

Rural life in years gone by

FRITHSDEN THE CHERRY HAMLET

By 'BEORCHAM'

WITHIN A FEW MILES of Berkhamsted we may still find a village and a hamlet or two which look much the same today as they did many years ago. Water End, for instance, consists almost entirely of attractive old houses, plus two splendid bridges, and if there are changes I am too busy dodging the traffic to notice them. Nearer home, Nettleden is neat and bright and small; with some fifty inhabitants it must be one of the tiniest villages in the county. It has a church but no inn. In the next valley we find a somewhat larger hamlet with a public-house but no church; its name is Frithsden.

With a few old houses strung along a narrow, mile-long valley, on the far side of Berkhamsted Common, Frithsden takes its name from Le Frith, as the wooded part of the Common was called in early times. Some people call it 'Freezedden', thereby perpetuating a pronunciation which caused early map-makers to use the spelling *Fresden*. In the register of Berkhamsted St. Peter we find another spelling, *Freesden*; for example, 'Ould Goodwife Bates of Freezesden,' who was buried in 1701.

A HOUSE IN TWO COUNTIES

This pleasant hamlet is old and quiet and none the worse for not having a remarkable history. But its little stories are well worth telling.

Today Frithsden is in the parish of Nettleden - cum - Potten End, but for centuries it was just inside the parish of Berkhamsted St. Peter. Until the county boundary was revised in 1895, the northern slopes of Frithsden (and the adjoining ancient parish of Nettleden) were in Buckinghamshire. At least one house had its front door in Herts and its back door in Bucks. It is now wholly in our county, with emblematic white plaster panels, two of which record that

the house was built in 1513 and restored in 1879. It faces the little triangular green with a small, strange neighbour, a disused chapel.

John Bunyan is said to have started Frithsden's long Nonconformist tradition; there was a meeting house in the valley long before the Bethesda (Baptist) chapel was built in 1835. The last services were held shortly before the war.

The Church of England was rather late in providing services for parishioners on the far side of the Common. Even so, Frithsden, not its larger neighbour, Potten End, had the distinction of being the first place in the old parish of St. Peter to acquire the next best thing to a chapel of ease.

EVENSONG IN THE PARLOUR

The story has previously been told in these pages of Henry Twells, curate of Berkhamsted from 1849-51, who walked or rode over the Common to conduct services in a cottage parlour. But where? At last I believe I can identify the cottage.

A short time ago I had the pleasure of interviewing Mrs. Edith Kirby, who lives in the cottage in which she was born 85 years ago. This cottage, halfway along the Frithsden valley, bears the date 1733 and may be recognised by the well in the garden, a very good subject for the camera.

Mrs. Kirby recalled that as a young girl she was sent to bed early on Sunday, so that there would be more room in the parlour for her parents and neighbours who congregated for services held by the vicar of Potten End. Of course, this was thirty years or so after Henry Twells (who became a well-known hymn writer) visited Frithsden, but is it not reasonable to conclude that *all* the services were held in the same parlour?

LONG WALKS TO SCHOOL

Mrs. Kirby showed me this parlour—and a cactus which has lived there for over 100 years—and talked to me of her girlhood days. When three years of age she started attending school at Potten End. At the age of eight she went with her two sisters to the Church of England school behind the Court House, walking two miles each way. Unlike some of the children who lived near the school, the Kirby sisters were never late. Twice a week they went to cookery classes at the Board (Park View) School and paid twopence for the dinners which they helped to cook. On the other days they took sandwiches. On Saturday they often walked to Berkhamsted Castle for free soup and bread, which they took home. Mrs. Kirby left school at the age of twelve, having reached standard 7X.

GUNFIRE AT DAWN

Until Victorian times Frithsden was noted for cherries. Most of the trees have gone, and other villages have challenged Frithsden's claim to have invented the cherry turnover. Using rattles to scare birds off the trees, children chanted 'Shoo birds away fer tuppence a day', thus ensuring good crops for the annual Frithsden Cherry Fair. Incidentally the lovely place-name Cherry Bounce survives.

Mrs. Kirby remembers that at cherry time she was woken up at 4 a.m. by Potten End men who, having bought the fruit which grew on trees opposite the cottage, fired guns to scare the birds. The cherries were sold at twopence a pound in the black barn (now a house) at Hollybush Farm. It was this sale, and the convivial hour or so that followed at the Alford Arms, which constituted the cherry fair, though in earlier times it may have been a more picturesque annual event.

The present public-house was rebuilt after the original Alford Arms was burnt down one Sunday evening. People came out of the little Baptist chapel and tried to extinguish the fire, but the building was destroyed. Happily, there was no repetition of a tragedy which occurred in early Victorian times, when three cottages were burnt to the ground, causing the death of a man who was sleeping on a mat. Three families were evacuated, one to Little Gaddesden, two to Berkhamsted.

STRAW-PLAITING

According to tradition (and Frithsden has lots of traditions), the hamlet possessed another public-house, the

Leather Bottle, at the Frithsden Beeches end of the valley, but we have no documentary evidence of its existence.

There was a straw-plaiters' school in the hamlet, kept by Mrs. Wells, and Mrs. Kirby remembers plaiting straw with her mother and sisters and taking the finished plait to Hemel Hempstead market. If the demand was good, buyers came along the Water End road to meet them.

East of Mrs. Kirby's cottage stands a house which is an enlargement of the old village school—not the plaiting school. An Earl of Bridgewater founded this school for the children of Potten End, Nettleden and Frithsden, and from my files I draw upon the following notes supplied to me many years ago by a veteran resident, Mr. Wilson:

OVER THE RIDGE

'The schoolmistress was a dear old lady dressed in a full-founced frock, and in imagination I can see her curtsying to the vicar of Nettleden and his wife when they visited the school. On Ash Wednesday 1880, all the children were gathered together and we marched in procession up the ridge at the back of the school, the dear old lady leading, and from the top of the ridge we marched across the meadows to St. Laurence Church, Nettleden. It was the event of the year—to church in the morning, then a half day's holiday. It was part of the education.'

'Unfortunately, the school was closed in the autumn of 1880 and I was sent to the Board School at Berkhamsted every fine day until the August holiday, 1889. Many of the children obtained work at Hollybush and Nettleden Farms and at Ashridge, and so dodged the school attendance officer. He was definitely the most hated man to visit the hamlet. The school was not allowed to rot; after some years it was reconditioned and two old widows were allowed to occupy it.'

Much remains to be said about this quiet hamlet; a fantastic story about Henry I, an amusing tale about a crock of gold, and more information about the houses and cottages. There are other villages to visit, too; but we shall not stray very far from the town of Berkhamsted, for 334 monthly articles have by no means exhausted our subject—local history.