

Fun and Games in Merrie Berkhamsted

Entertainments Old and New

THE OLD TIME MUSIC HALL recently presented by the Operatic and Dramatic Society prompted a reader to ask what types of entertainment were available locally in years gone by.

For centuries the great popular events of the year were the Whitsuntide and Michaelmas fairs, which started as extra-large versions of the weekly market. The fun of the fair came when sideshows and refreshment booths were added to the market stalls. For many years the Whitsuntide fair was transferred from the High Street to the Common, where races and other amusements were followed by fiddling and dancing far into the night.

TAVERNS IN THE TOWN

Strolling players occasionally gave performances in barns, and when circuses started touring the country in the mid-18th century our townspeople made their first acquaintance with clowns and performing animals. On May Day, at Christmas and at harvest suppers, Merrie Berkhamsted created its own entertainment.

But until little more than a century ago there were few social activities outside the taverns, the only buildings other than churches and chapels which regularly opened their doors to the public. Many parochial meetings and dinners were held in the largest rooms of the largest inns, each of which held social evenings at which vocalists and instrumentalists exercised their talents.

FIRST SOCIAL CENTRE

Then, in two or three decades, Victorians found many new opportunities for enjoying leisure time. The Town Hall, opened in 1860, quickly became a social centre, though no such term was used at that period. Churches

and chapels built rooms for Sunday schools and found them just as useful for a variety of social activities. For the first time women were able to spend an afternoon or evening in the company of other women, or in mixed company, at lectures, concerts, magic lantern shows, spelling bees, etc. Other functions were organised by temperance societies and friendly societies.

When the round of winter activities was over, genteel garden fetes, with dancing on the lawn, were preferred to raucous statute fairs in the High Street.

The town's oldest society, the Mechanics' Institute (founded in 1845),

BY

'BEORCHAM'

was in competition with the Conservative Club, the Liberal Club, the Working Men's Club, and the Winter Club for Boys. Cricket, football and tennis clubs were formed, as well as a very active harriers' and athletic club. The Berkhamsted Buckhounds had a large following. The Working Men's Club organised an annual Whit Monday sports meeting, and for the Oddfellows' August Bank Holiday fete in the Castle grounds special trains were run at excursion fares.

BLACK AND WHITE MINSTRELS

By the 1870s no one could complain that there was nothing to do in Berkhamsted. A drum and fife band became St. Peter's Band, an amateur musical society was founded, and a choral society gave frequent concerts. By 1877 we had our own Black and White

Minstrel shows, provided by the Berksted Black Boys, later known as the Jolly Niggers, a name that was not frowned upon in those days. Many older residents remember the late Mr. Edwin Winter, who, carrying on the good work started by his father, ran a 17-strong troupe who blacked their faces with a special blend of burnt cork and stale beer and had sufficient engagements to make a professional company jealous.

There were professional shows, too, and many famous singers came to Berkhamsted. Touring companies, such as Maggie Morton's, made our grandmothers weep and clap with performances of 'East Lynne' and 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' at the Town Hall.

THE FIRST CINEMA

Circuses and travelling fairs continued to visit the town, and it was in a tent that Berkhamstedians saw their first moving pictures. Some 57 years ago the town's first cinema was built in Cowper Road. The Gem Picture Palace was a grand name for a corrugated iron building with a noisy gas engine and an unreliable projector, Kitty Wilkins, the pianist, competed with those early cinema pests, the sub-title announcers who droned away in the belief that no one else could read. The manager was accustomed to returning the full price of admission when the projector jammed halfway through the performance.

The audience faced the projector, seeing films on the back of a rather small and almost transparent screen. This method of projection led to some loss of clarity and later the films were shown on the matchboarded wall.

THE PICTURE PLAYHOUSE

A year or two before the first World War, Berkhamsted's second cinema was opened—the Picture Playhouse, in Prince Edward Street. Talking (or rather singing) pictures were shown there at least ten years before the 'talkies' as we know them today were introduced. Synchronised records were played on the old type of horn gramophone.

The Picture Playhouse provided 'live' turns in the middle of the film programme, and a violinist as well as a pianist accompanied the films. But this second cinema, which soon put the Gem out of business, ceased to show films in March 1917, when its seats were transferred to the newly-built Court Theatre.

Although used mainly as a cinema, the

Court really was a theatre, with dressing rooms and a reasonably large stage. The screen was raised for stage 'turns', and in the first World War excellent pantomimes were presented by the Inns of Court O.T.C. Later, the Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society performed Gilbert and Sullivan and other light operas at the Court Theatre, which lost its intimacy when the theatre was enlarged soon after the 'talkies' were introduced. At a later date an organ was installed, and Vincent Collier rose from the depths with a gaily illuminated console to give short recitals.

REPERTORY THEATRE

A brave attempt was made to run a repertory theatre in the spring of 1939 by an excellent company introduced by Mr. J. Whitmore Humphreys, but when war broke out audiences dwindled and the Court Theatre reverted to films.

Our fourth cinema, the Rex, would have been built at Swing Gate Lane corner had a more central site not been found by demolishing Egerton House a few years before the second World War.

What happened to the older cinemas? The Gem stood derelict until it was used for a short time as an auction saleroom. Then, in March 1916, it was bought for £300 by the Gas Company, for eventual use as a warehouse. But the Inns of Court moved in and used the former cinema for training and quartermaster's stores. Until the time it was demolished a few years ago, the Gem retained its box office.

The Picture Playhouse became the King's Hall, and the Court Theatre, which was originally topped by a not very waterproof dome, started a new lease of life as a supermarket.



BROWN & MERRY

ESTATE AGENTS, AUCTIONEERS, VALUERS, SURVEYORS
AND PLANNING CONSULTANTS

128 HIGH STREET, BERKHAMSTED Tel. 5421/2

Partner in Charge J. O. BOLTON KING, F.R.I.C.S.,

And at Tring, Aylesbury, Hemel Hempstead, Wendover, Leighton Buzzard, Bletchley, Stony Stratford and Bedford

KEEP



COOPER, McDOUG

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW . AUGUST 1967

BERKHAMSTED REVIEW . AUGUST 1967