

Mission Rooms in the 'Suburbs'

THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE TOWN

By 'BEORCHAM'

TWO YEARS before the sale of the Kitsbury Estate provided the first of many building sites on our southern hillside, Berkhamsted began to sprout at the opposite end of the town. In 1866, various small plots suitable for cottages were offered for sale on the land that is now occupied by George Street, Ellesmere Road and several small side roads.

The canal (1800) and the railway cutting (1835-7) hemmed in a strip of land nearly half a mile long and nowhere more than 175 yards wide. It was farmland but for a narrow piece of common land at the eastern end, described in a survey of 1616 as 'a little wast plott or moore at Bank Mill.' Many children enjoyed playing there until the last remnant of Bank Mill Common disappeared in the late 1920s.

THE BOMBED BRIDGE

It seems that from early times some sort of track ran from a farmyard at the Gravel Path end to Rose Cottage, on the far side of the canal bridge. The old road from Rose Cottage to the Common was interrupted by the railway, and as the railway company did not like level crossings the road was diverted over a bridge some 225 yards west of Rose Cottage. George Street and Ivy House Lane came into being, and the lower part of the old road to the Common was abandoned, though its site is still marked by trees and undergrowth on the east side of the allotment-gardens.

Twenty-eight years after the event, we are in no danger of helping the enemy by revealing that Sunnyside railway bridge was bombed. A train ran into the debris, causing the locomotive to topple over. Happily, apart from a cut thumb there were no injuries. To the delight of the Vicar of Sunnyside,

a footbridge was quickly provided; this was replaced by the present bridge.

But we must return to 1866, the year of the saving of Berkhamsted Common from enclosure and the birth of a district which bears the happy name (never officially recognised) of Sunnyside.

THE CIRCUS

Both George Street and Ellesmere Road were started from the Gravel Path end. When George Street was first developed, 52 plots were offered for sale on both sides of the street, and early plans show that the bend some 100 yards from Gravel Path was to be named 'The Circus'. Fortunately for the residents, it wasn't.

A map of 1878 shows that Ellesmere Road was then little more than half its present length, and contained 43 houses, some of which have been pulled down since the war.

In George Street, some 50 houses were built in the first ten years, all at the western end. The road, however, had been made all the way to the railway bridge, but at a point opposite Swing Gate Lane it was blocked by three cottages and their gardens. To get round this property a little by-pass was provided.

HAMPTON COURT ROAD

The three cottages (were they new, or had they been there from earlier times?) were knocked down when, in 1880, another 100 'eligible freehold building plots remarkably well adapted for the erection of small cottage property' came in the market. These plots were in the middle and eastern portions of George Street and Ellesmere Road, and in three little turnings from George Street to the canal, named Hampton Court Road, William Street and Charles Street.

Why Hampton Court? I do not know. The name was applied to the

little turning beside the recreation ground; it is now part of Little Bridge Road. Charles Street became Bedford Street, to save confusion with another Charles Street in the town. There was another little turning called Smith Street (after Augustus Smith or a Sunnysider?) on the west side of the recreation ground, which was formerly occupied by J. King's steam sawmill.

THE CANAL FOOTBRIDGE

The mill, with its tall chimney, was demolished when the Council purchased the site some 40 years ago. About the same time, the canal footbridge was built. For years residents had complained about the long walk to High Street via Gravel Path, and complaints grew louder when buses were introduced. It was galling to see a bus stop only 100 yards away with no means of reaching it unless one made a long detour or swam the canal.

Incidentally, Mr. Edward Greene, of The Hall, gave land 30-ft. wide to provide a link between High Street and the canal footbridge; and a very generous contribution to the cost of the bridge was made by the late Sir Richard Cooper, who was not unmindful of the fact that many of his employees at the Lower Works lived in Sunnyside.

Here's another interesting point: In 1866 it was proposed to make a road from High Street (just east of the Bull public-house) to the canal, with a row of nine cottages. This New Street, as it was to be called, was never made; but only a stone's throw away, Londrina Terrace (Little Bridge Road) was built some sixty years later.

Another incidental piece of information: When Paxton Road was made between Ellesmere Road and George Street, an adjacent site was advertised as 'public-house plot'; but the plot never matured, and the Paxton Arms, or whatever it would have been called, did not compete with the district's only public-house, the Rising Sun, a very good Sunnyside name for the last pub. in the town to receive a licence.

CHURCH ACTIVITY

The rapid growth of two new 'suburbs'. Sunnyside and Kitsbury, was watched with great interest by the clergy. Hundreds of Berkhamstedians were living some distance from their parish churches, and although Victorians were very good walkers it was feared that some would find excuses for not going to church regularly.

Sunnyside, now a separate parish but then in the eastern (detached) portion

BEORCHAM (Contd.)

of Northchurch parish, was provided with a mission room at the west end of George Street. It was large enough to accommodate 100 people for a Christmas tea, a fact I have discovered in No. 1 of St. Mary's Magazine, dated January 1883.

In an introductory note, the editor stated: 'A whole town lies between us and seven hundred of our people, and we depend on the condescension of the little local press for brief notices of what the Church is doing. The rapid growth of the population, rising at the last census to 2,128 souls, tells of material progress, with every prospect of continuance. We may wish to see boundaries altered, and districts re-arranged, but that is of the future.'

The mission room was replaced by a corrugated iron church in Ivy House Lane, and this became the church room when the handsome Church of St. Michael and All Angels was built in 1909, with many flints in its walls taken from St. Peters at the time of the 1870 restoration. The old mission room was moved to Station Road and used as a storage shed, but we can still see, on the wall of the first large villa in George Street, marks left by the roof of the mission room all those years ago.

A KITSBURY BARN

What happened at Sunnyside was almost exactly duplicated at Kitsbury. The first houses on the hillside were built in Kitsbury Road, Cross Oak Road and a very short Charles Street, over half a mile from St. Peters Church. For this somewhat isolated but growing residential area another mission room was provided. A lofty barn was converted (a suitable word, surely!) into a place of worship, and services and meetings were so well attended that in due course a larger building was erected in Cross Oak Road. This was a corrugated iron church which, like the one at Sunnyside, is still used for many activities, though since 1906 it has been dwarfed by the soaring, handsome Church of All Saints.

That it is still popularly known as Kitsbury Church is due to the location of the original mission room in, or rather just off, Kitsbury Road. No one ever speaks of Cross Oak Church.