

Peeps into an Old Ledger

TRADE SECRETS OF 1861

By 'BEORCHAM'

A FEW YEARS AGO the Local History Society received a ledger for the years 1810-11, containing the accounts of a local builder and contractor. He was either the founder or a son of the founder of the firm of H. and J. Matthews, whose workshops in Castle Street were swept away a few years ago for the new fire and ambulance station. The ledger provided material for an article in the *Review* for March, 1968.

Recently it was my good fortune to receive another ledger from the same firm, for the year 1861. Mr. Matthews then had a business with a turnover of more than £1,000 a year. An amazing variety of jobs was undertaken by a small staff of craftsmen and labourers, whose average rate of pay was 4d. an hour. Mr. Matthews charged his own time at 6d. an hour, even when he gave up half of Boxing Day to hang doors for 2s. But that was before December 26 was a

Bank Holiday; it was still the day for distributing Christmas boxes, hence the name Boxing Day.

SLOW PAYERS

The business must have had ample financial resources. Many customers were slow payers. The richest man for miles around, Earl Brownlow, ordered an invalid's bedstead, hair mattress and other items in February, and did not pay the bill (£4 18s.) until November.

Some of the slowest payers were clergymen. The Rev. F. B. Harvey, usher at Berkhamsted School, was surcharged £1 interest on a bill for £10 2s. which had been outstanding for over two years; nevertheless, Mr. Matthews continued to supply goods and services to Mr. Harvey.

The headmaster, the Rev. J. R. Crawford, was forever asking Mr. Matthews to repair furniture and supply items such

as inkwells and rope for the school bell. Entries include 3d. for mending a cricket stump, 15s. 6d. for making, painting and varnishing a box for croquet, 3d. for 'repairing carving of pianoforte', and 1s. 6d. for mending a form.

BOTTLES IN THE BOOKCASE

The rector, the Rev. J. Hutchinson, called upon Mr. Matthews' services at least forty times in 1861, the biggest order being for a greenhouse, £39. Most of the entries concern minor jobs, such as covering the rector's writing table with American cloth, sawing an apple tree, fixing a rail to the dog kennel door, and 'fitting shelf for bottles in bookcase'. Tut-tut! But why should a bookcase be limited to satisfying a thirst for knowledge?

The ledger suggests that few people threw anything away if it could be repaired. The poor always had to mend and make do, but the gentry could not be expected to soil their hands. Mr. Matthews was always being called in to shift and mend furniture, put up and take down curtains, beat and stretch carpets, and make all sorts of boxes and gadgets which we would now buy at a shop.

SMALL ORDERS

Why do it yourself when Mr. Matthews was ready to glue a letter-box for 3d., or repair an ornamental black cup for 6d.? Mr. D. Norris must have been fond of his old toasting fork to place a bespoke order for a new handle. Miss Gambier, daughter of an admiral, paid 6d. to have her crutches shortened. Mrs.

Greaves, charged 3*d.* for 'glueing the Bedstead', still owed that modest sum two years later. Thomas Whateley, who gave the great west window to St. Peter's Church, ran up a bill for £100 and, after six months, paid £50 on account. But as a surgeon he must have had slow payers among his patients.

One of Mr. Matthews' best customers was Joseph Robinson, a wealthy iron-founder, who lived at the Red House and built the adjoining White House on the site of a baker's corner shop. In seventeen years Joseph's wife Hannah presented him with thirteen children before her death at the age of 38 in 1860. Some if not all of the children were educated at home; Mr. Matthews supplied a key for the door of the schoolroom, repaired a toy house, varnished a wooden horse, mended a birdcage, and did work in both day and night nurseries. A boy's name was put on a wooden box in brass nails for 6*d.*, and a mahogany box, lined with velvet, was made for a flute at a cost of 10*s.*

BEER AND SKITTLES

Mr. Matthews was also a removal contractor. With horse and cart he transported everything from pianos to night-soil. Our Victorian historian, the Rev. John Cobb, then curate, was charged 4*s.* for 'carting harmonium to Broadway Church and fetching back again'. Another entry: 'Horse, cart, three men and apprentice fetching billiard table from Tring and part fixing ditto, £1'.

There are several references to public-houses. Much work was carried out at the Goat, where thatch was taken off the roof and repairs were made to the parlour floor and door. Beer and skittles were the main attractions at the Goat, though the sport seems to have been transferred elsewhere, judging from these consecutive entries:

2 men, apprentice and boy taking down Skittle shed at the Goat, 10*s.* 6*d.*

2 men and boy $\frac{3}{4}$ of day loading shed and taking to Leverstock Green, 6*s.* 6*d.*

'Board for Victoria Road, 5*s.* 6*d.*'

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was presumably the old street-name board which was affixed to the Goat wall before metal nameplates were used. How curious that the bill was sent to the brewers and not to the Vestry, the local authority at that time.

AT THE WHITE HART

Down in the valley, two old doors were fitted to a cowshed at the Brownlow Arms; but it is doubtful whether the patrons ever asked for milk.

The White Hart, built in 1861, gave Mr. Matthews some good orders for fixtures and fittings, including 'old oak for beer stand'. A signboard was made for the White Hart and the total cost, including ironwork, was 14*s.* One of Mr. Matthews' workmen assisted the 'Gassfitter at the White Hart, 8 hours', and 3*s.* was charged for his services.

Next door, at the newly-opened Town Hall, seats had already been damaged; Mr. Matthews was called in to effect repairs and to provide stout rails at the top of the stairs. A short distance away, at what is now the International Stores, William Hazell placed large orders for fitting out his grocer's and pork butcher's shop.

For the Rifle Corps, Mr. Matthews erected a tall flagpole on the Common, and received an annual rent of 2*s.* 6*d.* for its use. A red flag was flown from the pole to warn walkers and poachers when the rifle range was being used.

IN THE GALLERY

A full page is headed 'Church', though most of the entries concern improvements to the Church school behind the Court House. For instance: 'Division fence at entrance of boys and girls, £1 3*s.*' Some work, however, was done in the church: 'To altering pews and seats in the Gallery with extra framing, steps, etc., £5 19*s.*; staining new work in the Gallery, 2*s.* 6*d.*'

It seems that whenever paint was used, the colours were always stone or green.

Finally, a few more items from the 155 pages of Mr. Matthews' well-filled ledger:

Putting up and taking down book-boards for the band concert, 2*s.* 6*d.*

Mounting lions' skulls and fixing ditto, 3*s.*

Mounting stone monkeys, 8*d.*

1 circular basket for the garden covered with bark, £1.

74½ lb. of lead for the church, 17*s.* 4*d.*

Painting Grape House, Strawberry House and Cucumber House, 2 coats, and repairing the glazing as per contract.

Taking down bedstead at Charity School and putting up ditto at Potten End School and bringing a bedstead and mattresses to the Castle, 2*s.* 6*d.*