's solicitors; the nuisance was abated.

Without in any way trying to minimise the callous stupidity of attempting to enclose the Common, for which Earl Brownlow and his mother must rightly shoulder the blame, it must be emphasised that they were not evil landowners. The young earl, who died less than a year after the enclosure, did a great deal of good during his short life. He was a generous employer of labour and initiated valuable schemes—road-building, for instance—which continue to benefit the whole district.

KINDLY NEIGHBOUR

His mother was a lady of great accomplishments and a kindly chatelaine at both Ashridge and Belton House, Grantham. The book she wrote in defence of the Common enclosure is extraordinarily interesting, and very well written; but it was for private circulation, unlike a once-famous work she wrote on needlework.

She died at Ashridge in 1888, having whispered responses to the prayers recited by her brother, Lord Alwyne Compton, Bishop of Ely, until her strength failed.

Little Gaddesden, to quote Vicars Bell's history of the village, will not forget Lady Marion's 'disinterested and enlightened work . . . a tradition of service to its neighbours became the mainspring of life at the great house.'

'BEORCHAM'

(To be continued)



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