

Berkhamsted's Growing Pains—2

HOUSING PROBLEMS IN YEARS GONE BY

By 'BEORCHAM'

LAST MONTH'S article showed that in fifty years the population of Berkhamsted has more than doubled, while the number of houses and flats has increased almost threefold.

In the years which immediately followed the 1914-18 war, astonishingly little headway was made. By 1921 the number of houses in the town was 1,670, only 23 more than in 1911. This was almost certainly the smallest increase in any decade since the end of the 18th century. Moreover, the population of the town declined, perhaps for the first and only time since the Black Death. There were 7,302 inhabitants in 1911, and we have war memorials to remind us of the tragic reason why the number fell to 7,295 in 1921.

FIRST COUNCIL HOUSES

Men returned from the war to a land that was to be fit for heroes to live in. Some postponed marriage for months and even for years because there were no empty houses fit for anyone to live in. Many old properties were in a deplorable state. And where could one find a new house? The total number built by private enterprise was three in 1920, three in 1921, 11 in 1922, 20 in 1923, and 37 in 1924—a total of 74 in five years.

In this period, however, the first council houses were built. Sites were found at Gossoms End and Swing Gate Lane, and 50 houses were finished by 1922. In difficult circumstances the Council made a bold if expensive start, but three years elapsed before more council houses were built.

UNFIT FOR OCCUPATION

The Council had other housing problems. Between 1920 and 1925, 71 houses in the urban district were found unfit for occupation, but very few were closed—four in 1920, and another four in 1925. Many defects were remedied as a result of the Council's action, without the issue of closing orders.

Much of this information comes from a *Report on the Industrial Housing Conditions of Berkhamsted*, compiled by the Citizens' Association in June 1925. Members of the Association visited 191 houses, only three of which had baths. Seventy were without sinks. Over 80 had no internal water supply and depended upon taps in backyards, some a good distance from the house and often common to two or four houses. There were cases where one tap was shared by six, seven or eight houses. Many water-closets were in a bad state of repair; in some the flush had not worked for months or even years. Forty houses had no dustbins.

Only 26 of the 191 houses investigated had larders; in 52 there was no provision whatever for storing food.

Tenants feared that if they complained to the landlord, the sequel would be eviction or a demand to pay higher rents. To make matters worse, it was widely thought that the tenant should not improve the property, as only the landlord, not the occupier, would benefit.

The rents of six-roomed houses, inclusive of rates, varied from 6s. to 12s. a week. Four-roomed houses were let at

3s. to 10s., and two-roomed houses at 2s. to 4s. 11d. Some of the small houses were without backyards and back-doors.

SWING GATE LANE

The rents of the first council houses varied from 10s. 9d. to 13s. 6d. a week, exclusive of rates. These houses were built at an average cost of £1,098 each, a staggeringly high figure, much more than the Council paid for houses built later in the inter-war period.

The first council houses were built at Gossoms End and on what became known as the Swing Gate Lane estate. The land acquired by the Council at the eastern end of Berkhamsted was part of the vast estate belonging to The Hall, a mansion which stood beside the High Street halfway between Swing Gate Lane and Bank Mill. Built in Georgian times on older foundations, with cellars reputed to have been used as a prison for Royalists captured in the Civil War, The Hall was pulled down after ending its days as the first home of the preparatory department of Berkhamsted School.

The Hall estate extended all the way from Highfield to Garden Field Lane, a distance of over half a mile. The larger portion, east of Swing Gate Lane, known as Hall Park, was developed by private enterprise at various periods, a considerable time after the portion east of Swing Gate Lane was acquired by the council. Here, soon after the first World War, roads were made over pleasant pastures. For some time Swing Gate Lane itself was as narrow at the High Street end as it still is at the Bottom Farm end; before widening it was jokingly known as Swing Cat Lane.

HIGHFIELD ESTATE

In the 'thirties, a small, adjacent estate was acquired by the Council. Highfield House with its many out-buildings was pulled down, the extensive gardens and an adjacent meadow provided new building sites, and Highfield Road, Victoria Road and Three Close Lane ceased to be culs-de-sac. A somewhat similar scheme had been proposed some sixty years earlier, when 'villa building land' was offered for sale at Highfield; it was proposed to extend and

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link up Highfield Road and Victoria Road and build 34 villas in what would have been called Highfield Place and Highfield Crescent. But this Victorian dream did not come true for many years; then, on the meadow, we had pre-fabs, not villas.

By the time the second World War broke out, the Council was the town's largest landlord, owning nearly 300 houses. Today the number is approaching 1,100, thanks largely to the Durrants and Westfield estates.

Between the wars, private enterprise extended the town in some new directions, and there was considerable infilling. Mr. David Pike developed what became known as the Ashlyns Estate. Greenway, started before the 1914-18 war, was extended, and Greenway West came into being. George Street was extended, and more houses were built in Shrublands Road, West Road, Anglefield Road, Kingsdale Road and Crossways were new names on the town map. On the far side of the railway, Meadway linked Gravel Path with Ivy House Lane. The first houses appeared on the Castle Hill and Dell Field estates.

The 1,690 houses of 1921 had risen to about 3,000 in 1939, part of the increase being due to the extension of the urban district to include a large part of Northchurch. At Northchurch, too, there had been considerable building, but not on the scale which transformed the village after 1945.

But in this long-running series of articles we are not concerned with recent history; in any case modern developments have been so numerous that a list of new roads alone would take up a great deal of space.

And so, in the next article, we shall discuss the development of the town in Victorian times, when Berkhamsted first expanded beyond the ancient triangle formed by High Street, Castle Street and Mill Street.