

Strange Tales from the Parish Records

WHIPPING THE DOGS OUT OF CHURCH

By 'BEORCHAM'

HISTORIANS wishing to consult the first volume of the Berkhamsted Churchwardens' Accounts have been compelled for many years to visit the British Museum. This valuable source of information, for the years 1584-1748, was removed from the church chest and reappeared as 'Lot 49' at a London auction sale in 1851. I wish I knew what happened to the book during the 'lost' years, and how much the British Museum paid for it. A very small sum, I imagine. The important thing is that the book was saved, though I have always wished that it had never strayed from Berkhamsted.

Now for some good news. The book has been microfilmed, and in addition photographic prints have been made of every one of the 366 large pages. Thus, without leaving Berkhamsted, it is now possible to study a book which contains much more than the title 'Churchwardens' Accounts' suggests.

VESTRY'S WIDE POWERS

From Tudor until fairly modern times the wardens' duties were by no means limited to church affairs. Already practised in the art of imposing church rates, the vestry was given the wider power of levying rates for public welfare. The parish was responsible for the maintenance of highways, the relief of the poor of the parish, the relief of maimed soldiers and wayfarers, the provision of arms for soldiering, and other services. All ratepayers had the right to participate in parochial business, a right accompanied by the duty to serve in various offices.

In the earliest pages of the churchwarden's accounts we find the names of wardens, overseers of the poor, and stonewards, as the highway surveyors were called. I have found no early reference to the constable, a very old position in local society, who was

appointed by the manorial court. Cobb, in his *History of Berkhamsted* (1855) tells us that constables (and some rather obsolete minor officials) were still being nominated at a local court; this was many years after a professional police force had replaced parish constables.

THOUSANDS OF FACTS

Incidentally, although Berkhamsted was a borough from 1618 until the early 1660s, the vestry was still the major local authority, the only one empowered to raise money by rates. The mayor and twelve chief burgesses may have had the glory ('Let none deride or evil do or speak against the Corporation'), but it was the churchwardens who had the power. However, the same men were often found in both local Houses of Parliament!

Back to the churchwardens' accounts. Here, in one large tome, we have thousands upon thousands of facts, some trivial, some repetitive, some amusing, some astonishing, some indecipherable, some positively heart-rending. Many a single-line entry provides what journalists call a human interest story.

Since starting these monthly articles 28 years ago, I have devoted a number to extracts from the churchwardens' accounts. This time I am making animals my main theme. First, birds and beasts that were described as 'vermyn'; then the dogs that seem to have been fond of going to church, with or without their masters.

FARTHING FOR A SPARROW

As early as 1532-3, every parish was required by law to provide itself with a net for catching rooks, crows and choughs, but the only reference I have so far found to a net in the Berkhamsted accounts is dated 1639: 'For one nett to catch the bird in church, 4d.' The bird (a pigeon?) is unspecified.

At an earlier date (1623) we find the following entry: 'For a labourer to remove rabbits [*sic*] out of the market house, 5d.'

Many Berkhamsted men and boys (and at least one girl) earned pocket money by catching and producing the heads of certain creatures. These payments were made in 1735:

To Thomas Peacocks boy for a Hedge hog, 4d.

To William Binjun for a hedge Hogg, 4d.

To Edward Bennings Boy for 12 Sparrows, 3d.

Pd John Binns boy for 12 Sparrows, 3d.

for 3 Doz. of Sparrows, 9d.

John Bunn 8 Sparrows, 2d.

paid John Warner for 16 Sparrows, 4d.

paid for a Wheezell, 4d.

paid my boy for 4 Sparrows, 1d.

paid Well's boy for 10 Sparrows, 2½d.

paid Judith Leigh for 2 Poulcats, 8d.

paid Thomas Weedon for 2 Wheezells, 1s.

paid Charles Edge for 40 Sparrows, 10d.

Bullfinches figure in the payments of 1741 (a farthing each, the same as for sparrows). By 1767 the price per polecat had been reduced from 4d. to 3d. But the price on the head of a hedgehog, 4d., had not been devalued. The sexton must have caught 294 sparrows to receive 6s. 1½d. in 1767.

Here are two payments dated 1731: Charles Cowper for a Hedge Hogg, 4d.

Paid Old Bird for a Poltcatte, 4d.

Was Charles a kinsman of the Rev. John Cowper, rector and father of the poet? And who was Old Bird?

Incidentally, the payments made in 1731 included half-a-crown for 'cutting ye Yew Tree.' The name of the recipient was George Holley.

THE DOG WHIPPER

Now for a strange fragment of local history. At Berkhamsted, as in hundreds of other parishes, a minor functionary was the dog-whipper, employed to preserve order among the canine attendants at church. As W. E. Tate states in *The Parish Chest*, his business was not to expel from the church all dogs, but to remove those who did not behave themselves well. Wooden tongs used for gripping offenders by the neck are still to be found in some churches. Towards the end of the 18th century it

BEORCHAM (Contd.)

was usual, in some areas, for sheepdogs and turnspits to accompany their masters and mistresses to church.

We find many entries in the Berkhamsted accounts similar to the following, dated 1601: 'Paid to Thos. Fletcher for sweeping the market house and whipping the dogs out of church, 4s.' This was an annual payment; the reward was less than 1*d.* a week. Thomas Fletcher, it seems, was a poor man. In 1598 the parish paid 9*s.* to provide him with a pair of hose, a shirt, shoes and two new bands, the price including 'making of his clothes.' There was a further payment of 9*d.* for mending Fletcher's shoes.

A NEW DUCKING STOOL

Here's another interesting entry, dated 1604: 'To Mr. Shall for the Crest over the Queen's Arms, 5*s.* 4*d.*' Perhaps this refers to the relic preserved in the gallery, with the following lines beneath the coat of arms of Elizabeth I:

This mighty Queen is dead, and lives,
And leaves the world to wonder
How she a maiden Queen did rule,
Few Kings have gone beyond her.

We find a reference in 1601 to the ducking stool. For felling and carting the oak from which the stool was made, 1*s.* 6*d.* was paid; then comes an indecipherable payment of 6*d.*, another of 8*d.* for sawing the wood, and 3*s.* to two carpenters who spent 1½ days in fitting up the stool. There was a further payment of 2*s.* 2*d.* for 'the ground about it.'

THE MAYPOLE

Then, in 1617, 8*d.* was paid 'for taking down of the maypole and carrying it to the Church.' It was put to further good use, for John Dunn was paid 2*s.* 2*d.* for sawing a piece of the maypole to 'mend about the church rails and the gutter of the market house.'

I wish I had space to tell you about the fine that was inflicted on the parish in 1617 'for the default that the Cross and Weather Cock being down are not yet up again.' The topmost feature of the parish church had crashed down and the only prompt action taken was that of 'mending the timber and tiles that were hurt and decayed with the fall of the weathercock and cross.' But it's a long story, to be told when I next dip into the churchwardens' accounts.