

A Cottage in Berkhamsted Churchyard

How the High Street Developed

IN MANY OLD TOWNS the streets are narrow and crooked. Berkhamsted is also a very old town, but it has a very long, straight and wide High Street. Why?

This question was put to me—in the High Street, naturally—when I was walking home after studying the Town Centre Appraisal Plan. I had just been reading some rather obvious remarks that the main road had considerably influenced the town's development, that it was the spine as well as the communal heart of the town, and that today this dual role was a major problem. A traffic problem, of course. Our wide street isn't wide enough.

THE BEST ROUTE

But my questioner wanted history, and although it was easy to explain why the High Street is long and straight (or fairly straight), I had to admit that I had never asked myself *why* the central part is so wide.

Our main road is part of a Belgic track which became part of a Roman road (Akeman Street) from Verulamium to Cirencester—and as everybody knows, the Romans followed a straight line whenever they could. If this were still virgin country, surveyors would probably choose the same route; it is far enough from the river to escape flooding, and low enough to avoid steep gradients, such as the one in Charles Street. From Bank Mill to Northchurch there is a rise of only 50-ft., the steepest gradients, near the Cooper Technical Bureau and the Post Office, being almost imperceptible unless one tries to push a car up the slopes.

RIBBON DEVELOPMENT

The road builders of AD41, or whatever year it was, determined the straight line of the A41 through Berkhamsted

and Northchurch, but were *not* responsible for the nasty bend at Dudswell; that was a later but still ancient diversion from the straight and narrow Roman way.

The question why our High Street is long as well as straight surely answers itself; the road was there, ripe for ribbon development whenever the population was large enough to take advantage of it. Trade followed the houses; inns and shops extended east and west (mainly west) and eventually created a very elongated shopping area.

BY

'BEORCHAM'

Now we come to the really ticklish question: Why is the central part of the High Street so wide?

I have a hunch that the shape was influenced by our oldest surviving institution, the street market. In very early times, even before St. Peter's Church was built, the market was almost certainly held beside the highway, as were our ancient fairs. Having established one of the county's best markets where nearly all the trade of a wide district was transacted—there were few if any permanent shops—it was unlikely that the town would allow the market place to be hemmed in too closely by houses and inns.

MARKETS AND FAIRS

The parish church? That was a different matter! It was built right up to the roadway, before there were any other buildings of importance in the High Street, and to this day it causes a slight contraction and bend in the roadway.

West of the church there was a wide, open space which tapered off gradually before reaching what is now the corner of Cowper Road. It was rather like a long village green, where the road, such as it was, was gradually widened by carts and wagons that were driven left and right to avoid potholes, mud, dust, pigs and chickens. In the country we still go round rather than through a muddy part of a footpath.

I believe it is true to say that even now it would be possible to assert ancient market rights and erect stalls on both sides of the High Street all the way from the Parish Church to the Sayer Almshouses. This area corresponds to the widest section of the High Street, adding strength to my theory that the market at least helped to create the shape of the town centre.

IN THE SHADE

But, you may say, the road suddenly narrows east of Water Lane corner. This is because the row of buildings from the Victoria Wine Company's shop to the church is an encroachment on the 'village green'; it seems that at a time when the market was declining, some of the stalls were replaced by permanent shops and houses, thereby thrusting buildings which formerly faced the High Street into the shadows of Back Lane. It was never intended that the Court House should be half-hidden from view.

The biggest single obstruction, however, was the former market house, which, until it was burnt down in 1854, stood at the top of Water Lane and extended as far as the kerb. Even in early Victorian times it was said to hamper traffic.

A CLERGY HOUSE?

At the Parish Church there was another and still more surprising obstruction. Occupying the corner of the churchyard where the war memorial stands today was a little, two-storeyed house which actually adjoined the church.

Rare prints show that it was an attractive little house; a door and a large bay window faced the west, as did a bedroom window; there was another door facing the High Street.

To have been built on this site it must originally have been some sort of clergy house or the home of the parish clerk. We find references to 'the Church House' in old documents, and sometimes this seems to have been a synonym for the Court House. But the use of the

word 'tenement' appears to indicate the churchyard cottage in the following entry in Norden and Salter's survey of the Honour of Berkhamsted (1616): 'The Churchwardens of Barkhamsted St. Peter's hold to them and their successors 1 Messuage or Tenement called the Church House. The Quit Rent thereof is 12d. per annum due to the said Francis Barker.'

A PAUPER'S HOUSE

The house remained until 1826, and a charity commissioners' report published a few years later states that with another cottage at Gossoms End it was bought by the parish in 1703 for the habitations of two poor families. Obviously in a poor state of repair by 1826, it was demolished 'in order to open the west entrance to the church.' But no great improvement was made until 1870, when the south-west corner of the church ceased to be used as the parish fire station.

Why this house was bought by the parish in 1703 when it should already have been parish property is a mystery; perhaps it was sold by the church at some time and then conveyed back.

It seems so strange, building a house in the churchyard against the very wall of the church, within a few feet of the main door. But in many other parishes tenements and even shops were built against churches. St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield, was similarly cluttered until about 50 years ago, and Stow, in his 'Survey,' railed against 'a fair and beautiful church (St. Michael's, Cornhill) . . . greatly blemished by the building of lower tenements . . . in place of a green churchyard, whereby the church is darkened, and in other ways annoyed.'

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