

A Notable Victorian Rector

JOHN COBB AND HIS 'HISTORY'

By 'BEORCHAM'

IN THIS SERIES of articles, started nearly thirty years ago, many acknowledgments have been made to the Rev. John Wolstenholme Cobb, author of *The History and Antiquities of Berkhamsted*. Very little, however, has been said about the man himself, a notable rector, a very good local historian, and founder of the town's first parish magazine.

John Cobb came to Berkhamsted in May, 1853. He was young and energetic, the ideal curate to help a comparatively new rector, the Rev. James Hutchinson. Together they put some zest into a parish which had become dreary and lifeless during the over-long ministry of the Rev. John Crofts (1810-50).

Not that Cobb's parochial duties were quite as heavy as he claimed in the preface to his book. Having a flair for history, he found ample time to study

the county histories by Norden, Chauncy, Salmon and Clutterbuck; he collected information from old parishioners, and took days off to study at the British Museum. Within twenty months of his arrival here, he was able to give two long lectures on the town's history to the Mechanics' Institute, which incidentally had no mechanics among its members.

MOVE TO NORTHCHURCH

So popular were the lectures that he was asked to publish them. But several months before the book appeared, early in 1856, he left the parish of Berkhamsted St. Peter to become curate of Northchurch. I have yet to discover the reason for this move. A likely theory is that he was attracted by the efforts the rector of St. Mary's, the Rev. Sir John Hobart Culme-Seymour, was making for people living in the detached portion

of the parish of Northchurch, now the two parishes of Sunnyside and Bourne End. Services were held in the school-room at Bourne End until Sir John, at his own expense, provided a chapel of ease, now Broadway Church. It could have been this pioneer work which drew John Cobb from a busy town to a neglected, thinly populated district.

FIRST EDITION

It seems likely that Cobb's interest in local history waned somewhat at this time. He sent his manuscript to the printers without deleting asides that were permissible at a lecture but had no place in a scholarly book. 'Having said thus much,' 'I will now proceed with my subject,' 'When we next meet,' 'You may remember at the close of my last lecture' such remarks should not have reached the printed page. Cobb, however, was a very good, clear writer, and he provided an index, very necessary in a book which runs on and on with only one break. Some very useful foot-notes and appendices were added.

Shortly after officiating at the baptism of Aima Smith-Dorrien on May 4th, 1855 many older readers will recall the tall lady, who dressed and walked in a rather mannish style, wearing a billycock hat and carrying an outside red parasol. Cobb started his long curacy at Northchurch, where he remained until he was appointed vicar of Kidmore End, near Reading, in 1863.

He returned to Berkhamsted in 1871, soon after Thomas Butterfield, one of

the best church restorers of Victorian times, had made extensive improvements to St. Peter's, refacing the church with flint, demolishing a frightful box-like vestry, making the old south porch part of St. John's Chantry, and knocking down the dividing walls of two chambers at the west end; in one of these chambers the fire engine was kept.

The church was reopened on 14th April, 1871, and although over three months were to elapse before Cobb was instituted rector, we know that he was often in the town and conducted services at the parish church, the old rector, the Rev. James Hutchinson, then being a complete invalid. In the middle of July, Cobb was still signing the registers of Berkhamsted as vicar of Kidmore End, but at the end of the month he preached his first sermon as rector of Berkhamsted.

St. Peter's was very different from the dowdy church Cobb knew when he was curate; nevertheless, there was scope for further improvement. Under Cobb, the north transept was restored, a new east window was installed as a beated memorial to the poet William Cowper, and several other memorial windows were installed. Mural decorations of the chancel, sanctuary and altar were the costly gifts of Cobb and his friends.

COWPER'S WELL.

A great admirer of William Cowper, Cobb also affixed an inscribed marble slab to the old well-house in the rectory garden. Cowper's Well, as it was called. Admirers of the poet regarded the well almost as a shrine; it attracted literary people from all over the world, and was the subject of a popular illustrated post-card. But the well no longer exists, and only a broken portion of the inscribed slab survives.

In July, 1872, Cobb started a parish magazine, contributing to the first number an article on the Cowper window. A glance through the magazines published during Cobb's ministry shows that Berkhamsted, then less than a quarter of its present size, had a great variety of societies, most of them linked

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with the church: a Mothers' Club, Blanket and Loans Society, Needlework Society, Dispensary, Parochial Nursing Association, Mission Room, Night School, Depot for the Sale of Church Books, Working Society, Drum and Fife Band, and various guilds. Many families were on the poverty line, especially in winter, and so there were many calls for charity.

REVERED AND FEARED

A little light relief is provided by Arthur Keyser, a diplomat, who spent some of his early years at Berkhamsted and wrote a book entitled *Trifles and Travels*, published shortly after the first World War.

Cobb, says Keyser, was 'our revered and rather feared rector, who made us squirm in our seats one Sunday by preaching against tennis on the Sabbath, with of course some appropriate biblical verse as his text. But the fear was slight and transient compared with the awe inspired by the severely rigid principles and strenuous activities of Mrs. Cobb, the rector's wife.'

Keyser goes on to recall the considerable commotion caused when the rector 'dissolved the ladies' choir and installed boys in surplices in their place. Local feeling was intense, and for weeks little else was discussed across parochial tea tables. The climax was reached when a popular and irascible squire, meeting