

Country life 150 years ago

THE DIARY OF AN ASHRIDGE BAILIFF

By 'BEORCHAM'

WILLIAM BUCKINGHAM, the seventh Earl of Bridgewater's bailiff at Ashridge, was a very busy man. But every day, year after year, usually by the flickering light of a candle, he devoted a quiet quarter of an hour or so to his diary.

It is not known how many notebooks he filled, but three hefty manuscript books, for the years 1813-14 and 1820-27, are now available for inspection at the County Record Office, Hertford. Buckingham may have kept a diary before 1813, and almost certainly he did not abandon his daily task during the years 1815-19. Some of the missing books may still be in existence.

Our diarist knew everything that happened on and around the vast Ashridge estate, and his entries cover an intensely busy period. Ashridge House was receiving its finishing touches in 1813, and in the ensuing years many improvements, including a great deal of road-making, were in progress all over the estate. As the entries largely concern his supervisory work, Buckingham's diary is an interesting new source of information, all the more valuable because there were no local newspapers at the period. Fortunately for local historians, Buckingham was a very good reporter, with inside knowledge!

TINY SCRIPT

After three visits to Hertford I still cannot claim to have read more than a fiftieth part of Buckingham's homework. Most of the entries run to between 100 and 200 words, and much of the diary is in clear if rather small script. Like many writers of the period, he never wasted paper, spurning short lines and sometimes reducing his writing to so small a size that entries printed in the type used for this article would occupy about as much space as the original script.

My first impression was that the diary was dull and repetitive. This was because Buckingham always recorded the time he rose, the time he went to bed, and regularly mentioned such obvious details as having breakfast, dinner, tea and supper.

GIVING ORDERS

Reports of daily visits to see the Earl at Ashridge House, and diligent recording of every ride or walk to give orders to men working on the estate, also make rather monotonous reading. But the more entries I studied the more I was impressed by the astonishing variety of Buckingham's work.

No two days were ever alike. He met most of his lordship's visitors, distinguished and otherwise, and kept an eye on the ploughmen, shepherds, carters, builders, road-makers and others who formed what was by far the largest labour force for many miles around. Buckingham was a power in the district, a familiar and respected figure in Berkhamsted and other market towns. He frequently visited London. And at the end of a day which may have started as early as 5 a.m., he tackled accounts, wrote reports, added a dozen or so lines to his diary, and sometimes found time to read a book. *Aesop's Fables* seems to have been one of his favourites.

WHITE CHRISTMAS

Concerned largely with duties and travels, the diary does not reveal a great deal about the writer's private life. He seems to have been very happily married to E.B., whose initials crop up repeatedly. There is at least one hint of a little domestic tiff. In my mind's eye I see Buckingham as a good mixer and a man of exceptional energy and wide knowledge. His lordship could not have had a better public relations officer.

He had a seven-days-a-week job. Even on Christmas Day our diarist was minding the Earl's business. Here is the entry for December 25th, 1814:

'Xmas day, up at $\frac{1}{2}$ past 7, preparing and getting Meat to the fire for Labourers' Dinner, then at Breakfast and again assisting for Dinner, then cleaning. Atty came, then with him to Ashridge and with Lord and Lady B in the Hall consulting about Waggon going to London, etc.; then in Steward's Room and with Atty and Mr Clarke to Church, stopt till Communion Service was over, then home assisting with Men's Dinner and carving for boys and 74 Diners, then my own Dinner . . . and home all the afternoon being much Snow falling, then at Tea and books, then to Atty's with Bills of parcels and then back and entering Diary and books, then supped and Bed by $\frac{1}{2}$ past 10 o'clock.'

So, working for his lordship and catering for the labourers, Buckingham spent a quiet, white Christmas. In January the social round was rather livelier. One Friday morning he rose at 7.30 a.m., attended to estate duties until tea-time, then 'shaving, cleaning, etc.' prior to going to Ashridge 'to spend the evening at cards, supper and dancing till 5 o'clock in the morning, then home with Searth and Atty and Bed at 6.' After three hours' sleep he rose at what, for him, was the very late hour of 9.

VISIT TO LONDON

The reference to 'shaving, cleaning etc.', is interesting. 'Cleaning' means washing himself and changing under-clothing; sometimes he mentions 'shaving and shirting' for the same operation. In the diary for 1813 he refers to shaving every Sunday, but seldom on any other day of the week. 'Seven o'clock shadow' was apt to last seven days.

However, on Tuesday 1st June 1813, Buckingham returned home in the evening 'to shave and prepare for the morning'. On Wednesday he was up at 4.30 a.m. and an hour later set off in his chaise for the Earl of Bridgewater's mansion in Grosvenor Square. After consulting his lordship he went to the bank and then ordered some paint. Next he went 'to Islington to Mr. Mack's who was at Wormley, then to Botters, who was ill at Bath, then to Smithfield and H. and I. Baker's to Dinner, then to the Strand and Hawkins to Tea, Mrs. H. at Hendon for her Health.' What with absentees at Wormley, Bath and Hendon, it seems to have

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been a bad day for meeting friends. However, our diarist continued his tour and spent the night with some friends, the Gaunt family.

On the following day, Mr. and Mrs. Gaunt set off early for the Epsom Races. Buckingham did not rise until 8 o'clock, and then went on a shopping expedition. He ordered boots in Swallow Street, bought a bonnet for his wife in Cranbourne Street, and a hat 'for Morison' in Oxford Street. He left London at 4 o'clock and arrived home at 7.45, having stopped to water the horse at Edgware.

BEATING THE BOUNDS

After two busy days in London, Buckingham was up at 6.30 on Friday and visited Pendley, the Cow Roast, Dudswell, Coldharbour and Nettleden before mid-day. His Saturday tour of duty took him to Ivinghoe, Seabrock, Slapton, Northall, Coldharbour, Frithsden and Lower Nettleden. In the evening he felt very unwell, went to bed at 9, and E.B. (his wife) 'brought me some rum and water to Bed, had a very indifferent night.'

Beating the bounds of the parish of Ivinghoe occupied two days. On Friday 11th June, Buckingham was 'up at $\frac{1}{4}$ past 5, then in the yards giving Orders etc., then in to Breakfast . . . then to Atty and up the Green to Buckmaster to Order Bread and Cheese in the Park for Persons who attended the perambulation of Ivinghoe Parish.' After going to Ivinghoe, Buckingham accompanied the party to Ringshall and Little Gaddesden. Lord Bridgewater joined the company 'and went part of a boundary through Park, then round St. Margaret's, Great Gaddesden, Piper's Hill, Nettleden and up the Park to Red Gate, there gave barrel of Beer, bread and cheese and cakes to company'. At 6 p.m. a band played and girls danced in front of Ashridge House. Buckingham accompanied the party back to Ivinghoe, and returned home at 10 o'clock.

'Up at 7, very so-so.' Our diarist underlined these words at the start of his entry for Saturday 12th June. Once again he took part in the perambulation of Ivinghoe parish; there was a halt for beer, bread and cheese, a visit to a public-house for more beer, and at Ivinghoe market house the band played and girls danced, 'Atty giving them oranges.' Our diarist went to bed at 11 o'clock, and the entry for Sunday contains no hint of a hangover.

(To be continued.)