

Lord Brownlow's 'Carrot'

EVERYBODY in Berkhamsted knows, or should know, that the hero of the fight for the Common in 1866 was Mr. Augustus Smith. Less well known is the very strong nudge he received from the Commons, Open Spaces and Footpaths Preservation Society, which was founded in 1865 and published *A Short History of the Society and its Work* to celebrate its centenary last year.

This interesting booklet, which draws extensively on Lord Eversley's *Commons, Forests and Footpaths* (1910), recalls the astonishing fact that between 1845 and 1864 over 614,000 acres of commons were enclosed.

Enclosure, of course, means the termination of common rights and the appropriation of the land for other purposes. So long as waste land was needed to grow food, such enclosures, though illegal, found a great deal of favour. The commons in and around large towns also began to have great intrinsic value as building sites. It was a threat to build on Putney Common which was the immediate cause of a Government Committee being set up in 1865 to enquire into the best means of preserving the commons in the immediate neighbourhood of London for the use of the public.

SPECIAL MENTION

It is a matter of pride and local interest to know that Berkhamsted, Wimbledon and Wandsworth Commons, Hampstead Heath and Epping Forest, are the five open spaces which receive special and lengthy mention under the heading, 'Some of the Society's Earlier Cases', in the centenary booklet.

The Society's part in the fight for Berkhamsted Common is best told in the words of George John Shaw-Lefevre, M.P. (afterwards Lord Eversley):

'Meeting Mr. Augustus Smith in the House of Commons, I was able to induce him to take up the cause, and to employ Mr. P. H. Lawrence, the Solicitor of the Commons Society, in proceedings to vindicate the [Berkhamsted] Commoners' rights and interests. After careful consultation between Mr. Smith, Mr. Lawrence and myself, it was decided to resort to the old practice of abating the inclosure by the forcible removal of all the fences, in a manner which would be a demonstration, and an assertion of

right, not less conspicuous than their erection. For this purpose it was thought necessary to employ such a force as would not only speedily remove the fences, but render any opposition on the part of the employees of Lord Brownlow absolutely impossible.'

AUGUSTUS SMITH

Last month's article endeavoured to state the case for the lord of the manor. Now we turn to his spirited opponent, Augustus Smith. He was a descendant of Thomas Smith, a draper, founder of the Smith Bank at Nottingham in 1699. One of Thomas's grandsons or great-grandsons, James Smith, purchased Ashlyns Hall in 1801, and two years later he married his second wife, Isabella, to whom there is a large monument with a fine marble figure in St. Peter's Church. Augustus, one of three sons of the second marriage, was born in 1804 at Ashlyns Hall, which he inherited in 1843 on the death of his father.

As a young man Augustus Smith made his mark in local politics. He induced fellow townsmen to provide our first elementary school—now Park View School—and conducted a long campaign which resulted in much-needed changes in the management of Berkhamsted School, of which he has sometimes been described as the re-founder. Later on, he helped to pave the way for a re-organisation of the Bourne Charity School.

THE RIGHT MAN

Augustus Smith extended his interests far beyond Berkhamsted. He acquired the Scilly Isles and became known as Lord or King of the Scillies, where—not without charges of using dictatorial methods—he greatly improved the conditions of the islanders.

Links with the West Country were reinforced when Augustus Smith became M.P. for Truro. He entered the House of Commons in 1857 and annually asserted the rights of the public against the claims of the Crown and the Duchy of Cornwall to the ownership of the foreshore of the sea coasts.

These were the qualities of courage and persistency which marked him out as the man best suited to fight the cause of the Berkhamsted commoners. He was, of course, himself a Berkhamsted commoner.

Before moving on to the exciting

events of 1866, it is necessary to recall Lord Brownlow's attempt to appease the commoners, and the townspeople generally, by offering a central recreation ground. This was widely acclaimed as a more useful 'lung' than a stretch of waste land on a distant hill-top.

LORD BROWNLOW'S OFFER

Writing from the Ashridge Estate Office on April 30, 1865, William Paxton advised the Vestry (the local authority) that Earl Brownlow had acquired sufficient interest to enclose Berkhamsted Common under the General Enclosure Act. 'In regard to the best method of making a just and liberal compensation in lieu of the existing trivial outstanding claims on the Common,' Mr. Paxton wrote, his lordship was willing to give land 'somewhere near the town for the purpose of recreation, provided the same be on the west side of the railway and be generally acquiesced in.'

The Vestry meeting, attended by an unusually large number of ratepayers, decided that the most eligible site for a recreation ground was the land between the railway and the river Bulbourne. A committee was appointed, and this committee wrote to Lord Brownlow, praying that he would 'comply with the views of the Vestry and of the tenants of the Manor generally, feeling confident that under the superintendence of proper Trustees, the proposed Recreation Ground will be a permanent source of health and enjoyment to the present and future inhabitants of the increasing town of Berkhamstead, as well as a lasting memorial of Your Lordship's desire to promote the morality, health and prosperity of the town.'

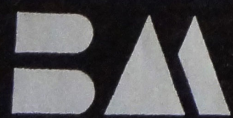
This letter was accompanied by a document with 186 signatures, containing an undertaking to accept the land in lieu of common rights.

THE 42-ACRE SITE

The land stretched all the way from Castle Street to Billet Lane. The area between the railway and river from Mill Street to St. John's Well Lane and between the canal and river from St. John's Well Lane to Gossoms End (plus a piece of land on the south side of the river) was to form a recreation ground of 32 acres. The remainder (10 acres) was to be allotment-gardens. A small area between Mill Street and Castle Street (site of the old watermill and cottages) was earmarked 'building ground'.

Lord Brownlow dangled an attractive carrot, but, as we shall see next month, it was not to Augustus Smith's taste.

'BEORCHAM'



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