

From £12 'Jayle' to £100,000 Police Station

When Berkhamsted Owned a Prison

A REPORT that the Home Office has approved the rebuilding of Berkhamsted Police Station at a cost of £100,000 in 1971 is not likely to provoke an outcry for the retention of the present building. Of late Victorian vintage, it is not one of the town's architectural gems. Nevertheless, the site has been occupied by the Police and their predecessors, the keepers of the Bridewell, for over 200 years, and it would be appropriate to place a plaque on the new station stating that a prison formerly stood on the site. But on second thoughts, this may not be the happiest of local historical facts to advertise.

A document of 1616 contains a reference to a 'cage' or place of detention. Two years later James I's charter gave Berkhamsted the right—which it already enjoyed, if that is the appropriate word—to have 'a prison or goale (sic) within ye boroughe.' Something much grander than a 'cage' was provided. Known as the house of correction, it served not only the borough but the whole of the Dacorum Hundred; in fact, the Hundred provided £30 to erect and furnish the house.

ALDBURY IN DEFAULT

Instead of erecting a new house the bailiff and burgesses converted and furnished an existing house, installing their own officer, Henry Holmes, as keeper. In 1626 he complained that the inhabitants of Aldbury had not paid their share (13s. 4d.) of his salary, evidence that other parishes in the Hundred were helping to maintain the prison.

In the late 1630s, the house of correction was closed and the bailiff and burgesses were in trouble for selling the house, allegedly to their own profit. There were sharp reminders that the £30

originally received came from the inhabitants of the Dacorum Hundred, not from the inhabitants of Berkhamsted alone. Happily, the 'city fathers' did not have to go to a house of correction at Hemel Hempstead, which was used when the one at Berkhamsted was closed, neither were they made to wear the handcuffs and shackles which, according to an inventory of 1642, were among the possessions of the borough.

THE BRIDEWELL

In 1640 the Corporation decided to build a new 'jayle,' comprising a cell 7½-ft. square and 'one roome over the same.' The estimated price of £6 10s. was to include labour and all materials except locks. But later on a larger scheme

BY

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was favoured, and Thomas Piddleton, a carpenter, contracted to build a gaol 12-ft. long and 8-ft. broad. The price went up from £6 10s., to £12, the first step on the long road to bigger and better buildings costing £100,000.

For over a century the Dacorum Hundred maintained a Bridewell, not a very good one, at Hemel Hempstead. Then, at the January Sessions of 1764, the chief constable instructed Mr. T. H. Noyes, J.P., to find a suitable place for building a new Bridewell at Berkhamsted.

Mr. Noyes was a man who liked to save money. Why have a new building? Like the Corporation over a century earlier, he favoured converting an old property, and selected a row of three small tenements at the corner of Cocks

Lane, afterwards named Bridewell Lane and now known as King's Road. The owner of the tenements, George Rose, accepted £112 as a fair and just price, and the three tenants, S. Axtell (descended from one of the last monks of Ashridge), Francis Gould and Job Beezeley had to find new homes.

By April 1764 the necessary alterations had been completed at a cost of £120 12s. 10d. Berkhamsted thus acquired a new Bridewell, and what is now one of the most valuable sites in the town, for a total cost of £252.

The first keeper, George Hoar, received a salary of £20 a year. He died five years later and Sarah Hoar was appointed keeper at the same salary as her late husband. Sarah must have been a brave woman; in 1779 she nursed a prisoner, Isaac Simpson, who had small-pox. For extra services she received £5 8s. 9d.

By 1779 the authorities were wishing that Mr. Noyes had built a brand new Bridewell. The converted tenements were 'insufficient for the safe custody of persons committed thereto,' and repairs to the value of £5 2s. 4d. were carried out. But prisoners continued to escape.

EASY ESCAPES

Thomas Wildly, sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment for petty larceny in 1784, lived up to his name. He was put in irons but nevertheless forced a way through the thin wall dividing the prison from John Dorrien's stable. He was recaptured at Northampton.

John Ghost, three years later, was publicly whipped and imprisoned for leaving his family chargeable to the parish of Tring. He, too, broke out of gaol, was recaptured, and sentenced to another public whipping and six months' imprisonment.

A Berkhamsted carpenter named Loader was paid £33 to strengthen the Bridewell, but determined and desperate men still broke out.

In 1782, in accordance with the requirements of a new Act of Parliament, the Rector (the Rev. John Jeffreys), the Rev. Walter Bingham and Mr. Thomas Halsey were appointed to inspect the Bridewell. They found two men who were 'almost naked.' The clerk was so moved to pity that he ordered four shirts for the men at a cost of 10d. per shirt.

At the Midsummer Sessions, 1789, a committee of justices reported that the Bridewell was still insecure. 'The rooms for men and women want air,' they

reported. 'The whole extent of the ground is 44-ft. by 33½-ft., the men's prison is 16½-ft. by 10½-ft., and the women's 17-ft. by 11-ft. . . It is very indifferently entered; no employment, no furniture. Keeper's salary £20. Prisoner's allowance 1 lb. of bread per day, and water, and let out once a day.

'One side of this prison,' the report continued, 'is against a cooper's shop, and that partition is a mud wall, raddled, and inside of the prison lined with an inch board. They can converse. There is a dungeon, a most dreadful hole, without air, without any light, nine steps down, and the brick bottom perished. In future no prisoner is to be put into this place. The average number committed here in a year is about 14.'

LAST DAYS OF THE BRIDEWELL

By the 1820s it was generally agreed that the Bridewell had outlived its usefulness, and on at least two occasions the justices all but decided to sell the property. Finally, in 1843, alterations at a cost of £56 10s. were made to 'render the place fit for a police station to which prisoners might be remanded before commitment, but it would not be fit for prisoners under any sentence, however short.'

For all its internal horrors, the Bridewell had the appearance, from the High Street, of a pleasant double-fronted house. Its antiquity was established by an overhanging upper story which kept rain off the constables when they stood outside the door in King's Road. But the road was very narrow, and when the old building and an adjoining shop were pulled down in 1894, part of the site was sacrificed to widen the road. Perhaps there will be further widening when the new police station is built in 1971.

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