

Berkhamsted's Modern Growth—1

THE DECLINE OF THE COUNTRY MANSION

By 'BEORCHAM'

UNTIL THE MIDDLE of the 19th century, Berkhamsted was essentially a valley town. Most of the 3,395 inhabitants lived in High Street, Castle Street, Mill Street, Water Lane, Back Lane, The Wilderness, and Red Lion Yard. With the exception of a few cottages, farm-houses and mansions there were no buildings on the hillside south of High Street, and fewer still on the north side of the Bulbourne.

The first important expansion followed the sale of the major part of the Pilkington Manor estate; this permitted the creation of several roads in the valley, including Manor Street and Chapel Street.

The pattern was set for many future developments. Part or the whole of an old estate was sold, and wide acres that were enjoyed by one family provided sites that were eventually occupied by dozens and in some cases hundreds of houses.

VITAL STATISTICS

The breaking up of one estate after another has gone on for so long that today there is an acute shortage of building sites. That the town will continue to grow there is not the slightest doubt, but it is not the business of a local historian to speculate about the future. In the past, all the prophets, including the planners, have underestimated the town's growth. Fifty years ago, anyone who dared to prophesy that Berkhamsted would almost treble its houses by 1969 would have been laughed to scorn.

Shortly after the 1914-18 war, when the first Council housing scheme was still a thing of the future, 7,292 inhabitants lived in the 1,690 houses of the urban district, which at that time did not include Northchurch.

Today, 15,210 Berkhamstedians live in 4,724 houses and flats, of which nearly 1,100 are owned by the Urban Council. Thus, in half a century, the population has more than doubled, the number of houses has increased nearly three-fold, and because most of the newer houses occupy more land than older terrace houses, the built-up area is probably four or five times larger than it was in 1919.

STATELY HOMES

Fifty years ago, in one part of the town, the house density was about 60 to the acre. In contrast, many hundreds of acres were owned by a few families, whose mansions stood in extensive grounds, some with home farms and cottages for coachmen, gardeners and other employees. 'By kind permission'—how often were those words printed on handbills and posters?—fetes and school treats were held on spacious lawns, and visitors had the privilege of wandering round the gardens and greenhouses. But for a cottager to enter a mansion by the front door was a rare honour, something well worth mentioning to one's neighbours.

The Hall, Haresfoot, Millfield and eight or nine other large mansions looked so solid, so rich, that one imagined they would last for centuries. That they

would ever be pulled down and the estates broken up seemed as improbable as the dismemberment of the British Empire.

But what happened? One after another the houses were demolished. In addition to the three already mentioned, we have lost Berkhamsted Place, Northchurch Hall, Highfield House and Whitehill. Ashlyns Hall is now a home for elderly people, Woodcock Hill is shared by several families, Lagley has been converted into flats, Kingshill is the National Film Archive, and Cross Oak is empty. Ashridge House and Pendley Manor are colleges. The last really big house to be built in the district, Berkhamsted Hill, is a research station. However, tradition lives on at Rossway, beautifully situated in lovely parkland with a well-farmed estate, and Norcott Court and Norcott Hill remain intact.

AFTER THE WAR

Half a century ago some members of the landed gentry knew that they could never return to the gracious, spacious living they enjoyed before the war. Sons who would have kept up the family tradition were killed in action, family fortunes were depleted by death duties, taxation was already described as 'crippling.'

The horse-and-carriage days were almost over, but it was easier to turn stables into garages than to modernise houses with too many rooms, too many draughty corridors, too many coal fires and too few labour-saving devices. Few people could afford to employ the large domestic staffs of pre-war days; besides, there were more jobs in offices, shops and factories for women and girls, few of whom were keen to go into domestic service.

But there were still servants' registry offices in the town where mistress and maid were introduced to each other. The 'servant problem' was by no means new; in the early 19th century a dearth of indoor servants was attributed to the cottage craft of straw-plaiting, and in 1871, when the craft was dying, our rector strongly recommended that children still being taught to plait straw

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would be better employed 'in respectable service.'

THE AGE OF LEISURE

Nevertheless, in Victorian and Edwardian times it was rarely necessary for the lady of the house to wash a spoon, draw a curtain, or put a log on the fire. In 1851, at The Hall, a butler, footman, coachman, groom, housekeeper, cook, nurse, dairymaid, kitchen maid, two laundry maids and two housemaids ministered to the needs of Sir Thomas Halsey, M.P., his wife and one small son.

In the same year, at Berkhamsted Place, eight servants were at the beck and call of General Finch, his wife and an orphan who was staying at the mansion on the night of the census. At Haresfoot, the Smith-Dorriens had a domestic staff of twelve.

The largest employer of labour in the district was not Mr. William Cooper, of the chemical works, nor Mr. Lane, the nurseryman, with his army of gardeners. When in residence at Ashridge, Lord and Lady Brownlow employed up to thirty maids, two butlers, two footmen, two stillroom men, and other indoor workers, as well as twenty gardeners, fifteen keepers, three coachmen, seven stablemen and dozens of others who worked in the park and fields.

THE ASHRIDGE ESTATE

Bernard Falk, in *The Bridgewater Millions*, says that the third Earl Brownlow, towards the end of his life, felt the ownership of a vast, rambling estate to be a great and costly mistake. The staff at Ashridge, depleted in the first World War, was never rebuilt to its former strength; even so, when the earl died in 1921, and it was known that the house and estate were to be sold, many people were dumbfounded. The closing of a flourishing factory could not have caused more uncertainty and despair.

Nowadays, when a large estate is broken up, bulldozers and builders quickly appear on the scene. Conditions were different in the 'twenties. It was some time before great changes were made on the Ashridge estate, which extended to the Berkhamsted valley. The first important building developments started in the 'thirties, when the Castle Hill estate and the upper part of Dell Field were developed.

Similarly, building on a large scale did not start at Little Gaddesden until the 'thirties. The village had grown slowly from 83 houses in 1800 to 129 in 1921, and in the ten years after the death of Earl Brownlow the number rose by only five. In the next 17 years, however, the number of houses in Little Gaddesden was doubled.

(To be continued next month.)