

Street Cries of Bygone Berkhamsted

Watchman, What of the Night?

THE STREET CRIES of old Berkhamsted are not what they were. Instead of Mr. Mead's bell tinkling invitingly as he strode along with a tray of muffins on his head, we have chimes to announce that the ice-cream van cometh. Instead of the bell and voice of the town crier we have men in cars using loudspeakers to tell us how to vote.

'Milk-o!' 'Coal!' 'Rag-bone!' These calls to housewives are seldom heard nowadays. 'Ripe tomatoes!' may be shouted in the market place, but rarely in the side streets. Hordes of schoolboys yelling 'Ga-ZETTE, Ga-ZETTE!' no longer race through the town on Friday afternoons.

I remember an old fellow who pushed a truck around the town, calling out 'Jam-jars! Windmills!' He was nicknamed Ali Sloper and gave a paper windmill on a stick to every child who handed him an empty jam-jar—a very fair exchange.

WORDS AND MUSIC

Before my time, but within the memory of my parents, 'Old Brushy' came over from Chesham, wearing a billycock hat and an assortment of brushes and brooms tied to his back. To advertise his wares he selected a broom with a long handle and danced round it, singing:

Buy a broom, ma'am, buy a broom,
ma'am,

A large one for a lady
And a small one for a baby;
So it's O my good lady,
O please buy a broom.

Such music as we now hear in the streets is usually provided by portable radios. The Welfare State has killed hospital parades featuring a band at the front, another in the middle, and a third

at the end of the procession. Whistling, once the most popular form of do-it-yourself music, is almost out of fashion. Street singers and musicians are obsolete. Thirty years have passed since the last ex-serviceman patrolled the town with a gramophone and a cap for spare coppers.

With the help of Henry Nash, I would now like to take you back to an age when we had street cries by night as well as by day. Everybody has heard of nightwatchmen who patrolled the

BY 'BEORCHAM'

streets of ancient cities, calling out 'Twelve o'clock and all's well. It's raining.' Well, this nocturnal service was provided in Berkhamsted, too, and we would know nothing about it but for a fascinating page in Nash's *Reminiscences of Berkhamsted* (1890) and the preservation of the nightwatchman's rattle at the Berkhamsted Institute.

Writing about the days of his youth before Victoria was queen, Nash tells us how the dark was dreaded by many of the inhabitants. 'There were no police,' he writes. 'The shelter of one's own home was felt to be the only place of safety; when once within their own domicile these timid folks enjoyed a sense of security; they could retire to rest with the full confidence that the town was safe under the guardianship of a responsible and trustworthy official, then known as the night-watchman.'

A more self-reliant man could not have been found had the parishioners

searched the whole country, says Nash, and it is a pity he did not record his name for posterity. 'Enveloped in a coat with many capes,' the watchman started his rounds at 10 o'clock every night, armed with a stout bludgeon and carrying a rattle to summon assistance in case of need. He was out in all weathers, keeping watch and ward until the break of day; a monotonous and dreary round of duty.

EARLY WARNING

At regular intervals the parishioners 'heard his slow measured step, in unison with his deep sonorous voice, calling the hour. This not only gave evidence of his vigilance, but the restless sleeper was assured that all was well, and could again slink into slumber with safety.'

Nash makes a good point when he says that the practice of calling the hour and announcing the state of the weather was a boon to the criminal, who could time his nefarious activities accordingly. But the detection or prevention of crime was not the watchman's sole duty; he had many little friendly offices to fulfil, rousing the doctor in case of need or calling the fire brigade. He also lent a helpful and steady hand to men who were too drunk to find their own door.

A MAN AND HIS DOG

Nash tells a curious story about the watchman and a dog: 'One night, a strange dog approached the watchman in a manner which was readily reciprocated; a mutual friendship was at once formed, and the remaining duties of the night were performed in company. At the break of day, when the watchman turned his footsteps homewards, the dog left him; he knew not from whence he came nor whither he had gone, and never expected to see him again; but on resuming his duties the following night, to his great surprise the mysterious stranger reappeared in the same friendly manner, and went through the usual night's watching, again at break of day disappearing. That this was no mere whim or fancy for nocturnal wandering is shown by the fact that this sagacious animal seemed to know perfectly well what it was about, as the practice was continued for years without intermission... It was soon discovered that his owner was living at Potten End, nearly two miles from the scene of his nightly rounds.'

The nightwatchman recalled by Nash

was the last to hold this very ancient office. Surprisingly, I cannot recollect seeing a reference to the watchman in the churchwardens' accounts, and it would be interesting to know what pittance he received for his 'dreary and monotonous' job.

THE TOWN CRIER

There is, however, an early reference to a town crier in the parish registers, dated 1674: 'John Newman the crier buried.' According to various editions of Loosley's Directory of Berkhamsted, Peter Wood was town crier and bill-sticker in 1882, followed by Mr. F. Nash in 1892 and Mr. D. Nash in 1901. The combination of two forms of advertising, by voice and by poster, is interesting.

Mr. W. Elliott, the last crier, was for some years a near neighbour of mine. I remember interviewing him on his golden wedding day in May, 1940, when he was 72 years of age. He was born near Aylesbury and came to Berkhamsted in 1905.

On the suggestion of a former mayor of Hertford, Mr. Elliott did not confine his activities to Berkhamsted. In nearly 300 towns he 'cried' such varied events as agricultural shows, the Dunmow Flitch, and the Olympia circus. Locally we were more accustomed to hear Mr. Elliott announce 'Water off!' and rewards for finding lost watches and dogs. He was superbly uniformed, and if ever a bell shone, it was Mr. Elliott's.

But in 1940 his tricorne hat was worn for the last time; the ringing of bells was limited to announcing 'all clear' after a warning of gas attacks. Mr. Elliott died during the war and his office was never revived.



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