

Local History with a Personal Touch

## Long Memories and Short Commons

TO MY GREAT REGRET, tape recorders were not available when I first supplemented my knowledge of local history by interviewing old inhabitants. Men and women with long memories are always valuable sources of information, and my files include many articles based on interviews with residents who, if alive today, would be centenarians. But to hear them describe how the market house went up in flames in 1854 or how the fences on the Common went down in anger in 1866—ah, that would make a first-rate programme for the Local History Society!

It was just before the war when William Fisher, 91 years old and the doyen of our allotment-holders, told me how he helped to put up Lord Brownlow's fences. 'And they came down quicker than they went up,' he added.

### SMOCKS IN FASHION

But his memory was not so long as that of Mrs. Charles Osborn, who, on her 95th birthday in the early 1930's, reeled off the names of some of the stallholders before we lost our ancient market house in 1854. 'Let me see, now; there was Mrs. Dormer—oh, yes, and Mr. Stone. They came over from Chesham to sell cakes and sweets and fruit. The market was always busy, and lots of the men wore smocks—sometimes they went to church in them. I remember Mr. Pearson, the grocer, who made candles behind his shop; he dipped the tapers in great pans of fat. Very smelly. Then there was Mr. William Cooper, of the chemical works. They say that after riding his mare on his rounds he blindfolded her and used her for turning the mill which ground the first sheep dip...'

Another good source of information was Edward Emery, who moved to Watford but had lively memories of his

boyhood days in Cox's Lane, now King's Road. He lived in a row of eight cottages which shared one drinking water tap, one rainwater tank and one large brick oven. Fuel cost nothing beyond the energy needed to gather furze. Men and boys, young Edward among them, brought loads and loads from the Common.

School holidays were spent gleaning, and the Emery family gathered enough wheat in Dell Field to last the family all through the winter. Mr. Cook ground the wheat into flour at his mill near the

BY

### 'BEORCHAM'

Moor, and Mrs. Emery baked the finest bread anyone ever tasted. Farmers sent word when gleaning could start, and sometimes paid children for odd jobs such as stone-picking.

Mr. W. G. Gilbert, 84 years old when I interviewed him a few years before the war, remembered when Ellesmere Road was allotment-gardens. And, he said, the land above the old level crossing near Rose Cottage would have been built on but for a financial crisis in Victorian times. His father came to this district to build Northchurch tunnel, and forty years later my informant helped to build the 'new' railway station. Another interesting piece of information from Mr. Gilbert: he worked on a restoration of St. Peter's and saved some old flints and rubble for incorporation in Sunny-side Church many years later.

In 1952 I interviewed an 85 years old lady at Potten End. She was the youngest of ten children, a mighty family to be reared by a father who never received more than 13s. a week during a lifetime's

employment at Lane's nurseries. Originally their cottage had only one door, and the only floor covering was a sack in front of the fire. The floorboards were scrubbed twice a week and sprinkled with fine sand. There was but one tablecloth, one pair of sheets, and for a time two brothers shared one pair of boots—one wore them in the morning, the other in the afternoon. No water tap; supplies came from a tank. And they were glad to trudge all the way to Berkhamsted and back for free soup. Yet there was great happiness in this poor cottage, and the whole family sang as they plaited straw for a few coppers.

### SIXPENCE AN HOUR

A dear old friend, Joseph Tuffnell, was 86 when I interviewed him in 1948. He remembered his brother Walter climbing the scaffolding when the Baptist Church was built and playing a fanfare near the top of the spire with Thomas Ellens, Nearby, in Tower Mills, at the end of Thompson's Row (off Holliday Street) Joseph was apprenticed to John Silks, one of the town's wood-ware master-craftsmen. He learnt his trade the hard way, sometimes helping to fell and then cart trees to the workshop, where pit-sawing was the vogue. Little use was made of a circular saw in those early days. The hours? 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., except on Saturdays, when he knocked off at 4 o'clock. The only holidays were Christmas Day and Good Friday. Sixpence an hour was a good wage for a skilled craftsman; when he received 24s. a week Joseph was among the town's best paid manual workers.

Another old Berkhamstedian, Frederick Chappell, had been a chorister for 70 of his 83 years when I interviewed him in 1949. He left school in 1879 and was apprenticed to Edward Hill, a tailor, whose shop occupied a third of the present Westminster Bank site.

### LATE NIGHT DELIVERY

Tailoring was a notoriously bad trade for hours and wages. Frederick worked, and worked hard, in an attic workshop from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. in summer, and 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. in winter. And after leaving the shop the young apprentice was sometimes required to deliver parcels to outlying villages. Early closing days were unknown, and on Saturday the shutters were not put up until 10 p.m. or later if customers were still in the shop.

The only whole day's holiday was Christmas Day; contrary to custom, Mr. Hill expected his men to put in a full

morning's work on Good Friday. Wages were 1s. a week at the age of 14, rising to 6s. a week six years later. A craftsman's wage was £1 for a 60 hour week.

Seventy years after starting his apprenticeship, Frederick Chappell could afford to laugh about a wet January afternoon when he was told to take a parcel to a customer in Kings Langley and was given 2d. to buy a child's ticket from Boxmoor to Berkhamsted after walking three-quarters of the way. He rebelled and reported the scandalous request to his parents. Meanwhile Mr. Hill notified the police of his apprentice's disobedience, but as a result of family intervention someone else was detailed to take the parcel.

### POCKET MONEY

Two months later, on a frosty afternoon, Frederick obeyed an order to take a parcel to the butler at Abbots Hill, near Nash Mills. This time the tailor offered him no fare at all, but told him to take the dog for company on the 13 miles walk. The dog was exhausted and had to be carried most of the way home.

But there was a joyous moment at the end of the week's long toil: Frederick was given a penny from his wage of 1s. and bought a massive packet of sweets at the market. And when he eventually received £1 a week and married, he was distinctly better off than his father, who was General Finch's gardener at Berkhamsted Place for 16s. a week.

Recollections such as these prove what most of us already know—that the old days were *not* good old days for a very large section of the population. But it is interesting to have first-hand accounts of Victorian Berkhamsted, and in future I hope, 'tape' my interviews with old inhabitants.



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