

'AUGUSTUS SMITH OF SCILLY'

*Augustus Smith, of Scilly,
By Piper's Hole he swore,
That the proud lord of Brownlow
Should keep the waste no more . . .*

So began a parody of Macaulay's *Horatius* which appeared in *Punch* in 1866 and is often quoted when the story of the saving of Berkhamsted Common from enclosure is retold.

The first line supplies the title of a fascinating biography which was published early in June. *Augustus Smith of Scilly*, by Elizabeth Inglis-Jones (Faber, 42s.), could also have been called *Augustus Smith of Berkhamsted*, for he was the most valuable townsman we have ever had. But his good work for the Isles of Scilly amply justifies the title selected by Miss Inglis-Jones.

One old belief of mine was shattered: Augustus Smith was born in London, not at Ashlyns Hall. But no matter. Berkhamsted was for many years his home, and some people may be a little

startled by what Miss Inglis-Jones has to say about the town.

Her story starts at a time of great poverty and ignorance. Apart from some little 'academies' to which few people could afford to send their children, there was only the little Bourne charity school. Berkhamsted School existed as a building, not as a place of education. There were many earnest churchpeople, but many more who said nothing and did nothing. Dissenters were much more active, but poor and not very influential.

One man—a keen churchman and for a time churchwarden of St. Peters—challenged the old order. Augustus Smith, son of a rich landowner, was not brought up to follow a profession and could have led a life of ease. But the idle rich bored him; he had boundless energy and used much of it to wake up Berkhamsted. He called for work, not pauperism. He urged the founding of schools to rescue children from ignorance and indolence. After starting the first parochial school, he re-founded Berkhamsted School.

All praise to the great Dean Incent for founding the school in 1541; but isn't it time more was said about the young Victorian who, 300 years later, stopped the 18th and early 19th century rot and put Berkhamsted School on the road to success? In many respects this was a bigger achievement than the saving of Berkhamsted Common, a refreshing account of which provides the liveliest chapter of Miss Inglis-Jones's book.

It is delightful to know that the 'war' with Lord Brownlow and his mother did not interrupt a life-long friendship with another of his lordship's near relations. Augustus Smith was also acquainted with Maria Edgeworth, the novelist, who lived at Northchurch.

A man of extraordinary versatility, a great reformer but at times also an obstinate autocrat, Augustus Smith made many friends and many enemies. Rare, however, was the man or woman who did not respect him. He was that sort of man.

Congratulations to Miss Inglis-Jones on the quiet, skilful way she has pieced together a most interesting story. Extensive research enables her to tell Berkhamstedians several things they did not previously know about Berkhamsted, and I for one am most grateful to her for an important contribution to the town's recorded history.

I would be proud indeed to have written such a book.



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